

MILES

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GALLERY

CURATORIAL STATEMENT

THE ECOLOGY OF THE SELF

CURATED BY ALEX DODGE + MARKUS LINNENBRINK

27 JULY - 31 AUGUST 2023 | 520 WEST 21ST STREET

The Ecology of the Self presents a constellation of nine artists, each confronting the perennial mirror of human experience, or selfhood, in various forms.

Ways of understanding the self and personal identity have taken a multitude of paths across time and human culture.

In Andrea Wulf's recent book, *Magnificent Rebels*, she recounts the origin of the modern Western self in the small German town of Jena; with the likes of such 18th century poets and thinkers like Goethe, Novalis, and Fichte, entwined in the gravity of the charismatic Caroline Michaelis-Böhmer-Schlegel-Schelling, the concept of the "Ich" (I) and "non-Ich" (non-I) emerged as a revolutionary dual structure that positioned the individual at the center of their universe. This was a self born in the shadow and bloodshed of the French revolution, one that emphasized and empowered the sole individual and their relentless questioning of the status quo. This is the self that made technological and scientific discovery possible. Echoes of this self permeate the aspirational American fabric, from its origin to the present. The darkest of those echoes palpable in the groups that were denied selfhood along the way.

In contrast, relational models of the self, such as the Nguni philosophy of Ubuntu, emphasize the individual as defined, not by some inner emergent property, but through their relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual bonds.

Similarly, the philosopher Derek Parfit, who thought deeply about the self, concluded in his voluminous works, that what mattered about the self was not an essentialized consistency across time, but rather the psychological continuity or connectedness of the self. Such a view allows for fundamental change and growth of the individual. Influenced heavily by Buddhist thought, he pointed toward a view in which the *object* of selfhood dissolves into the *process* of a self, one in which an individual's experience is an illusory and non-dual state, where again our relationships with others find greater importance.

Finally, the path of the artist is one that meanders in and out of deep individual reckoning, but through a creative process that is more often described as selfless; their resulting work inherently defined by its connection to others.

A line from Ursula Le Guin's novel *The Dispossessed* comes to mind: "To be whole is to be part; true voyage is return." In kind, Novalis wrote: "We are only going to make sense of the world when we understand ourselves and vice versa, for we and it are integrated halves, we are part of the system and we can catch sight of ourselves as an element in the system."

A work of art is one of the few things that sustains such a nuanced psychological balance between the self and the world it inhabits; the necessary illusion of free creative will and the shared experience it makes possible, the sense of individual direction and that of belonging.

The Ecology of the Self includes works by Efe Bes, Lieselott Beschorner, Juan Pablo Garza, Clifford Prince King, Songnyeo Lyoo, Satoko Nachi, Keiko Narahashi, Doris Prouty, and Kelli Thompson.

The exhibition is co-curated by Markus Linnenbrink and Alex Dodge.