

KRAKOW PHOTOMONTH

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By Jennifer Higgin

Last week I returned from Poland where a heteronym I invented was included in Krakow Photomonth. I prefer, though, to keep mum about what exactly I came up with as to do otherwise would run counter to the spirit of the thing. Titled 'Alias', and curated by artists Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin, it was one of the oddest, most enigmatic and imaginative shows I've seen. (I wouldn't normally trumpet something I was, however minimally, involved in, but this one is worth it.) As the curators declared: 'None of the artists in this exhibition exist. All of the works are copies.' (I do love an original show about copies.) Let me explain.

'Alias' is, according to Broomberg and Chanarin, 'an incomplete survey of invented artists' – incomplete as the potential and solace of assuming an alter ego is infinite; artists and writers will never, I imagine, tire of disguise and subterfuge as a liberating proposition. Reversing the usual power-structure of most exhibitions – artist is invited by curator to do their thing, they do it, writer responds etc. – Broomberg and Chanarin kick-started their project by firstly asking writers to create a heteronym, i.e., an imaginary character with a history (which is where it differs from a pseudonym which is simply a false name). It's a concept dreamed up by the Portuguese poet, writer, literary critic and translator Fernando Pessoa, who invented around 70 in his lifetime. But it would seem that Pessoa's motivations were less to do with escape than the opposite: he was in thrall to the idea that a false identity can, paradoxically, be a conduit for truthful expression and a way of expressing the complexities of day-to-day existence without the burden of everyday responsibilities – after all, can anyone ever be absolutely truthful when they have jobs, lovers, friends and colleagues to negotiate? (Remember the chaos Jim Carrey's character gets into in *Liar Liar* when he is forced to tell the truth for a day?) 'To live,' wrote Pessoa in his posthumously published *The Book of Disquiet* (1982), 'is to be someone else.' Oscar Wilde's famous dictum is also apt here: 'Man', he wrote, 'is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.'

Back to 'Alias'. Once the invited writer accepted the brief and came up with a heteronym, it was then given to an artist/photographer who, in turn, was required to assume its character and to respond to it with a piece of photographic-based work which was then displayed in one of 23 venues around Krakow – museums, small rooms in apartment blocks, church crypts and galleries. Searching them out amongst the crumbling beauty of Krakow's 18th-century buildings was half of the fun.

Although the names of writers and artists who agreed to participate were cited in the catalogue, who wrote which heteronym, who paired with whom, and who created the works on show remained anonymous. Thus, as you can imagine, there was much speculation about authorship amongst viewers to each venue, which revealed one of the strengths of the show: the way it highlighted image-making and ideas over personality. I must say that on a purely personal level I did enjoy not being myself for a while, as did other participants. It was kind of soothing (as was the rather popular apple vodka).

In the main venue, the Bunkier Sztuki, Broomberg and Chanarin curated a show of historical and contemporary works by 55 artists and collectives who employ heteronyms, such as Marcel Duchamp/Rose Sélavy, Walid Raad/The Atlas Group, Salvador Dalí (who was, he declared, a reincarnation of his dead brother of the same name); The Bruce High Quality Foundation, Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland, Lucy Shwob/Claude Cahun, and Simon Fujiwara as his father. Non-artists were also included such as French serial child-impersonator (yes, it is a category) Frédéric Bourdin, who posed as missing schoolboy Nicholas Barclay. Obviously, the reasons why each of these people chose to assume another identity varies wildly but often it was to do with survival; repressive regimes do not, obviously, encourage transparency and heteronyms allow artists and writers the freedom to explore issues of politics, sexuality, race and gender without the burden of being thrown in prison (an approach that has particular resonance in Krakow, the closest city to Auschwitz and one that has, over the last century, become all-too-familiar with varying degrees of totalitarianism).

Less life-threatening situations have also historically encouraged the assumption of an alter ego: artists have chosen anonymity or collective action as a form of resistance to

the cult of the individual. Conversely, some artists have chosen to operate with heteronyms in order to explore ideas that might run counter to their usually held beliefs while others have chosen to forgo their identity as a form of protest – or of course, simply to side-step the complications of selfhood because it can be a lot of fun.

The main exhibition of ‘Alias’ was unique in its approach to display: only one original work was included – a picture by Brian O’Doherty/Patrick Ireland, which was turned to the wall to reveal an inscription: ‘To my singular wife from her plural husband’. Every other work was represented by a photograph of its installation, a method that both emphasized the role of photography in documenting art and side-stepped the liabilities and costs involved in transporting invaluable works of art from around the world to Poland. The result is a show that operates on so many levels – from detective fiction to visual pleasure to a rigorous questioning of the intertwining of individuality, aesthetics and ethics – that it was impossible not to follow Pessoa’s declaration: ‘Wise is he who enjoys the show offered by the world.’