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Press Kit
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Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Ohne Titel, um 1927. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025

Staging the Self

Marta Astfalck-Vietz

11.7. – 13.10.25

**BERLINISCHE
GALERIE
MUSEUM OF
MODERN ART**



Contents

Press release

P.3

Biography

P.7

Exhibition texts

P.8

Catalogue

P.10

Press images

P.11

Contact

P.14

Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Untitled, c. 1927, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Staging the Self **Marta Astfalck-Vietz**

11.7. – 13.10.25

Opening
Thu 10.7.25, 7 pm

In a single decade known as the Golden Twenties artist Marta Astfalck-Vietz (1901–1994) authored an iridescent opus of self-enactments, nude and dance photography and experimental images. She worked behind the camera and in front of it – photographer, director and model all in one. Astfalck-Vietz observed gender roles in the Weimar Republic with humour, wielding her camera with confidence to depict the versatile potential for female identity. Incorporating masks, theatrical poses and grotesque elements she forged a style which combined private introspection with social and political issues.

In its 50th anniversary year, the Berlinische Galerie is dedicating an extensive solo exhibition with more than 140 works to Marta Astfalck-Vietz. Drawing on recent research into her publication practice and on feminist perspectives, the exhibition and catalogue present her largely overlooked oeuvre and consider its place within art history. Six chapters address her works theme by theme, turning a spotlight on her avant-garde photography and, for the first time, her watercolours of plants. These were increasingly important to Astfalck-Vietz from the mid-1930s and remained a focus for the rest of her life.

Selected photographs by her contemporaries, among them Marianne Breslauer (1909–2001), Lotte Jacobi (1896–1990), Cami Stone (1892–1975) and Sasha Stone (1895–1940), illustrate the aesthetic and thematic context within which Astfalck-Vietz operated. Artists Andreas Langfeld (*1984) and Sophie Thun (*1985) have created a single-channel video commenting on the impact of this remarkable personality from today's perspective.

Fabric, lace, cosplay

There are many facets to the work of Astfalck-Vietz. In a conversation with her camera she repeatedly poses for self-enactments of her own conception, deploying fabrics as costumes or as design features in the composition. She creates scenes full of enigma with floral lace, shiny brocade and dramatic illumination. Carefully arranged photographs explore tensions between hiding and revealing, masquerade and identity. Playfully she morphs between different variations of womanhood and styles herself dancing the Charleston, in a bob, in a wig or in a glamorous gown.

Setting the Stage

Alongside her introspective photographs, the artist co-opts friends for scenic narratives. We find her engrossed in an emancipatory book, holding out in a waiting room or preparing for an evening party. With a pinch of humour and self-irony Astfalck-Vietz exposes traditional female roles and contemporary stereotypes. Series and stand-alones grant insights into social phenomena but also into the popular culture of the 1920s. She published these pictures in the widely read magazines of the day, in specialist journals like “Die Aufklärung” and in annual reviews such as “Das Deutsche Lichtbild”.

Shared copyright: the Combi-Phot.

The artist’s almost lifelong friendship with Heinz Hajek-Halke (1898–1983) was a defining influence. They met in 1922 at the college run by the Museum of Decorative Arts in Berlin. They both worked for the Berlin agency Presse-Photo but also created their own innovative photographs as independent artists. They conceived, designed and implemented these as equals, sometimes stamping the picture “Combi-Phot.”. The motifs reflect social phenomena such as loneliness, alcoholism and a fashionable fad for spookiness.

Bodies in motion and pose

As a professional photographer Marta Astfalck-Vietz accepted commissions for dance photography. She rarely took pictures of stage performances, specialising instead in shots of the body in motion. This was the time when Berliners flocked to see avant-garde performances of free modern dance. Mary Wigman (1886–1973) was one of the dancers who developed and taught the genre. International acts, not least with singer-dancer Josephine Baker (1906–1975), also provided material. Photographs were needed for media coverage, but also for advertisements, invitations, business cards and the documentation of performances.

Astfalck-Vietz captured not only dancers in expressive poses but also hands, sometimes dressed up in fur or jewellery. This motif gave rise to a body of work in its own right.

Botanical watercolours

Just she portrayed hands in a variety of poses and in motion, so too Astfalck-Vietz used plants as “living models” for her many watercolours from the mid-1930s onwards. Her botanical paintings are naturalist depictions of flora but she was equally captivated by their almost dance-like grace. Over time these arrangements become airier, even ornamental or sketch-like. They include dahlias, lilies, roses, orchids and poppies. In 1936 Astfalck-Vietz began numbering her works and by the end of her life she had produced more than 6.000 watercolours. Her interest in botany led to contacts with well-known gardeners such as Karl Foerster (1874–1970). Some species have even been named after the artist.

About the Artist

Born in 1901 in Neudamm (now Dębno in Poland), Marta Astfalck-Vietz moved to Berlin with her family in 1912. She developed an early interest in painting plants and in fabrics of all kinds. At 17 she began training at a vocational school set up by the textile and garments industry. Then from 1920 to 1924 she studied fashion, book illustration and commercial graphics at the college affiliated to Berlin’s Museum of Decorative Arts.

Astfalck-Vietz acquired her photographic skills between 1925 and 1926 at the studio of photographer Lutz Kloss (dates unknown). At the age of 26, on 1 October 1927, she opened her first studio at Markgraf-Albrecht-Strasse 10 in what was then the Berlin borough of Wilmersdorf.

In 1928, now a freelance photographer, she met the architect Hellmuth Astfalck and married him in 1929. Together they founded their studio for “Photography, Propaganda and Decorative Art”. Self-employment was tough in the 1930s due to inflation and economic crisis. In 1933, when the Nazis came to power, the shift was radical. To evade state influence and the regulation of professional photography, the couple turned to advertising and commercial graphics and to interior decoration. During these years Astfalck-Vietz gave drawing lessons and private tuition to Jewish children and teenagers, who were prevented by Nazi policies from attending state-funded schools.

When the Second World War ended in 1945 Marta Astfalck-Vietz sought a fresh start. Resuming her photographic practice of the 1920s was no longer an option. She taught drawing, worked in social services and devoted more attention to her plant paintings. In 1970, after over 50 years in Berlin, she moved with Hellmuth Astfalck to Nienhagen near Celle, where she continued to teach art.

Marta Astfalck-Vietz died in 1994 at the age of 92.

History of the estate

Astfalck-Vietz's Berlin studio at Treuchtlinger Strasse 10 was destroyed in an air raid in November 1943. By a stroke of good luck, many of her works survived the Second World War in the care of her father, art publisher Reinhold Vietz (1873–1958). In the 1920s she had sent him some of her photographs as gifts. After 1945 he returned them to his daughter with a heavy heart.

For a long time the work of Marta Astfalck-Vietz lay undiscovered. It was only in 1989, when the Berlinische Galerie included two photographs marked "Marta Vietz" in its exhibition "Photography as Photography", that contact could be established with the artist, who was by this time living in Lower Saxony.

The Berlinische Galerie acquired its holdings from her estate in stages. In 1990 the artist gifted a large number of her photographs to the museum. This corpus was expanded after her death in 1994. In 2022/2023 the estate was digitised and partially restored as part of a scheme set up by the State of Berlin to fund the digitisation of cultural assets.

The exhibition has been funded by the Förderverein Berlinische Galerie e.V.

Exhibition catalogue

A bilingual catalogue in German and English has been published by Hirmer Verlag.

Museum Edition: 34,80 €

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Book Trade Edition: 49,90 €

ISBN: 978-3-7774-4534-2

Accompanying events and outreach in English

Guided tours in English take place every Saturday at 4:15 pm. No extra charge to ticket-holders. No advance booking required.

Press images

berlinischegalerie.de/en/press-release/

[marta-astfalck-vietz](#)

Online tickets

bg.berlin/tickets

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#MartaBG

#BerlinischeGalerie



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Admission 10€, concessions 6€
Every 1st Wed of the month
reduced admission for everyone
Wed–Mon 10 am–6 pm
Tue closed

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Biography

Marta Astfalck-Vietz

Born in Neudamm (now Dębno, Poland) in 1901, Marta Astfalck-Vietz moved to Berlin with her family in 1912. She discovered a connection with plants in her youth and her first drawings and watercolours of these “living models” date back to teenage years. At 17 she started training at a technical college for textiles and clothing. Afterwards, from 1920 to 1924 she studied fashion, book illustration and commercial graphics at the teaching institute attached to the Museum of Decorative Arts in Berlin. She earned some money on the side by painting panels of fabric with floral motifs for the silk merchant Michels.

Photography becomes “the main thing”

She met Heinz Hajek-Halke (1898–1983) at the teaching institute. In the mid-1920s he fetched her “straight to Presse-Photo on Wilhelmstrasse”, a Berlin based press photo agency. Their joint endeavours included surrealist experiments in photography. Prior to this, from 1925 to 1926, she learnt her photographic craft at the studio of Lutz Kloss (dates unknown). On 1 October 1927, aged 26, she opened her own studio at Markgraf-Albrecht-Strasse 10 in the old borough of Wilmersdorf. The neighbourhood was popular with women photographers: the premises of Frieda Riess (1890–1954), Steffi Brandl (1897–1966) and Lotte Jacobi (1896–1990) were not far away.

Riding the turmoil together

Her professional self-employment began at the same time as her visitors’ book, which by 1982 ran to 800 pages. It is both a testimony to her art and a source of information, recording friendly links with Heinz Hajek-Halke, Alexander Kampmann (1898–1970) and Mary Wigman (1886–1973). The architect Hellmuth Astfalck (1898–1974) first signed her visitors’ book in 1928. They married in 1929 and founded their studio for “Photography, Propaganda and Decorative Art”.

To evade the state influence on and regulation of professional photography exerted by the Nazis from 1933, the couple turned to advertising and commercial graphics and to interior design. From 1933 Marta gave drawing lessons and private tuition to Jewish children and teenagers, who were prevented by Nazi policies from attending state-funded schools.

A fresh start

After the Second World War, which ended in 1945, Marta Astfalck-Vietz had to start afresh. Her efforts to resume professional practice as a photographer were thwarted by the unstable economy and a lack of equipment. With a job as an educator for social services, she focused on drawing plants. One important contact in the botanical world was the gardener Karl Foerster (1874–1970). In 1970, after more than 50 years in Berlin, she moved with Hellmuth Astfalck to Nienhagen near Celle, where she taught creative design. Working with fabrics and designing clothes remained a passion. Heinz Hajek-Halke visited. Marta Astfalck-Vietz died in 1994 at the age of 92.

Exhibition texts

About this Exhibition

The artist Marta Astfalck-Vietz (1901–1994) produced her iridescent work amid the political and social turbulence of the 1920s. Her creativity was free in spirit and rich in facets: self-enactments, nudes, experimental photography. She was often the camera operator, stage director and model all in one.

Photographs by Astfalck-Vietz address the role of women in the Weimar Republic with a sovereign sense of humour. The camera is her tool of choice and she wields it with confidence to depict female identities in multifarious versions. Fabrics are deployed, both as costumes and to frame the composition. With photographer Heinz Hajek-Halke (1898–1983) she devised imagery to address social phenomena in the Berlin of the 1920s. Together they experimented with photographic techniques such as distortion, double exposure and shadow play. The impact is striking and often surreal.

Astfalck-Vietz frequently photographed dancers. She was an attentive observer of bodies in motion – on stage and in her studio. Plants, with which she felt a deep connection, were likewise “living models”. They are the subjects of her detailed watercolours. The artist’s Berlin studio was destroyed in an air raid in 1943. Fortunately, many of her works survived the Second World War in the care of her father, art publisher Reinhold Vietz (1873–1958). She had sent him her photographs as gifts.

This solo show with some 140 exhibits features the photographic oeuvre together, for the first time, with numerous watercolours. Photographs by contemporaries illustrate the aesthetic and thematic context in which Marta Astfalck-Vietz operated. A single-channel video by Andreas Langfeld and Sophie Thun offers commentary on the work of this remarkable artist.

Berlin booms

In the 1920s Berlin never stood still: people flocked to the city, engines sputtered, modern architecture squared up to buildings from the Kaiser’s day. Picture production flourished too. After the First World War (1914–1918), a period of radical political and social

change began in Germany. For women, granted the vote in 1918, the changes were myriad. More and more took jobs, gaining greater financial independence and a new socio-economic status. The image of this New Woman took root in the media. This was Marta Astfalck-Vietz’s terrain. Her paths took her to various districts. From 1925 to 1926 she learnt her trade at a photo studio run by Lutz Kloss on the grand boulevard Unter den Linden. In 1927 she opened her own studio at Markgraf-Albrecht-Strasse 10 in what is now Charlottenburg. She produced her versatile oeuvre under the impact of a vibrant media and cinema hub attracting creatives from all over the world.

High-circulation dailies and a surge of illustrated weeklies and monthlies needed constant visual fodder. Photographers like Erich Salomon (1886–1944), Cami Stone (1892–1975) and Sasha Stone (1895–1940) supplied images for reportage, essays and advertisements. Sasha Stone’s picture book “Berlin in Bildern” (1929) featured motifs, documenting life in the dynamic capital and illustrating different styles of architecture against the urban backdrop.

Silk, lace and shadow play

Floral lace, shiny brocade and glittering, close-fitting clothes help Marta Astfalck-Vietz to create mystery. She often avoids looking at the camera, masks her eyes or turns her head away. Carefully arranged photographs explore the tensions between hiding and revealing, masquerade and identity. The artist conducts photographic experiments with light, contre-jour and shadow, combining them with different textiles.

Silk and satin were the fabric of choice for exquisite, feminine evening wear in the 1920s, but synthetic rayon or faux silk was more widespread. Astfalck-Vietz honed her keen sense of materials between 1918 and 1920 while training at a technical college for textiles and clothing in Berlin. She took huge pleasure in dressing up, uncritically integrating fashions, folklore and accessories from different contexts. These forms of cultural appropriation reproduce clichés and discriminatory stereotypes.

Mise-en-scène

Astfalck-Vietz would really have liked a career on stage but, as she recalled in 1992, her “bourgeois family got in the way”. So she turned her studio into a stage instead.

With her enactments and narrative tableaux, Marta Astfalck-Vietz placed herself and her friends in a variety of roles – now immersed in a

progressive book, now dressed up in a wig and glitzy shawl. A photograph from the series “Waiting” plays with the cliché that modern women were vain and unpunctual. Astfalck-Vietz offered such pictures to popular magazines and specialist journals like “Die Aufklärung” and annual reviews like “Das Deutsche Lichtbild”. In her series “Women’s Fashion”, Astfalck-Vietz again pokes fun at traditional assumptions about woman’s role – exploiting a rich stock of costumes designed by her friend William Budzinski (1875–1950).

There is humour and self-irony in the series “Companionate Marriage”, “Waiting” and “Courtesy”, which grant insights into social phenomena and magazine culture in the 1920s. The photographer Marianne Breslauer (1909–2001), by contrast, offered a more sober New Objectivity take on the modern young woman.

An artistic friendship

Marta Astfalck-Vietz and Heinz Hajek-Halke (1898–1983) were bound in friendship for more than fifty years. They met in 1922 at the teaching institute of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Berlin and their experimental teamwork, both professional and artistic, soon intensified. They both worked at the “Presse-Photo” agency. Photographs like “Suicide in Spirits” emerged – “that was a productive phase”, recalled Astfalck-Vietz in 1992. Whenever they collaborated on an idea, design or implementation, they stamped the picture “Combi-Phot.”. They sold the photographs to specialist journals. Often, however, only Hajek-Halke was credited and paid. When he “simply took” a picture for the annual photography review (1928/1929) compiled by the magazine “Das Deutsche Lichtbild” and published it under his own name, Astfalck-Vietz protested directly to the publisher.

Their creative collaboration ended as the 1930s began. Astfalck-Vietz was gradually withdrawing from photography. Hajek-Halke moved to Lake Constance in 1934, hoping to maintain his professional status. Initially their correspondence was sporadic but it became more frequent from the 1950s.

Plants in Motion

Blossoms, stems, buds: plants were central to the life and work of Marta Astfalck-Vietz. Between 1920 and 1924 she learnt to draw and paint watercolours from landscape painter Ludwig Bartning (1876–1956) at the teaching institute of the Kunstgewerbemuseum (Museum of Decorative Arts) in Berlin. During National Socialism, she had to give up her

photographic work. She focuses on other techniques. From 1936 she developed her botanical painting into an independent practice and after 1945 it became her focus.

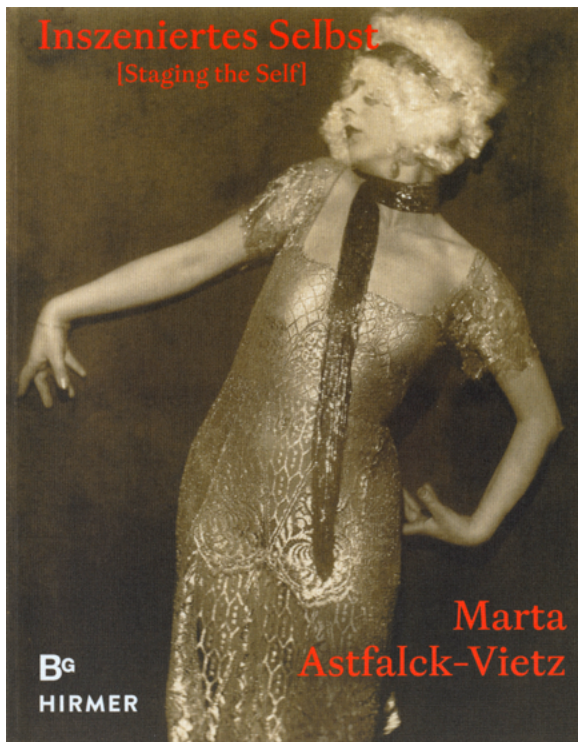
A major source of inspiration from the outset was the naturalist and artist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717). Astfalck-Vietz not only made accurate depictions of flora but was fascinated by their almost dance-like movements: “Plants are living creatures too,” she remarked in 1992. Over time the arrangements become airier, even ornamental or sketch-like. Flowers and cacti surrounded her in the studio and at home – in Berlin and later at Nienhagen in Lower Saxony.

In the course of more than five decades she produced 6,000 watercolours and drawings of botanical motifs. They include dahlias, lilies, roses, orchids and poppies. During her lifetime she showed these at the Karl Foerster Pavilion in Potsdam (1991) and at the Albert König Museum in Unterlöss (1995).

Caught in mid-leap

Residents of the German capital flocked to watch new performances of avant-garde dance and classical ballet. Audacious young dancers like Anita Berber (1899–1928), Gret Palucca (1902–1993) and Mary Wigman (1886–1973) developed free modern dance as a form of artistic expression. “New Dance” was taught in Dresden under Mary Wigman and by Margarete Wallmann, head of the Wigman School in Berlin. International acts provided additional input, not least shows by the singer-dancer Josephine Baker (1906–1975).

Dancers needed photographs for publicity – advertisements, invitations, business cards – and to document their performances. Dance and photography became conspirators of a kind: a dynamic spin or leap was over in an instant, but an image froze the relationship between movement and space. Photographers Umbo (1902–1980) and Lotte Jacobi (1896–1990) published studies of movement and portraits of dancers in action. Marta Astfalck-Vietz also accepted commissions for dance photography, although she rarely took pictures of stage performances. She made an exception for the ballet troupe of dancer Eugenia Eduardova (1882–1960) at the Wintergarten music hall.



Exhibition catalogue

Staging the Self **Marta Astfalck-Vietz**

Published on the occasion
of the exhibition
"Staging the Self. Marta Astfalck-Vietz"
(11.7.–13.10.25)

Experimenting with light and shadow, multiple exposures, surrealist imagery, and roleplay – this is the artistic terrain of Marta Astfalck-Vietz (1901–1994). Her spellbinding photography from the 1920s stages bodies, interweaves pictorial planes, and exhibits dreamlike realities created through her own unique methods.

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Staging the Self

Marta Astfalck-Vietz

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Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Ohne Titel, c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Untitled, c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Untitled (Selfportrait), c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Heinz Hajek-Halke, Untitled, c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025 /
© Heinz Hajek-Halke Collection, Courtesy CHAUSSEE 36



Marta Astfalck-Vietz und Heinz Hajek-Halke, Untitled, c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025 /
© Heinz Hajek-Halke Collection, Courtesy CHAUSSEE 36

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Marta Astfalck-Vietz, *Untitled (The Companionate Marriage)*, c. 1930,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, *The legs of the dancer Daisy Spies*, c. 1929,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, *The figures from the artist's ashtray*, c. 1930,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, *Ohne Titel*, um 1929,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, *Untitled*, c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, *Poppy*, c. 1942,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Untitled, c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Untitled, from the series: Courtesy, undated,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



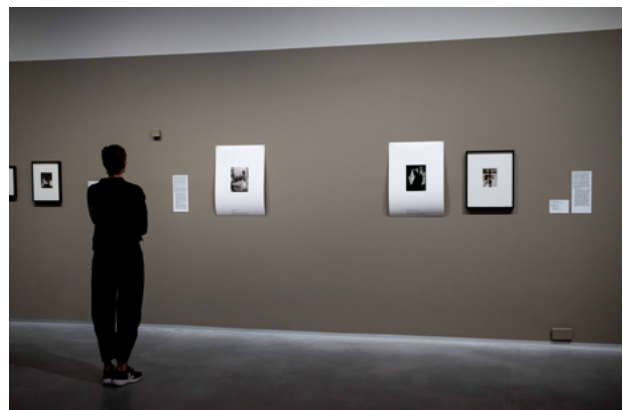
Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Untitled, c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Suicide in Spirits, c. 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Marta Astfalck-Vietz, Untitled, um 1927,
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2025



Installation view „Marta Astfalck-Vietz. Staging the Self“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



Installation view „Marta Astfalck-Vietz. Staging the Self“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



Installation view „Staging the Self. Marta Astfalck-Vietz“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



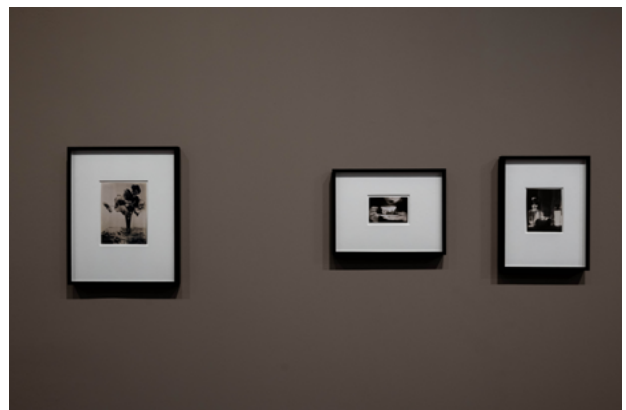
Installation view „Staging the Self. Marta Astfalck-Vietz“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



Installation view „Staging the Self. Marta Astfalck-Vietz“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



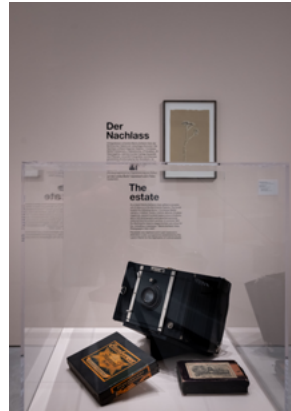
Installation view „Staging the Self. Marta Astfalck-Vietz“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



Installation view „Staging the Self. Marta Astfalck-Vietz“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



Installation view „Staging the Self. Marta Astfalck-Vietz“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



Installation view „Staging the Self. Marta Astfalck-Vietz“, Berlinische Galerie,
Photo: © Harry Schnitger



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