

23.02.16 – 16.04.16

PRIVATE VIEW: MONDAY 22 FEBRUARY 2016, 6 – 8 PM

THE CONFORMIST

'He stuck out his tongue and made devil faces in the glass'

PARTICIPANTS

JONATHAN BALDOCK
AUBREY BEARDSLEY
LEIGH BOWERY
HELEN BULLOCK
JENNIFER CAMPBELL
HELEN CHADWICK
MARVIN GAYE CHETWYND

ERIC GILL
PAUL GORMAN
LADY EMMA HAMILTON
PAUL HOUSLEY
STEPHEN JONES
PAUL KINDERSLEY
MALCOLM McLAREN

JULIA MUGGENBURG
DAVID PARKINSON
ROBERT RUSH
JULIE VERHOEVEN
DENTON WELCH
JAH WOBBLE
ROSE WYLIE

Costumes by RICHARD MALONE

Belmacz, 45 Davies Street, Mayfair

23 FEBRUARY – 16 APRIL 2016

Opening Night

22 FEBRUARY, 6 – 8 PM

*Beauty must be exhibited. And beauty must be taught
how best to exhibit itself.*

—
Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*, 1992

*Tea and coffee and cigarettes produce conversation;
lager beer and pipes produce routine journalism;
wine and gallantry produce brilliant journalism, essays
and novels; brandy and cigars produce violently
devotional or erotic poetry; morphia produces tragic
exaltation (useful on the stage); and sobriety produces
an average curate's sermon.*

—
George Bernard Shaw, 'On Going To Church',
The Savoy, No. 1, January 1896

In 2016, Belmacz will present *The Conformist*.

Organised by artist Paul Kindersley, the exhibition draws its title from Bernardo Bertolucci's cult 1970 film — a study in the conformist psychology of fascism — and it poses the same questions of what it means to conform or to deviate. Ranging between aestheticism and attitudinizing, beauty and banality, the display moves from the eighteenth century to the present, to throw a spotlight on some of the eccentric, *recherché* and taboo aspects of creativity at different moments in history. *The Conformist* brings together some twenty artists, designers, writers, performers, utopians, outsiders, posers, perverts and other figures who have affronted or inverted the idea of 'conformity'. By turns contemporary and arcane, gilded and abject, the exhibition celebrates those aspects of creativity that have skirted on the perimeter of the 'mainstream'.

Running through *The Conformist* is a chorus of historical revenants and references, foremost among them the ghost of Lady Emma Hamilton (1765–1815), a low-born woman who became the wife of Sir William Hamilton — British ambassador to Naples and an avid archaeologist, volcanologist and collector. Emma was also notoriously the lover of Lord Nelson (her story was fictionalised by Susan Sontag in her 1992 novel



The Volcano Lover). Abrasive and alluring, Emma charmed Europe's elite with her performances of classical 'attitudes,' or mythological poses. In *The Conformist*, she appears in the form of a print after one of George Romney's feted portraits of her, and is also alluded to in a piece of jewellery newly designed by Julia Muggenburg, which invokes the English tradition of the commemorative jewel.

Hamilton's persona — a crucible of erudition and eroticism, cultivation and crudeness — pervades *The Conformist*. It finds parallels in the outré drawings of Aubrey Beardsley — represented in the form of original copies of *The Savoy*, a short-lived *fin de siècle* periodical from 1896 — and the lives and works of figures including Eric Gill and Leigh Bowery, each of whom maintained a fine, fragile balance between flamboyance and reserve in their works and deeds. In its shape and sensibility, the exhibition also channels the spirit of Denton Welch's 1944 novel *In Youth is Pleasure*, which evokes the author's adolescence through a loosely-plotted sequence of eroticised sensations and visions.

Mirroring these disparate historical sources is a selection of contemporary art and design that echoes the variety of the German *Rumpelkammer* (a chamber of motley objects and objets, a trove of things 'knocking about' like so much antiquarian loot). Conceived as a grotto, the exhibition throws the concept of collecting into relief: individually and collectively, the artworks speak of the piratical desire that drives the collector (Sir William Hamilton was an insatiable hoarder of antiquities and contemporary art, erotica and esoterica).

Through disparate lenses, *The Conformist* will trace some of the shifting and contradictory fashions, fixations and subcurrents that have defined creativity from the days of Lady Hamilton to the present — profanity, romanticism, smut, beauty, camp, cliché, bloody-mindedness, exuberance, quiddity and vulgarity. The exhibition will feature contributions by Jonathan Baldock, Aubrey Beardsley, Leigh Bowery, Helen Bullock, Jennifer Campbell, Helen Chadwick, Marvin Gaye Chetwynd, Eric Gill, Paul Housley, Paul Gorman, Lady Emma Hamilton, Stephen Jones, Paul Kindersley, Malcolm McLaren, Richard Malone, Julia Muggenburg, David Parkinson, Robert Rush, Julie Verhoeven, Denton Welch, Jah Wobble and Rose Wylie.

James Cahill

