

THE SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE PRESENTS A MAJOR SURVEY OF THE US-AMERICAN
ARTIST GEORGE CONDO

GEORGE CONDO. MENTAL STATES

February 22 – May 28, 2012

Press preview: Tuesday, February 21, 2012, 11 a.m.

Ironic, provocative, witty—since his beginnings in New York’s East Village in the early 1980s American artist George Condo has produced a distinctive body of work. His paintings, characterized by mordant humor, surrealist-tinged absurdity, and exuberant pathos, make repeated reference to the traditions of American and European art history of the last 500 years, from Velázquez by way of Picasso to Gorky. In partnership with the Hayward Gallery in London and curated by Hayward Director Ralph Rugoff, the Schirn is pleased to present a comprehensive retrospective of Condo’s art. Condo works in a style that can be described as artificial realism, and both his paintings and sculptures display his ongoing examination of human physiognomy and all-too-human mental states. Organized thematically and stylistically in groups, sixty-six important paintings from different creative periods, as well as a selection of roughly ten sculptures and new works by the artist will be exhibited at the Schirn.

The exhibition “George Condo. Mental States” is sponsored by the Verein der Freunde der Schirn Kunsthalle e. V.

George Condo was born in New Hampshire in 1957 and studied art history and musical theory at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. He has maintained his outstanding position in the art world for almost thirty years. Next to such artists as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat, Condo exercised a decisive influence on the art scene of New York’s East Village of the 1980s. His first public show was presented at Ulrike Kantor’s gallery in Los Angeles in 1981. In Germany, it was Monika Sprüth’s gallery in Cologne that dedicated the first solo exhibition in Germany to him in 1984. Since then, his works have been shown at numerous institutions in the United States and in Europe, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Contemporary Art Museum in Houston, or the Musée Maillol in Paris. Works by George Condo are part of such important collections as those of the Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The artist has also been influential in the world of fashion, the music industry, and the field of street culture. In 2010 George Condo collaborated with US hip hop star Kanye West and made a series of paintings which were used as album covers.

In the course of his career, George Condo has developed an artistic style that mercilessly combines the beautiful and the grotesque, seriousness and absurdity and thus created one of the most provocative and imaginative oeuvres in contemporary painting. He is often called “an artist’s artist,” and his influence on younger generations of artists is undisputed. His paintings’ figures have also provided a source of inspiration for authors like William S. Burroughs or Salman Rushdie. Condo’s works abound with art historical references. Skillfully drawing on the pictorial language of past centuries, the artist incorporates a variety of painterly and pictorial styles into his works. He attaches special importance to his figures’ countenances; grotesquely distorted,

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cubistically exaggerated, or even featureless, their faces question the identity of the individual concealed behind them.

The exhibition “George Condo. Mental States” encompasses works from the last three decades. Thematically grouped into five sections – “Portraits,” “Manic Society,” “Pathos,” “Abstraction/Figuration,” and “Heads” – it offers a survey of the artist’s entire production. One focus of the show is Condo’s imaginary portraits, which, vacillating between absurdity and pathos, evoke different mental states. Presented on a large wall hung from the ceiling to the floor in the salon style, these portraits constitute the heart of the show. The figures depicted are archetypes – butlers, businessmen, clerical and historical personalities – familiar to us despite their humorously distorted features. Their eyes furnish a special characteristic. Frequently huge, not matching each other, protruding in panic or rage, they lend the grotesque or even monstrous figures something human and personal, as they do for example in the case of “Portrait of a Woman” (2002) or “Nude on Purple” (2007). The figures in some of the paintings present themselves as faceless. “The Objective Idealist” (1994) is primarily defined by the depicted figure’s clothing and ornate jewelry; the face confronts us with a gaping void. The paintings not only question the judgment of a person’s identity by appearances, but also the claim of portraiture to render a likeness of the subject’s identity.

Condo’s works are deeply rooted in European and American traditions of painting in spite of their frequently outrageous humor and exaggeration. By using traditional materials, techniques of painting, and stylistic forms, the artist establishes manifold cross references spanning from the Renaissance and the Baroque eras to Cubism, Surrealism, Abstract Expressionism, and Pop Art. Condo enters into a dialogue with the artists he takes his cues from. “Memories of Rembrandt” (1994) makes us think of this great master of chiaroscuro; the effect of light creating meaning ensured by Rembrandt is torpedoed by Condo in his portrait. He unfolds the face as a desolate, jumbled-up construction, as if he aimed at destroying its role as a crucial symbol of subjectivity.

The group of paintings that make up the “Manic Society” section of the exhibition reveal unequivocal social relationships. Condo unsparingly exposes the yawning abysses and ridiculousness of modern society. The protagonists of “Couple on Blue Striped Chair” (2005) eye the viewer aggressively. The expression of their distorted faces oscillates between fear, derision, lust and greed. Condo also describes his figures as “antipodal beings,” as they reveal undiscovered spheres of consciousness.

Lonely, pathetic figures with equally distorted countenances, oversized ears, and conspicuous rows of teeth for which the mouths seem too small are the characters the “Pathos” selection confronts us with. The protagonists in “The Chinese Woman” (2001) or “The Janitor’s Wife” (2000) convey the impression of being aware of their hopeless situation. They present themselves as outcasts vainly rebelling against their alienation. Ten sculptures of the group “Heads” complete the presentation of Condo’s art of portraiture. The mostly gilt bronze heads comprise quotations from art history as well as sociocritical allusions and translate the artist’s unmistakable style into the medium of sculpture.

The large-format abstract paintings, which may strike us at first sight as odd next to the portraits, once again express the artist’s intense involvement with Cubism, Surrealism, and Abstract Expressionism. In many cases, abstraction seems to be a logical consequence of the manic overcrowding of the surface with pictorial motifs. In other works, figurative elements compete

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against abstract compositions. Condo's most recent creations like the paintings "The Fallen Butler" (2009) or "Racing Forms" (2010) swarm with bodies lost in abstract forms and landscapes.

The three crucifixion pictures "Jesus" (2007), "Dismus" (2007), and "Gestas" (2007) provide a further highlight of the exhibition. These works may also be seen as examples of George Condo's continuous exploration of the contradictory. Their expressions vary between humor and pathos, contemporary imagery and the return to models from art history.

The exhibition "George Condo. Mental States" has been organized by the Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London in collaboration with Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt. The show has already been on display at the New Museum, New York (January 26 – May 8, 2011), at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam (June 25 – September 25, 2011), as well as at the Hayward Gallery, London (October 18, 2011 – January 8, 2012).

CATALOGUE: George Condo. Mental States. Edited by Ralph Rugoff and Max Hollein. With a preface by Max Hollein, Ralph Rugoff, and Sjarel Ex, texts by Ralph Rugoff, Laura Hoptman, and Will Self, and a short story by David Means. German edition, 176 pages, ca. 100 color illustrations, Prestel Verlag München, 2011, museum edition: ISBN 978-3-7913-6393-6, book trade edition: ISBN 978-3-7913-5182-7, 29.80 euros (Schirn) / 39.95 euros (book trade).

VENUE: SCHIRN KUNSTHALLE FRANKFURT, Römerberg, D-60311 Frankfurt.

EXHIBITION DATES: February 22 – May 28, 2012. **OPENING HOURS:** Tue and Fri – Sun 10 a.m. – 7 p.m., Wed and Thur 10 a.m. – 10 p.m. **OPENING:** February 21, 2012, 7 p.m. (public).

INFORMATION: www.schirn.de, e-mail: welcome@schirn.de, phone: (+49-69) 29 98 82-0, fax: (+49-69) 29 98 82-240. **ADMISSION:** 7 euros, reduced 5 euros, family ticket 14 euros;

combination ticket also admitting to the exhibition "Edvard Munch. The Modern Eye" 15 euros, reduced 11 euros; free admission for children under eight years of age. **GENERAL GUIDED**

TOURS: Wed 11 a.m., Thur 8 p.m., Sat 3 p.m., Sun 5 p.m. **CURATOR:** Ralph Rugoff

(Director, Hayward Gallery, Southbank Centre, London). **PROJECT MANAGEMENT SCHIRN**

KUNSTHALLE: Katharina Dohm and Heike Höcherl. **SPONSORED BY:** Verein der Freunde der

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