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Edita Schubert

Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas

Edita Schubert's (1947-2001) entire oeuvre can be seen as a continuously evolving attempt to solve the problem of representation of the self and the human body. Drawing on her dayjob as draughtsperson at the Anatomy Institute at the University of Zagreb's Medical School, she transgressed boundaries between media and disciplines in her incisive investigation of the anatomy of an artwork and of the self. Titled after her *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas* (1977), the exhibition centers around a selection of her large-format perforated canvases from the late 1970s and a performance for the camera in which she activated these works by poking different body parts through the slits in the canvas and documenting these protrusions. While Schubert exhibited widely in her native Croatia during her 3 decades of artistic production, including representing Yugoslavia in the Venice Biennale in 1982 and a comprehensive posthumous retrospective at the Klovićevi Dvori Gallery in Zagreb in 2015, *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas* marks her first exhibition in Germany.

Here, in a conversation moderated by Julia Kusiak, art historians Sandra Kržić Roban and Leonida Kovač discuss *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas* and Edita Schubert's oeuvre more broadly.

Julia Kusiak: I'd like to focus our discussion on Edita Schubert's *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas* (1977), as it stands between the two main media in which she worked: painting and photography. In this work, she operates on canvas in an unconventional way, as she includes elements of her photographic portraits. Can you briefly introduce Edita's work and situate this moment of interlacing media with each other within her artistic language?

Leonida Kovač: I'd start off by saying that in my opinion, Edita Schubert is one of the most important Croatian artists of the 20th century. As a whole, I would term her work as "a history of painting in experimental conditions". Edita was first and foremost a painter, but she was frustrated by the expectation at the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb—she graduated in 1971—that she should paint nudes lying on sofas and narrate something with a paintbrush on canvas. She told me she felt the urge to stab a knife into the canvas; and she really did it. You can detect that stabbing process in *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas*. It's important to mention, in terms of the referential field of self-portraiture, that she was employed as a draftsman at the Institute of Anatomy at the University of Zagreb School of Medicine from the time she graduated in painting until her death in 2001. The work also followed a period of mixed media experimentation in the mid-1970s, which always referred back to painting. The *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas* is a work related to the series of about eleven *Perforated Canvases* that she made at that time, which engage the concept of seriality. In the self-portrait, as in other works of hers, she extends this reflection through the medium of the Xerox copy. At the time, Xerox copies were unstable—the image or text might be altered or disappear—which Edita Schubert was interested in, as all of her work has a dimension of temporality or a possibility of disappearing. And an acknowledgement of the relationship between the human and non-human. She worked, for instance, with experimental sculptures made of tree branches and leaves, and today, almost 50 years later, it's clear how prescient such works were in considering the ecological precarity of the planet. But returning to *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas*. She titled each painting *Perforated Canvas (Performed)*, making it clear that she

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considered the act of painting a performance, a bodily act. First, she stretched the canvas, primed it three times, and painted it, usually in a deep blue. Then she took a surgical scalpel—a tool that she refers back to her workplace—and she made a triangular incision. Then she folded the flap back onto the face of the canvas and pasted it with a surgical plaster. In one work, she secures the flap with a red wax seal. The cutting was like a dissection, like the dissections of the human body that were performed a few floors beneath her studio, which was on the 4th floor of the building of the Institute for Anatomy. And then she performed for the camera through the hole of the cut canvas in a seventeen-sequence self-portrait. First, we see the act of tracing, cutting, and folding the canvas, then pushing her fingers through the holes, then showing her nose, mouth, teeth, her tongue, closed eyes, an open eye, mouth puckered in a kiss. Conscious of art production and historiography of art as something so occulocentric, Edita Schubert turned our attention to other senses, other bodily senses beyond a gaze. She also filled the hole with a wad of medical cotton, which was also material from where she worked, and a photograph of Tuscany, the Italian city with which she was fascinated. This fascination originated from her favorite painting—it's perhaps strange for a conceptual and experimental artist like Edita Schubert was—but her dearest painting was Gorgione's *La Tempesta*. You can in fact read her entire oeuvre as continuously undoing motifs from that painting, and that's the situation here as well. The work itself, *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas* is a series of xerox copies of the photographs. A year before she died when we were preparing her monograph, Edita showed me photographic prints of this self-portrait. It was a small format and folded like a leporello. After her death, those photographs disappeared, and I'm quite certain she destroyed them. She left only the Xerox copy, which she signed. In an interview that I conducted with her in the last year of her life, she specified that she exhibited the Xerox copy, which was the case with all of her photographs, of course to reflect on the status of an original, but also because she was against the clarity of technology. She also joked that she left the audience the forgery and kept the original hidden away for herself. The work is about conditions of visibility—her looking through the canvas to see herself, but also in some way to see the viewer.

JK: Sandra, perhaps you can situate this in the context of Croatian photography at the time—both this idea of showing and seeing oneself and navigating a relationship with the viewer, as well as the way in which she combined photography with painting?

Sandra Križić Roban: The 1970s and early 80s was a very interesting time for photography in Croatia, specifically conceptual photography. Despite the affinity that we notice from today's perspective, Edita wasn't really a part of the early wave of conceptual artists, who were quickly recognized by the art institutions and the galleries in Croatia in the early 70s. The first significant show her work appeared in was an important group exhibition, "Innovations in Croatian Art of the 1970s" at the Gallery (today Museum) of Contemporary Art Zagreb in 1982, but then she exhibited sculptures made from grass, branches and organic materials that Leonida mentioned. She also represented Yugoslavia at the Venice Biennale that year. Her photography work was less recognized at the time and only after her death did it begin to be included in historical exhibitions that looked back at the advent of conceptual photography in Croatia. But yes, to answer your question, her work is a strong example of the radical experimentation taking place at that time. You can recognize in her visual language a sense of someone who is both performing for the camera and is also interrogating, and trying to change, the medium itself. I find her strong urge to present herself through a kind of self-portrait, in the broadest sense of the term, especially compelling, as she situated herself between media. No matter the media, she was always reflecting in

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some way on her own position: the way she lived, how she passed from the place that she earned a living to the place where she made her work. It was always a kind of reflection of reality. I think she was trying to emphasize the importance of reality—of realness—and of how you can intervene in or change that reality through artistic procedures. Such a perspective resonates with the thinkers who were instrumental in articulating the New Art Practice in the early 1970s. Radoslav Putar, for instance, who was an influential curator at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb at that time and was involved with Spot magazine, encouraged art experiments as a means of releasing creative potential in the medium, often specifically photography. And this is what I think Edita was doing, working with photography both in context with painting and via Xerox copies, which were approaches that hadn't been codified at the time. Putar never included her in any of his exhibitions, and she remained just outside these (in)formal groups of artists at the time. Edita was always present, but very individual in a certain way.

LK: It's also important to note that Edita had been taking photographs her whole life. She was born in 1947, so she had access to cameras from an early age, and by her teenage years she was also developing photographs by herself. This was one of her passions. She also started painting as a child—when she was 12 she made a significant painting that is reminiscent of Kandinsky, though she hadn't seen any Modernist painting at the time. I would also emphasize that she was always transgressing the borders. Throughout her whole career. And she never exhibited the same work twice. For every exhibition, she conducted new research and sought to solve the same problem in a different way. When you see the breadth of her work it could look like ten different artists until you start to look carefully and recognize that it's the same problem being considered from different positions and through different media. I think that's the most important thing when we talk about Edita Schubert. The issue of self-representation in her work was often not explicit—it was explicit in the late 1970s in *Self-Portrait Behind a Perforated Canvas* and again when she started to produce some explicitly (auto)biographical works in the second half of the 1990s when she realized she was ill. But still these are never literal self-portraits, instead the idea of the self is always questioned, it's challenged. I would say that she is one of the first artists in this part of Europe that was working with the notion of identity as something not fixed, but rather performative and in flux. This is one of Edita Schubert's most significant contributions, to the idea or role of the self in art, and also to what it means to be a woman artist. While Edita, like many artists at the time, wouldn't have used the term herself, all of her works from the early 1970s onwards are explicitly feminist.

JK: Yes, definitely, we can see that clearly from a contemporary perspective.

SKR: I would add that from my point of view, what is important in Edita's work is that she pays attention to motifs that many might consider meaningless. I'm especially interested in one of her later works, *My Flat* (1999) in which she installed a series of Dia slides that she had mounted on improvised pieces of styrofoam in eleven shop windows in the center of Zagreb, through which you could see views of the interior and exterior of her flat, which was relatively close by. The work was almost invisible—you have to have a really sensitive eye to notice something like that happening in the public space—and I find the subtlety of the gesture, as well as bringing something which is, in a way, very intimate into public space, quite brave. I liked the way how many of her works invite the viewer into her private sphere, while maintaining a certain distance. Her work dealt with different energies, it has a soft and embracing quality while being very rational at the same time.

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This is an edited transcript of the conversation recorded in 2021 as part of the Arton Foundation's Remember Her Name podcast and oral history project.

Leonida Kovač is an art historian, theorist and curator who works as a professor at the University of Zagreb – Academy of Fine Arts, where she lectures Art History, Contemporary Art and Critical Theories. She also lectured Intermedial Art Practices at the Doctoral Studies in Literature, Performing Arts, Film and Culture at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. From 1993 to 2008 she worked as curator and chief curator in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. In 2015, she curated a major retrospective of Edita Schubert's work at the Klovićevi Dvori Gallery in Zagreb. She is the author of numerous books, including *Edita Schubert* (2001); *In the Mirror of the Cultural Screen: Jagoda Kaloper* (2013); *Anonimalia: Normative Discourses and Self-Representation of 20th Century Women Artists* (2011); *Mrdjan Bajić: Disenacting Transversals* (2017).

Sandra Križić Roban holds a PhD in art history and is a critic, curator, lecturer and writer. She is a senior scientific advisor in tenure at the Institute of Art History in Zagreb, where she acted as the editor-in-chief of the art journal *Život umjetnosti* (2000–2017). Her research focuses on contemporary art, history and theory of photography, the post-war architecture, and politics of cultural memory. She authored a number of books, scientific articles and book chapters, published on photography, especially women's, cultural migration and conceptual photography, trauma and alternative ways of memorization, most recently in *W.G. Sebald's Artistic Legacies. Memory, Word and Image*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023. She is a head of the non-profit association Office for Photography in Zagreb, dedicated to contemporary photography.

Julia Kusiak is a Warsaw-based art historian and archivist. Currently an editor at Tajfuny Publishing House, she previously worked as an archivist at the Arton Foundation and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. She organized and hosted a podcast series for the Arton Foundation called Remember Her Name as part of the Creative Europe project Not Yet Written Stories – Women Artists' Archives Online.