

## CONVERSATIONS

# Kiki Kogelnik “Inner Life” at Kunsthall Stavanger

Hanne Mugaas and Martin Clark in conversation

Martin Clark: Tell me about how you approached this show. Are you focusing on a specific element of Kiki Kogelnik’s work, or trying to introduce it more broadly?

Hanne Mugaas: I’ve chosen to focus primarily on works Kogelnik produced in the 1960s and 1970s. I find her preoccupation with technology, new materials, and body politics during that period way ahead of its time. I became really fascinated with her cyborgian works, such as *Plug-in Hand* (ca. 1967) and *Human Spare Part* (ca. 1968), both polyurethane hand sculptures with technologies embedded—a telephone handle and an electrical plug—as well as the vinyl *Hangings*, which allude to a future where bodies can be taken on and off.

MC: I agree: Kogelnik’s work feels extraordinarily timely right now. Like so much good art, it seems to be announcing a future that’s finally arriving in one form or another. How do you see her work resonating with younger artists and practices, beyond an art historical interest?

HM: Her work was definitely foreseeing our current quest for integrated hardware and software on and inside our bodies. Although, as Kogelnik pointed out, the cyborg had already arrived through medical science, in the form of pacemakers for instance, as exemplified in her work *Woman with Artificial Heart* (1964). (The first pacemaker was implanted in 1958.) Her work does feel very timely in 2017, given the range of young artists who grew up fully absorbed in technologies such as the Internet and the iPhone, currently utilizing these as both tools and subject matter.

MC: The work is extremely political, in the sense of a wider political engagement with feminism and the way women were (and still are) represented, but also in the way in which it deals on a smaller scale with the body itself, and the interaction of individuals in communities and culture.

HM: Very political, indeed, especially when it comes to feminist issues. For instance the unmistakable shape of the DialPak—the contraceptive pill dispenser, also developed in the 1960s—keeps reappearing in her works. Then there are the works that deal with gendered divisions of labor, like *Chandelier Hanging* (1970), a collection of small vinyl women’s bodies hung on one of those racks for drying underwear and socks. There’s a collage on a baking tray. And of course, the installation *Seelenwasche* (Soul Laundry, 1992) refers directly to what you’re saying about the interaction of individuals in general: a washing machine continuously washing black, white, and gray bodies, which are then hung up to dry in the gallery on clotheslines.

MC: My favorite works in the show are those incredible draped and hanging bodies. They are totally seductive and beautiful, but at the same time unsettling, even violent. They seem to be perfectly evocative of our continuing attitude toward women’s bodies and their representation—particularly their almost ruthless, interchangeable idealization and “use” within fashion and the media.

HM: Absolutely! My fascination with Kogelnik started with the *Hangings*, the sheet-vinyl bodies based on tracings of friends and family members. I agree that they are violent. The emptiness and shell-like composure of the bodies is uncanny, even frightening. They are flat and hanging like skins, but they’re extremely lifelike. And although the bodies are not exclusively female, they’re definitely about the objectification, utilization, and display of women’s bodies. (There might also be a link here to the Vietnam War, with the enemy body count used as the primary measure of progress, and to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki radiation skin burns.)

MC: And there’s a kind of fetishism of the dismembered body part: the woman split up, reduced to eroticized and idealized images of the hand, the arm, the leg, the lips—the skin, even, as a kind of drapery or veil.

HM: One of Kogelnik’s main tools was definitely the scissors. It’s interesting that she worked in tandem with Pop artists and their depictions of the perfect body, while all of her bodies are in parts, cut up or ripped apart. The painting *Self Portrait* (ca. 1964) shows her body floating and ripped in two halves. To me, this has everything to do with the different roles imposed on her as a woman, the frustration she might have felt. The most frequent body part is the hand—presumably the artist’s hand. It’s everywhere, seemingly touching the works, or still working? Adding an additional layer.

MC: But then you get the insides, too. And here Kogelnik brilliantly disrupts reductive sexualization and introduces another idea of the body—this time as a machine. She makes me think about another brilliant and overlooked artist from that period, Nicola L. In her work there’s a similar attitude toward the body as a kind of lump of stuff, or collection of parts, that we drag around with us. This idea of the extended, enhanced, or prosthetic body gets mixed up in her work, too, with ideas of design, technology, and fashion.

HM: Nicola L. and Kiki Kogelnik are definitely related. I love Nicola L's "functional art," such as *Woman Pregnant with TV* (1970) and *Femme Commode* (1969). For a woman, the body is definitely something you drag around, that you always have to think about, and then in addition you have to drag around an additional body (or two) when you're pregnant. This is also something Kogelnik alludes to—the womb as a kind of machine—but also its link to space, with the floating bodies in her paintings, in the washing machine, and her own body in the film *Floating* (ca. 1964). She was, of course, fascinated with the Space Race and did a happening in Vienna during the Moon landing, where the audience watched the event live on TV while she produced prints of the first words uttered by the astronauts while they walked on the moon.

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