

ARTFORUM

May 2023

Maxwell Graham/Essex Street: Cora Pongracz

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Cora Pongracz, *Untitled* («verwechslungen», *Sheila Kronheim*) (Untitled [“Mix-Ups,” *Sheila Kronheim*]), ca. 1977. Five gelatin silver prints. Overall: 45 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 19 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches. From the series «verwechslungen», 1976–78.

If photographer Cora Pongracz (1943–2003) is remembered today, it is for her pictures documenting Vienna’s art scene of the 1960s and ’70s: snaps of dinner parties and happenings, shots of Franz West’s and Arnulf Rainer’s high jinks. Yet her legacy of being an eyewitness is an acutely ironic one, especially in view of the artist’s tenuous relationship to authorship and authority. In this exhibition of her conceptually driven work at Maxwell Graham/Essex Street—the first time Pongracz’s art been shown outside of Austria—we saw that the artist used her camera to create compellingly diffuse images that upended ideas surrounding photographic objectivity, linearity, and truth.

No example better summarizes Pongracz's radical approach to picture-making than an unassuming black-and-white image in the suite *Untitled (8 erweiterte portraits, Mira)* (*Untitled [8 Expanded Portraits, Mira]*). Taken around 1974, it shows a thirty-something Pongracz hunched forward on a chair, gazing sidelong at the camera, her curly hair brushing against her temples. The photograph is of and by its maker but cannot accurately be described as a self-portrait. In fact, as the texts from the exhibition explained, the work was intended as a portrait of the artist's friend, a woman by the name of Mira. The explanation for how this could be lies in Pongracz's highly original concept of the "expanded portrait," a type of serialized image she developed in the 1970s as a means of taking nuanced and anti-objectifying portraits of women in her circle. For each *erweiterte portrait*, Pongracz took two traditional portraits of the sitter head-on and five pictures based on terms the subject provided to suggest something essential about their own inner nature. The final seven-part ensembles push back against conventional notions regarding individualism, binding the artist's subjects to broader histories, environments, and communities. In giving Pongracz as one of her terms, Mira tied herself to her chronicler. Indeed, the artist is a part of Mira, and Mira is a part of her.

In their blended composition, the *erweiterte portraits* also gesture to the complexity of female interiority, interrupting exterior views of their sitters with enigmatic scenes calculated to conceal as much as they reveal. In another image from Mira's suite, we see a faded apartment building. A woman called Trude is represented with shots of a cemetery crypt, what might be a family gathering, and a misty view of the Danube. In yet another photograph, of a woman called Lore, we are shown the bottom half of a motorcycle, all tubes, pumps, and gears. Is it a symbol of Lore's love of mechanics? Her penchant for speed? Or does the bike allude to the memory of a journey past? Since Pongracz did not ask her subjects to explain the terms they chose, the exact meaning remains intentionally opaque.

Similarly ambiguous were works in the artist's »verwechslungen«, or "Mix-Ups," series of 1976–78, which also presented serialized images, several examples of which were featured here. For these works, Pongracz took multiple shots of figures engaging in a sequence of action, but then arranged the constituent pictures in different positions and orders, rewriting the story with each new hanging. In *Untitled (»verwechslungen«, Sheila Kronheim)*, ca. 1977, two uneven columns of photographs present a girl named Sheila cavorting outdoors. On the right, we see four disjointed shots of Sheila walking, pausing, holding a ball, and daydreaming. On the left, a lone image of the girl captures her with arms akimbo. Is she done playing? Was she caught in the middle of a reverie? Or is she perhaps angry at the person holding the camera? This temporally confusing and affectively dissonant group of pictures offers no clear answers. Mysteries abound, as they did everywhere in this quietly compelling presentation.