

PERFORMING THE IMAGE: THE TABLEAUX OF VANESSA BEECROFT

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PROLOGUE

Vanessa Beecroft is a contemporary artist, trained as a set designer, who creates gallery and museum installations using live models presented in a tableau-vivant form. The performances mirror iconography from painting, film, and fashion as a reference for building a tableau of similarly dressed, posed models. Common female archetypes become the identity of the object(s) to be viewed, which not only refer to film, fashion, or painted icons but also often have a relationship to a particular site (city, region or cultural history). Beecroft will comb the area for visual cues from local architecture, commercial venues (particularly fashion establishments), or even the city dwellers themselves to re-present or incorporate into the performance. As Roberta Smith of the *New York Times* noted, "...her work conjures up the 1970's ideal of site specificity; her works provide sample readings of local notions of class, beauty and taste."¹

These spectacular events are further stylized and reproduced by the use of photography and video that document the performances and also operate to create additional meaning beyond the evidentiary event. In creating this visual spectacle Beecroft draws attention to private voyeuristic behavior, to how consumer culture affects our visual interests, and to our evaluation of how scopophilia operates in our social environment. This combination of practices allows Beecroft's work to function within the

¹ Roberta Smith, "Critic's Notebook; Standing and Staring, yet Aiming for Empowerment," *New York Times*, May 6, 1998.

traditional expectations of art viewership² while also exploring the boundaries of more innovative contemporary practices including referencing the simulacral nature of popular culture imagery and eliciting a self-reflexive and active response from the viewer in a social environment.

Beecroft's early works are clearly a personal narrative envisioned as a collaboration of inanimate and animate objects that explores the concepts of beauty, presentation, observation, and consumption. Furthermore, the art reveals types and degrees of personal dysfunction, most notably her eating disorder (bulimia) and corresponding obsessive behaviors. In her later work she endeavors to stage the models in a more controlling and directorial way, while insisting on a level of uniformity and perfectionism that challenges human possibility. This directorial approach results in feelings of alienation between the artist and the models as it requires intensive physical endurance by the models. These more sophisticated and highly produced events also explore the complicity of the commercial gallery and museum system within the creation cycle, while allowing Beecroft the space to create this social experience between a large group of doppelgänger-type models and a sophisticated gazing crowd.

² Amelia Jones, *Body Art, Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 3. In discussing an *intersubjective* mode of interpretation, Jones compares this to a modern formalist method of analysis/viewership, "This reigning model of artistic analysis (dominated by Clement Greenberg's then hegemonic formalist ideas) protected the authority of the (usually male, almost always white) critic or historian by veiling his investments, proposing a Kantian mode of 'disinterested' analysis whereby the interpreter presumably determined the inherent meaning and value of the work through objective criteria."

My first chapter, *The Performance*,³ is an introduction to a series of Beecroft's performances from her post-graduate years to the height of her early popularity, achieved within the first decade of production from 1993-2001. Investigation of the progression of the form and content in these works will reveal unexpected relationships with body/performance art as well as other contemporary installation and participatory practices. Critics respond to Beecroft's performances in a variety of ways from outright praise to cautious curiosity to scathing rejection of the practices and content alike. The diversity of these responses elicits further questioning of the intentions and subsequent interpretations of this innovative form of body/performance/installation art.

The second chapter, *Performing the Object*, is a critique of Beecroft's work within the context of Body/Performance art history and interpretation. Performance Art in its conception reveres chance, ephemerality and confrontation of existing cultural institutions. Through this evaluation we will discover theoretical relationships between Beecroft's work, Performance Art, Minimalism, and Relational Art that, although intentionally cultivated by the artist, are often misconstrued by critics at large. This inability to relate Beecroft's work to a specific category of artistic production presents some challenges to the interpretive process, but also presents opportunities to find and appreciate the deploying of a collage of techniques in contemporary practice.

³ Marcella Beccaria, "Conversation Piece," in *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, ed. Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 17. Beccaria states in this interview, "You have often insisted on the fact that your entire body of performance is a single work, and that in the course of any single event, nothing happens." This theory lends itself to the notion that Beecroft's performances are performative of interconnected ideologies that operate as a continuum, and by studying them as such one will uncover additional theoretical underpinnings in the work.

The third chapter, *Performing the Image*, is an evaluation of how photography functions within the context of Beecroft's work. In most cases we expect, as is the artist's intent, to document the ephemeral event with a visual record of the sequence of happenings. However, photography theorists suggest that in the photographic object, meaning is produced beyond the subject depicted (traditionally understood as a record of an event located in time and place). In Beecroft's photographic work the construction of meaning is in some ways contrary to the meaning interpreted by the viewers participating in the live event. This reaction to photographic documentation is not uncommon, but further study will reveal a relationship between the iconography of the live event and certain genres of photographic practice, one that works to enhance the simulacral nature of the performances and corresponding photographs. To put it simply, photographic imagery/iconography becomes the subject of her work and the artistic end product of her process. This circuitous process highlights the notion of Beecroft's performance as a simulation of (simulacral) representation.

Through this series of critiques I hope to reveal the variety of meanings one might find in this work that is often interpreted as glitzy and superficial due to the spectacular nature of the events, the overt reference to fashion iconography, and the callous handling of the nude figure. However, through the duration of the event one finds subtleties of intention and meaning. This simulated production of social relationships within the realm of observing and being observed (in a world where appearance, beauty, and desire continue to elicit status) creates a space for active contemplation and participation. It also provides a way to determine what value we

place on these human attributes and how they operate to create, manipulate, and subvert personal and collective identity.

THE PERFORMANCE

The Beecroft performances presented here allow one to observe the rapid maturation from the first event in 1993, which consisted of a spontaneous performance by a group of women, to a highly polished and orchestrated production planned and directed by Beecroft at the New York Guggenheim Museum within a five-year span. In each successive event in between, Beecroft exerted more control to present, stage, and direct the models into a state of visual perfection. This heightening of directorial style by Beecroft could be attributed to her gradual maturing as an artist, but also to her identification of the importance of creating a perfectly installed *picture* for the viewers to experience.

At the time of the Guggenheim show (1998) Beecroft had honed a visual iconography and concretized the system of facilitating the events, in some cases delegating some authority to a production team. The performances that ensue in the following three years each intensified this system towards an ultimately perfected outcome where Beecroft attempts to present the models as exact multiples rather than discreetly unique and to exert increased control over the movements of the models. Through careful observation of these works, one can observe the progressions, shifts, and increasingly spectacular character in each successive performance. Familiarity with the contextual and sequential maturation of the works will provide a framework to evaluate its relationship with historic and contemporary body art and performance

practices and the role photography plays in documenting, disseminating, and creating meaning in the work.

The subject of Beecroft's work-the female body and its culturally mediated image in Western society⁴-is a volatile one to navigate. Beecroft's placement of these women as objects in space, in a way that often elicits an erotic, fetishized response becomes the most contentious part of the events. Although a majority of critics deem the works somewhat sexually charged, some find that the performance diminishes the erotic effect. New York Gallery owner Jeffrey Deitch comments, "If one is present at a Vanessa Beecroft performance, they are not erotic. You feel the power of the women's presence. It is an intimidating image."⁵ By analyzing her early works as precursors to the mature works, one sees how this possible sexualized form evolved from narrative-inspired literary and film-based sources to the abstracted minimalist productions for which she is known.

In concordance with this contextual change, Beecroft shifts her attention to the details of the formal qualities of the work in a minimalist style. Each successive show presents the models in fewer articles of clothing, and much if not all of the fashion is synchronized or coordinated, or "stripped-down", as Beecroft is known to say. The formation or installation of the models within the museum space is methodically facilitated, and "rules" or instructions of participation given to the models become rigid. All these refinements in presentation result in multiples or doppelgängers, and

⁴ Paola Morsiani, *Subject Plural: Crowds in Contemporary Art* (Houston Contemporary Arts Museum, 2001), 44.

⁵ Nick Johnstone, "Dare to Bare," *The Observer*, March 13, 2005.

consequently a loss of individuality on the part of the models. Or, as observed by Jan Avgikos, 'Beecroft's itinerant bands of girls represent a model of the "cultural body" that is imaged continuously throughout our visual media culture and is standardized, reproducible, and mass produced.'⁶ A single icon becomes a representative stereotype which is replicated with ease. Consequently, the living mannequins operate as a group that creates a different dynamic in the experience between the crowd of viewers and the group of women. Thus Beecroft moves from individualized women operating as a group, to an army of culturally constructed archetypes.

As the work progresses, the photographs documenting the events become much more stylized, and the use of intense cropping is introduced (as we will see in performance VB35). This photographic posing reminiscent of fashion and erotic imagery operates in a way that de-humanizes and enhances the fetishistic quality of the models. These choices of staging that truncate the full body into parts reinforce the objectionable nature of the use of the female form as a sexual fetish. These photographic styles are introduced in VB35 where the curatorial production team of Yvonne Force plays an important role in the staging of the entire event. The performance was designed in collaboration with a specific fashion designer, and the photographers hired for the documentation process have experience as fashion photographers. The decisions made by these photographers result in a dramatic shift in the form and content of the photographs produced as a record of the event. By viewing the progression of the Beecroft's work, one hopes to clarify the intent of these choices, albeit, even with the

⁶ Jan Avgikos, "Let the Picture Do the Talking," *Parkett* 56 (1999): 106.

understanding that many viewers continue to have conflicts with the form, facilitation, and visual content of the events.

Beecroft is one of a handful of artists that categorize their work as performance, yet does not actually “perform” physically in the work. Her early works may present motives as to why she works as a facilitator or director rather than a participant in these events. In these earlier events the models are interpreted as being extensions or surrogates of Beecroft herself, or as cinematic mise-en-scènes of characters Beecroft relates to personally. As noted by Roberta Smith of the *New York Times*, “Women are her material, but also her surrogates.”⁷ As her work matures, this relationship to specific narrative disappears and the models transform into visually idealized female archetypes.

In both cases the models and events necessitate directorial intervention, but the dynamic of the event and resulting work is quite different. The girls in the earlier work often elicit sympathetic responses from the viewer, described as “demure and quirky.”⁸ The latter works display questionable use of authority, described by Keith Seward in *Classic Cruelty*, “Beecroft’s cruel classicism inspires one of her models to remark that, although there are conventions regarding the usage of human beings in science and war, there are none in art.”⁹ The classicism Seward refers to is Beecroft’s intent on installing the models in rigid and often geometric formations, all while instructing them to

⁷ Roberta Smith, “Critic’s Notebook; Standing and Staring, Yet Aiming for Empowerment,” *New York Times*, May, 6 1998.

⁸ Jan Avignos, “Let the Pictures do the Talking,” *Parkett* 56 (1999): 107.

⁹ Keith Seward, “Classic Cruelty,” *Parkett* 56 (1999): 100.

remain still in their pose rather than move about. This propensity for creating precise and exacting formations with her models is developed in the first five years of Beecroft's performances. This inclination certainly reflects something about Beecroft's personal aesthetic and rigorous process, as noted by biographer Judith Thurman in relation to the artist's eating habits: "Beecroft's self-discipline is spartan."¹⁰ One could certainly draw parallels between the self-ascribed restrictive habits of a bulimic and the controlling limitations Beecroft demands of her models during a performance.

Although Beecroft develops her live installations in this explicit manner, an important part of the work results from the viewer's response to the work and their participation with each other in the social environment of the museum for the duration of the event. It is this part of the performance that Beecroft cannot control, but in many cases provides the most interesting content. This activity of facilitating the event or performance is characteristic of the methodology of several other artists working in the 1990's-often labeled as Relational Artists.¹¹ These artists intend a "shift from a focus on the individual aesthetic object to more transitory situation-based work, and a marked turn from the overriding, largely didactic influence of theory, to an embrace of the mutability of meaning."¹² In most of these works the viewer plays a pivotal role in the creation of meaning, rather than the artist or the object itself holding discreet meaning.

¹⁰ Judith Thurman, "A Wolf at the Door," *New Yorker*, March 17, 2003, 114.

¹¹ Nicholas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Presses du Réel, 2009). Bourriard combines several essays here coining the term Relational Art and Relational Aesthetics as the premises pertain to art of the 1990-2000. The overarching idea is that the social engagement with others or the interactivity between the art and the viewer's becomes the primary substance of the work.

¹² Nancy Spector, *Theanyspacewhatever: An Exhibition in Ten Parts* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2008), 15.

By directing rather than participating, the Relational Artist shifts the focus and therefore the creation of meaning from the artist or object made by the artist to the activity of the viewer which is experienced and generated during the event or performance. Beecroft's work does operate within these parameters by exploring the museum space through these spectacular events which unfold in a way that destabilizes traditional modes of viewership (distanced, contemplative, analytical). This emphasis on the theatricality and duration of the event as a way to deconstruct ways of seeing provides ample opportunity for the viewer to evaluate in what ways they interpret the performance and how imbricated they are in the production of meaning.

Criticism and review of Beecroft's work has consistently focused on the relationship between her personal experience and her performances as a primary mode of understanding the essence of her work. Through a series of interviews and written texts Beecroft provides substantive documentation in which to explore her intent and level of satisfaction with each performance, and further understand the relationship between her life and art. The illustrations provided for this thesis have come from a book published at a first-decade retrospective where the artist was able to contextualize her work over this time period, in some cases renaming works and finding meaning retrospectively where it may not have been apparent at the time of the event.¹³ With each performance presented and discussed, her comments are included as part of the

¹³ Marcella Beccaria, "Conversation Piece," in *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 45-421.

figures section at the end of the text, as this will expand our understanding of her intent and interpretation of retrospective works.

Beecroft's first exhibition, VB01 (Figures 1 & 2) occurred as she prepared to graduate from the *Accademia Di Belle Arti Di Brera* in Milan, where she studied scenography. The show was initially conceived as a presentation of a journal (*Despair*) prepared by the artist over several years. The journal recorded types, colors, and quantities of food that she had consumed and her thoughts relating to the ingested food and personal body image. The journal was typed and leather-bound as a Minimalist white cube, which was then displayed in an empty gallery. At the last minute, Beecroft invited thirty girls [sic]¹⁴ as a visual reference to the book and perhaps as a bodily projection of herself. She refers to them as a "special audience," yet, as she quickly found out, the girls became the objects and subjects of focus. She states in an interview with Helena Kontova and Massimiliano Gioni in 2003 that "To the visitors, in that moment, the girls are both the ideal for the book and the pictorial element of the rules laid out in the book."¹⁵

Each girl was asked to wear clothing provided by the artist from her own closet and to then stand, pose, and linger near the book during the opening night reception. "People reading the book could identify these girls walking around and relate them to

¹⁴ Beecroft uses the term "girls" to describe the volunteers and paid models that participate in her performances. Although considered derogatory and archaic by some contemporary feminist and cultural theorists, I will continue to use the term when describing her works, as I endeavor to present her artistic vision as clearly as possible.

¹⁵ Helena Kontova and Gioni Massimiliano, "Vanessa Beecroft: Skin Trade," *Flash Art*, July/September, 2008, 211.

it”.¹⁶ The girls were selected for their visual relationship to women Beecroft identified with in paintings, film, and on the streets of Milan. Although each participant had a similar appearance, the group overall came across as a collection of individuals, not a series of duplicates or doppelgängers.

This happenstance event, not fully visualized by Beecroft, became the overwhelming and somewhat controversial content of the piece as the presence of live figures completely diverted attention away from the leather-bound volume *Despair*. The viewers were unprepared for interaction with the “girls” and due to the impromptu nature of the event, they found no information, written or otherwise, to guide them through the performance. This culminated in a divisive response among viewers, students and faculty alike. As there were no “rules” or directions given for the performance, what ensued was screaming (from the girls) for reasons unknown, and an uncomfortable “audience” comprised of the artist, faculty, students, and public clinging to the exterior wall of the gallery in disarray.

What we see in the photographic documents of this event are casually standing women leaning on the walls, interacting with one another. The scene is one of audience (not pictured) and observed “performers” appearing indistinguishable due to the casual nature of the girl’s postures and casual interaction with one another. The clothing is brightly colored and although we cannot see any reference drawings, we know from Beecroft’s description of the event that drawings were placed on the floor as part of the

¹⁶Thomas Kellein, *Vanessa Beecroft* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004), 124.

installation. Beecroft's installation of these girls as objects amongst her own drawings and journal lend a sense of autobiography to the production.

Jeffrey Deitch refers to these works as "conceptual self-portraiture" or "a surrogate self-portrait."¹⁷ She later says in an interview with Thomas Kellen, "The girls took over the place. I was ashamed."¹⁸ When asked by Marcella Beccaria about the shame of this piece, her response was, "It resulted from an excessive revelation of a personal, autobiographical component and from elements that were not sufficiently conceptualized and were too mundane to constitute a work..."¹⁹ So, in Beecroft's opinion the event was unresolved due to her failure to control the performance aspect while also rendering her personal thoughts unequivocally public. This first performance creates the impetus for the directorial control Beecroft exhibits increasingly in the first five years of her career.

In VB02 (Figures 3 and 4), installed at Galleria Fac-Simile, Milan less than a year after her graduation from di Brera, Beecroft once again used her drawings as the main source of inspiration. One sees a more direct correlation between the drawings and the models and a unification of the "look" or visual similarity between the three models themselves. Although the models are clothed, we see the introduction of underwear as outerwear. This choice of clothing worked to elicit a response from the viewer- to feel a

¹⁷ Jeffrey Deitch, "Performance that Makes Itself," in *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 26.

¹⁸ Thomas Kellein, *Vanessa Beecroft* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2004), 124.

¹⁹ Marcella Beccaria, "Conversation Piece," *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 17.

sense of voyeurism, an intrusion into privacy that the first performance doesn't have. With this performance Beecroft introduced the first of the many rules of subsequent performances, "do not talk."

This muting of the models is just one of many ways Beecroft controls the actions of the models.²⁰ She is slowly building a visual repertoire of which a cohesive but silent grouping of women is the foundation. To this Beecroft adds a direct reference to narrative with her correlation to Jean-Luc Goddard's film *La Chinoise* (1967) and its heroine, Anne Wiazemsky. This reference not only implies that the girls have a "role" to play, an identity other than their own, but we see an autobiographical reference to Beecroft's formative years in Lake Garda where she attended films with her mother. In an interview with Germano Celant in 2002 Beecroft relays her thoughts on Goddard, film and painting: "Goddard said that women reminded him of Piero della Francesca, and this inspired me to think of something halfway between film and painting, whereby

²⁰ Ibid, 18. In her interview with Beccaria Beecroft lists the rules of the performance. "Do not talk, do not interact with the others, do not whisper, do not laugh, do not move theatrically, do not move too quickly, do not move too slowly, be simple, be natural, be detached, be classic, be unapproachable, be tall, be strong, do not be sexy, do not be rigid, do not be casual, assume the state of mind that you prefer (calm, strong, neutral, indifferent, proud, polite, superior), behave as if you were dressed, behave as if no one were in the room, you are like an image, do not establish contact with the outside, maintain your position as much as you can, remember the position that you have been assigned, do not sit down at the same time, do not make the same movements at the same time, alternate resting and attentive positions, if you are tired sit, if you have to leave, do so in silence, hold out until the end of the performance, interpret the rules naturally, do not break the rules, you are an essential element of the composition, your actions reflect on the group, towards the end you can lie down, just before the end stand straight up."

choosing a girl was the equivalent of making a drawn statement on the immanence of a female figure.”²¹

In VB09 (Figure 5), installed in Galerie Schipper & Krome, Cologne, the number of women increased to thirty--a literal army of girls. One observes the continuation of uniformity of dress, which is made more pronounced by the increased number of models. The level of visual conformity between the girls has increased dramatically from VB2 due to the homogenous nature of the clothing and hair choices, which reinforces their status as doppelgänger-type objects. The choice of clothing for this installation included grey underwear bottoms with thick grey or black pull-over sweaters and black knee socks. This inference of a school-girl-like ingénue created by the sweaters and socks is complemented by the choice of blonde page-boy wigs. This fashion iconography has references to fetish erotica where school-age girls become the object of desire.

By introducing such imagery within a gallery installation, Beecroft elicited a response from the viewer that included emotion or desire rather than a distanced objective evaluation. Furthermore, she employed a new installation device- one taken directly from Duchamp's *Étant Donnés*, in that the girls are separated from the viewer by a wall with a small rectangular opening to allow the viewers visual access to the performance. This physical separation heightens the provocative and voyeuristic relationship between viewers and the “objects” of their gaze. In addition, this

²¹ Germano Celant, “Carnal Drawings,” in *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 24.

arrangement increases the feeling of confinement for the girls and promotes cohesion within a unit, rather than a grouping of individuals. The viewers walking to the window, gazing, then walking on would not have the same sense of cohesion, but feel a sense of power at their ability to view and to move about. Italian historian Germano Celant notes, “[the girls]...could be viewed through a fragment of wall serving as a picture-frame or still-frame, as though they constituted a two-dimensional image....the chromatic and environmental components were controlled and almost predisposed to creating a subsequent photographic event.”²² The entire event was designed to distill and intensify the roles of spectator and performer as well as demonstrate the power of the photographic installation.

In addition, even though the event has a distinct reference to Rossellini’s Edmund in *Germany Year Zero* (1948), it was described as “without beginning, end, or narrative, the performance was pure spectacle, the actors standing only as signs of symbolic and personal significance once (or more than once) removed.”²³ This elevation into spectacle will continue to play a key role in Beecroft’s mature work as she delights in exploring the ideas of perfection, uniformity, and luxury as they relate to the representation of female form. That the visual role played by these thirty “Edmunds” is symbolic of a character once or twice removed from the real is another concept which will become increasingly noticeable in Beecroft’s later works, as her exploration of iconic figures becomes more abstracted with each performance.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

This abstraction allows for vague recognition of the image as familiar, yet it doesn't refer to a particular model, role or actress. Here Beecroft is modeling the idea of the simulacral, something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance- a photographic copy without a "real" model. As the girls in her performance become more uniform and expand into many multiples, the reference to a specific event or narrative is lost. The photographic documentation further emphasizes the models, not as referential to live human forms, but as simulacral objects. In addition to recognizing Beecroft's events as photographic staging, Celant goes on to say, "...There is a correspondence with a framed [photographic] image, as though the artist wanted once again to highlight the classic distinction between being and appearing, between reality and fantasy."²⁴

In the event titled *They Come* (Figure 6), Beecroft attempted to recreate the work *Sie Kommen* (Naked and Dressed, 1981) by Helmut Newton, the renowned fashion photographer.²⁵ In a retrospective of his work, Françoise Marquet describes the genre, "Fashion Photography goes back to the early years of the twentieth century. It creates an image of society and of the role women play in it. Its aim is to sell what it depicts,

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Françoise Marquet, "Helmut Newton," in *Helmut Newton*, edited by Manfred Heiting (New York: Taschen, 2000), 13. "Newton's contribution to the history of 20th century photography lies not merely in his extremely provocative approach but also, and more importantly, in his prescience and intuition, in his ability to imagine and visualize women as they are today at the dawn of the third millennium: women who take the lead rather than follow it; women who love and desire whenever and whomever they like, and in whatever way they like; women full of health and vigor, enjoying the resplendence and vitality of their sinewy bodies, bodies over which they themselves have sole command; women who are both responsible and willing."

using the powers of seduction and the desires they awaken.”²⁶ Newton continually worked to push boundaries in the genre of fashion photography by exploring sexual fetish and voyeurism as provocation and a means to market fashion. Newton’s *Sie Kommen* comprised of two photographs (Figures 27 and 28), which were first published in *French Vogue* (November, 1981) as a two-page spread in which four models in Paris are captured walking forward towards the camera. The two photographs differ in that, on the left side they are clothed, and on the right they are nude. In this choice of re-shooting Newton’s work, Beecroft revealed her interest in this genre of photography and corresponding fashion iconography.

Her study of Newton’s work also affects her use of the camera in the documentation of her work, as with her subsequent work we see increased use of pre-event photographic staging for capturing the performance and close cropping or truncation of the figures. The dichotomy of clothed versus naked informs both Newton and Beecroft’s work-as an investigation into the nude as powerful versus vulnerable and the inference that nudity is ‘worn’ rather than a condition. Beecroft observes of Newton’s nudes, “I like the way he portrays women, which is not the same way I do. His big nudes deal with sex, power, politics, Germany. They are smart-asses. They have control. Mine are vulnerable, not so stylized, not so beautifully perfect and refined. More like self-portraits.”²⁷

²⁶ Ibid, 12.

²⁷ Dodie Kazanjian, “The Body Artist,” *Vogue*, April 2001, 406.

In VB16 (Figures 7 & 8), her first project at Deitch Projects in New York, Beecroft designs around the monochrome of beige and its relationship to nudity. The visual source for this work is a fashion photograph by Jürgen Teller that inspires the beige monochromatic color, the underwear, and the green dress. Thomas Kellein reflected on the relationship between this performance and the previous "...the color contrasts tended to diminish, as did the amount of clothing, to produce a monochrome, flesh and blood minimalism."²⁸ Therefore, although we don't observe any nudity in this performance, the use of beige (or in this case skin-tone) clothing references nudity as something that is worn. In this performance there are more rules of play-- directions to not speak, to move slowly, to keep the initial position as long as possible-- in other words, to *pose* like a fashion model rather than to interpret any character from a narrative. Beecroft is working to control action and pace while in this performance still providing a variety of individual elements within the *mise-en-scène* and differing levels of *dishabille* within the elements. With this work we see no Beecroft drawings in the production; therefore all direct correlation to Beecroft's drawings is gone.

An interesting introduction in the presentation of this work within the retrospective book was the addition of a photographic shot of the performance that includes the crowd of viewers or "audience" (figure 8). One starts to understand the dynamic of interplay that could be happening at the event which is lost by the choices of views provided for other events. As the discussion of meaning in Beecroft's work in

²⁸Thomas Kellein, "The Never-Ending Film-After Raphael," *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, ed. Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 103.

subsequent chapters expands, one will find a great interest in the dynamic between the crowd of viewers and the “objects” of their gaze.

In VB25 (figures 9, 10, and 11) performed in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, we see a completely homogeneous group of girls in a very rigid formal installation within the gallery. Beecroft alludes to this in her retrospective statement as the choice of the curator, not hers. This is the first event where a designer donated shoes to the performance. Beecroft refers to the shoes as pedestals for the girls to “present” themselves, whereas from another standpoint, the heels may be seen to add an additional challenge to sustaining their physical stance for the duration of the event. It is interesting to see the choices Beecroft and the curator made in creating the photographic documentation of this event. First they documented the girls at attention, then a group of them sitting posed on the floor, and finally of one girl in repose on the floor-- alone. Although Beecroft bristled at the interference from a curator in this show, I think she learned how uniformity from the group can intensify the results and also how an individual versus a group commands a different dynamic from the viewer.

In VB29 (Figures 12 and 13) at Le Nouveau Musée in Lyon, France, Beecroft chose only one model for the performance. The events between VB25 and VB29 show a progressive and intensive use of bare skin and more provocative clothing and posing. Jan Avignos observed of the Lyon performance, “The girl performs for the camera alone, a show that includes a special kind of “lap” dance. Later, while sitting exhausted on the floor, she enacts a repertoire of provocative poses that qualify equally as classical and “girlie,” sacred and profane. The camera dutifully inspects and records the

supplicant, yet never with the pretense of intimacy. It all looks very private, but nothing personal ever transpires.”²⁹ In this performance the element of voyeurism was evident, as it was in the prior, yet as Avignos noted, the provocation in this event transpired more as a “girlie” show rather than as an art performance. Even the cultural authority provided by a museum setting cannot dispel the sordidness. The discomfort felt by the viewer bubbles to the surface, and Beecroft seemed to recognize the power in that.

After this event she returned to the use of multiple models in each performance. This decision seems to confirm that she recognized the different dynamic created by a solo model versus a group of girls. The solo act also doesn’t reinforce the idea of the simulacral, multiples, or the mass spectacle, which becomes a very important part of her subsequent work. After this, she transitioned back to investigating the interaction between the two crowds: the viewers and the viewed. This performance marked Beecroft’s willingness to embrace the element of chance inherent in her work...“I leave the performance open to make itself.”³⁰ Although she identifies this element of the work, she doesn’t stop the visualization of the event as a picture. In this sense the performances bifurcate into the pre-visualized, robustly-directed installations and the durational exchange of glances within an uncontrollable social environment.

In April 1998, a mere five years beyond her graduate work, Beecroft executed a major performance at the New York Guggenheim. *The Show* (or VB35, figures 14-17)

²⁹ Jan Avignos, “Let the Pictures do the Talking,” *Parkett*. no. 56 (1999): 108.

³⁰ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 183.

made the cover of *Art Forum* and she becomes an artist fully launched on the international art scene and ensconced in the dialogue of performance. This work is the first in which Beecroft works with an independent curator that is also a production company (Yvonne Force, Inc), and intentionally cultivates a relationship with a fashion designer (Tom Ford, Gucci) as part of the preparation process. For this work Beecroft wanted all the models to appear nude, but the curator insisted on a certain amount of clothing.

The girls (twenty of them) in various styles of black bikinis and high-heeled shoes stood together in harmony and at attention. Although the bikinis and shoes weren't styled exactly alike, they did co-ordinate enough to show the effect of a stylist. Beecroft alludes to her desire to have all the models appear nude, and refers to *nudity* as an "urban uniform"³¹ There is a long history of the nude in Western art, and John Berger in his seminal book on the subject notes, "Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display. To be naked is to be without disguise. To be on display is to have the surface of one's skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress."³²

Beecroft's use of nudity as an "urban uniform" indicates her perception of nudity and nakedness is in agreement with Berger's. Her performances strive to display the

³¹ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 213.

³² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (New York, Penguin, 1990), 54.

nudity of the women as armor to deflect the humiliation (or shame) of surveillance. The intended strength of the group is enhanced by the number of models standing (rather than reclining) in orderly, determined poses/stances. This strength wavers and changes in the duration of the event as the models become fatigued and change position, and one senses that a vacillation between nudity and nakedness occurs, leaving the models open to a feeling of vulnerability.

Berger discusses nudity as part of the larger issue of the difference in the social presence between men and women. In the phrase “men act and women appear,” he denotes the nature of women as having a “presence” for the reason of being surveyed by men. To be constantly surveyed requires attention to how you appear to others, and therefore to yourself, or “She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life.”³³ This dichotomy forces a woman to have to distinguish aspects of her identity; that of the surveyed, and of the surveyor. Beecroft’s performance aptly constructs this condition visually by presenting the models (girls) as a form of self-portraiture, and in doing so she presents herself to the viewers for surveillance. She therefore models the dichotomy of surveying herself and being surveyed simultaneously. As her performances display more nudity, the level of discomfort for the viewer increases. The heightened awareness of society’s surveillance of women becomes the experience Beecroft is cultivating for the viewer.

³³ Ibid, 46.

When asked about her use of nudity, especially as it relates to the Kenneth Clark's notion of "nude" and "naked", Beecroft states, "Provocation, pushing forward the limits of society, or seeing what happens if certain taboos are touched upon, is one of the things that stimulates my artistic creativity. But the primary reasons for my work remains poetic, introspective, psychoanalytical, social, formal, chromatic, compositional..."³⁴ By this statement Beecroft minimizes the importance of nudity as part of the work (used only as provocation), and prioritizes the formal qualities.

Therefore one must also consider the formation and placement of the figures in space as of utmost importance in the work. With VB35, certain Minimalist ideals are in play as the interior architectural space of the New York Guggenheim is ideal as an interactive pristine space which references the *white cube* as a framing mechanism. The models become installed figures which relate to each other and are spaced in a way similar to Minimalist sculpture. Daryl Chin notes of the VB35 performance,

The possibility of the body as empty signifier, the reduction of art and fashion and humanism into forms without function, simply inert objects so minimally of interest that there was no admiration and no desire. That the aesthetic of Minimalism should have been reduced to this is the most intriguing aesthetic meaning in Beecroft's work."³⁵

Chin interprets Beecroft's performance as intending to evacuate meaning from the body, in the way Minimalism reduced the sculptural form to pure geometry, thereby introducing the theatrically of spatial presence as an essential meaning in the work. This attempt to reduce the body into pure form is observed by Jaap Guldemon, as he

³⁴ Vanessa Beecroft, "Conversation Piece," in *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 18.

³⁵ Daryl Chin, "Models of Fashion," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 20, no. 3 (Sep., 1998): 25.

states, “the girls are objectified in as much as they resemble tailor’s dummies, fashion models, or simply ‘things’ in a room.”³⁶ This observation also suggests the bodies are perceived as more inanimate than animate, in that “things” and tailor’s dummies are in fact inanimate. By creating a schism between an animate crowd and inanimate girls on display, the performance increased the tension between viewers and object of view (the models). The crowd is titillated by the spectacle of the event and the transgressive nature of the performance, but also uneasy with the relationship between spectator and object.

This type of spectacle is promoted and enhanced by the celebrity of the Guggenheim architectural structure and by the nature of the curatorial relationship between Beecroft, Yvonne Force Inc., and the Guggenheim staff. This type of installation/event comes to the fore in the 1990s (also modeled by Maurizio Cattelan and Matthew Barney) as museums are increasingly driven to promote art as entertainment as well as educate the population about culturally significant works and the preservation of cultural heritage.³⁷ This relationship becomes so intertwined that in

³⁶ Jaap Guldemon, “Dream Girls,” in *An International Survey on the Notion of Identity in Contemporary Art* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbe-Museum, 1996), 40.

³⁷ Pierre Balloffet, François H. Courvoisier, Joelle Lagier, “Museum of Amusement Park: the Opportunities and Risks of Edutainment,” *International Journal of Arts Management* 16, no. 2 (Winter 2014): 4. Many heritage institutions, whether architecturally distinctive or not, are key attractions that play a role in reinforcing the image of a city or in promoting a region. Often, they must balance several different objectives, some of which go beyond the function of a museum as defined by the International Council of Museums – namely, the conservation of and research on collections for the education and enjoyment of the public (<http://icom.museum/la-vision/definition-du-musee/L/2/>). For example, research has demonstrated that new technologies that stimulate the visitor’s senses make it possible to “recreate” the content of a cultural message, leading to its rediscovery (Kotler, 1999). This applies in the case of both education and entertainment and can also be understood from the perspective of experiential marketing (Roederer, 2012). In this case, the aim of the institution is to enhance the visitor’s experience by making it a unique and memorable event.

some ways artists are pressed into staging grand spectacles that may not have been originally intended. As such, the curatorial practices of institutions start to inform the making and presentation of art in a substantial way. These practices work in tandem to elevate the artist to the level of celebrity and perhaps commercialism that was incidental in the past, but commonplace today.³⁸

After the Guggenheim show, Beecroft continues to explore the installation of bodies in space in formation and re-formation. She experiments with limits of control and continues to struggle with the dissolution of the image within the duration of the performance. Although she no longer displays her drawings, she still uses site and cultural history to inspire and actualize the performances. In VB45 (figures 18, 19, 20) we observe a highly-stylized and somewhat sobering performance at the Kunsthalle Wien in February, 2001. Beecroft specifically aligns herself with Minimalist concepts and the inspiration she takes from it, she states, "...the formations and arrangement of objects in space and in this sense a cube formation."³⁹ She also continues her progression towards confrontational and transgressive behavior in that she chooses black military style boots from Helmut Lang as symbolic of Nazi Germany.⁴⁰ Not only is

³⁸ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 8. In presenting the history of Installation Art, Bishop notes its progression in twentieth-century art history from Lissitzky, Schwitters, and Duchamp to Happenings and Minimalism, to the "...apotheosis as the institutionally approved art form par excellence of the 1990's, best seen in the spectacular installations that fill large museums such as the Guggenheim in New York and the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern." I posit that the location, sponsorship, and expectations of such large-scale installations inform the process, content, and viewer reception of the work.

³⁹ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 306.

⁴⁰ Dodie Kazanjian, "The Body Artist," *Vogue* (April 2001):373. Beecroft has always endeavored to use clothing and other props to distinguish the performances as related to local tastes, customs, or histories. While past events

she continuing to use the models as props to facilitate an image, in this particular case a very dark one, but the models have become so homogenized that we start to now realize the challenges they must endure to become part of the work. Rituals of hair dying, body waxing, and body painting are endured by the models to facilitate homogeneity of a performance, an installation, an event. In some cases these are transformations that cannot be reversed immediately after the event is over. Hence, the criteria for commitment to participate imposed by Beecroft has now escalated and is more serious, and her domination of the models has increased.

In this work and in Beecroft's comments relating to it, we see acquiescence to the idea that the image will lose form over the duration of the performance. In a reversal of spirit she chooses to embrace the serendipitous nature of this part of the work. The vacillation between an animate and an inanimate presentation by the models now becomes a new and very interesting part of the meaning of the work. This intentionality could be interpreted as a dysfunctional level of obsession in creating the image in a perfected form, one not obtainable by living beings. So Beecroft's embrace of the vacillation between animate and inanimate perhaps marks a shift for her into new areas of exploration.

In VB46 (figures 21 and 23) performed at Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, we see perhaps a response to the darkness (of VB45) in a pure white installation in a white cube of a gallery in sunny southern California. In an effort to continue this reach for

rendered these choices abstractly, the provocative selection of the clothing for VB45 elicited a backlash against reference to such a horrific and devastating historical event in European history.

complete Minimalism, Beecroft turns to the non-color white as a representation of absence. The models are dyed, plucked, and painted into conformity and then assimilated into their white cyclorama⁴¹ for a pre-performance staging then installed into the Gagosian gallery as if they were part of the mobile architecture. In this performance we see a return to using two different elements within the installation as the white-haired girls are counterbalanced by one dark-haired Asian woman walking amongst the stationary group of painted women.

In selecting the girls for this show, Beecroft directed the casting agent to find boyish or flat-chested women for the work. Always disturbed by the interpretation of her work as erotic or fetish related, Beecroft thought by removing the obvious visual cues of sexuality in the girls or their bodies, she would counter the sexualized interpretations. This performance also evolved in an unexpected manner through the inclusion of several California Institute of the Arts students informally known as the *Toxic Titties*. Their goal in participating was to infiltrate and reveal the inherent anti-feminist nature of Beecroft and her work. This group of women, some lesbian, some not, would write an exposé on Beecroft based on their experience of the three days of participation in the event. This scathing text will allow us to view the artist and her decision-making process in a different light and to also interpret how the actions and attitudes of these women affected the outcome of the event.

⁴¹ Beecroft leased a special cyclorama stage (a curved wall or drop at the back of a stage, used for creating an illusion of unlimited space or distance in the background of exterior scenes or for obtaining lighting effects) for this photo shoot.

Heather Cassils and Clover Leary, two of the three *Toxic Titties*, auditioned for the performance initially as a way to sabotage the event. Yet the importance of their work became to interrogate Vanessa Beecroft's methodology to reveal the behind-the-scenes activities as a way to introduce transparency to her process. Through this exposé we learn that the models are paid \$1500 to participate in the three-day event, and that the first day included removal of body hair, hair coloring, and intensive body painting to neutralize skin coloration. The two *Toxic Titties* provide extensive details as to what they endured, how they felt, and how these details are important parts of the performance. In a comparison with classic feminist performance, the *Toxic Titties* find that,

Beecroft's performances do not use the female body as a way to interrogate the traffic in images of women...she uses her status in the art world in order to wield power over other women. The 'what's wrong' in Beecroft's work is the actual set of conditions present in the process of the work itself, conditions that are not revealed or presented in the performance or its photographic representations.⁴²

By revealing such conditions the *Toxic Titties* expose Beecroft's indifference to this part of the process, which may indicate her indifference to a feminist agenda, or any cultural critique at all.

In this event we see a separate day and time for staging the photo shoot and for the performance. This facilitation of a tableaux-vivant for the specific purpose of photographic documentation belies the artist's stated intent to realize the performance as the primary vehicle for the creation of meaning. If we accept this intention then to

⁴² Julia Steinmetz, Heather Cassils, Clover Leary, "Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate Vanessa Beecroft," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2006): 767.

what end is a separate spectacle for? Is it for the eye of the camera only? Perhaps this choice was shaped by a curator or gallery owner, or was it just the natural progression of Beecroft's display of obsession towards perfection? In any case, the staging of a pre-performance photo shoot changes the nature of the work (both the performance and documentation) and specifically speaks to the importance of photographic documentation in the entirety of the work. This shift in production could indicate Beecroft's increasing submission to the perfection of the *image*, and the importance of the commercial aspect of the photographic documentation to the success of her work.

In VB47, (figures 24-26), also in 2001, one sees Beecroft's intent on purity, bareness, and certainly the removal of personal identity. The location in the Peggy Guggenheim Gallery in Venice, Italy contains early twentieth-century Metaphysical Art of Giorgio de Chirico, which provides inspiration for the performance. With some aplomb, Beecroft installed the nude girls with headpieces that hide their faces, but allow the women to gaze through them at the viewer. There is an intimacy to this installation that changes how the viewer and the photographer each interpret the works, as the figures relate to the others but also interact and collide with the paintings and furniture in the gallery. The headpieces by Phillip Treacy continue Beecroft's practice of working with notable fashion designers. These headpieces are pivotal to the interpretation of the performance as eerie and dream-like as the occlusion of the model's face increases the de-humanizing effect of the entire event à la de Chirico.

This series of work ending in 2001, at the conclusion of close to a decade of production, realizes a complete de-humanization of the model, a uniformity and rigidity

in the presentation that expose a dictatorial artist, and an exploration of cultural norms of beauty and identity. We experience a voyeuristic look at idealized representations of the female form and the spectacle of visual culture. This complex array of strategies used by Beecroft works in tandem to heighten the viewer's experience and self-reflexivity of the act of looking at women.

PERFORMING THE OBJECT

Beecroft employs ideologies and techniques from Performance, Minimalism, and Relational Art, which, although intentionally utilized by the artist, create ambiguity in the interpretation of the work. This mutability of meaning becomes a signature of early twenty-first-century performance art which now is also being referred to as Body Art or Live Art.⁴³ Through comparison to other methods of live art presented contemporaneously with hers and through certain historic practices we hope to engender clearer understanding of Beecroft's work within the place of late twentieth-century artistic production.

PERFORMANCE, FEMINISM, AND SUBJECTIVITY

Performance Art's conception in the early twentieth century by the Dadaists and Futurists revered chance, was subject to anarchic practices, and included some form of *live* presence by the artist(s). As stated by RoseLee Goldberg in reference to the development of twentieth-century Performance Art, "...artists chose performance to break free of the dominant media of painting and sculpture, the constraints of museum and gallery systems, and they used it as a provocative form to respond to change-

⁴³Adrian Heathfield, ed., *Live Culture* (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2003). In 2003, the Tate Modern sponsored a program called "Live Culture" and the catalog outlines how performance or live practice has expanded in recent years to disrupt cultural borders and traditions, engage with risk and extremity, correlate with the technological culture of immediacy, impact on political activism and social intervention, and express new identities. These conversations on Body Art and Live Art express the most current understanding of how Performance Art has been intertwined with political and social activism over the course of several decades since its re-inception in the 1960s.

whether political, in the broadest sense, or cultural.”⁴⁴ When performance as an artistic practice re-emerged in the late sixties and early seventies the cultural climate (again) promoted an inquiry into dominant modes of creation, display, and critical thought in art. Along with artists of Pop Art, Minimalism, and Institutional Critique, Performance artists utilized multiple strategies to interrogate the concepts of representation, power structures within the gallery and museum systems, and innovative processes of making and interpreting art.

As one might suspect, when the constitution of the work was comprised of the human body, the corresponding themes of gender, group identity, and interpersonal relationships became concepts explored in the work. As artists continued to use their own bodies, the events become known as ‘Body Art’, as this practice relates directly to the artist’s body rather than a series of performances or scripted actions between groups. I contend that Beecroft identifies her work as performance in the broadest sense, while utilizing aspects of this ancillary practice called Body Art.

In her text *Performing the Subject*,⁴⁵ Amelia Jones clarifies this distinction between Performance Art and Body Art as,

A particular moment in which the body emerged into the visual artwork in a particularly charged and dramatically sexualized and gendered way...[in works

⁴⁴ RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011): 9.

⁴⁵ Amelia Jones, *Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 13. In this seminal work Jones develops a series of analytical re-readings of live practice: from the action painting of Jackson Pollock—filmed by Hans Namuth; the erotic/violent/contemplative body sculpture of Vito Acconci; the feminist performances of Hannah Wilke, who marks sexuality, vitality, and mortality with equal measure of intelligence, humor, and courage; to the intersection of body and technology as exemplified by the works of Gary Hill, James Luna, Orlan, Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose, Maureen Connor, Laurie Anderson, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Laura Aguilar.

that] take place through an enactment of the artist's body, whether it be in a 'performance' setting or in the relative privacy of the studio, *that is then documented such that it can be experienced subsequently through photography, film, video, and/ or text...*by [placing] the body/self within the realm of the aesthetic as a political domain... so unveils the hidden body...and its active solicitation of spectatorial desire— [and it] provides the *possibility* for radical engagements that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity (both the artist's and our own)."⁴⁶

Jones here introduces a notion of the difference between Performance Art and Body Art- one as active performance versus the performative body revealed through photographic means. She also unequivocally reinforces the notion of the body as a political site, rather than just an entity possible of political actions. In the development of this tangential yet radical form of Performance Art, Jones identifies innovative outcomes of Body Art, "By surfacing the desires informing interpretation, it encourages a 'performance of theory' that aims to replot the relation between perceiver and object, between self and other."⁴⁷

This approach to the body and Performance Art coincides with the civil and women's rights movement that engender activism as one of the primary functions of Body Art. In her essay *Survey* in the text *The Artist's Body*, Amelia Jones comments on a form of Body Art she calls "The Authentic Activist Artist's Body" wherein she substantiates this conflation of Body Art and activism.⁴⁸ Beecroft, by placing her artistic

⁴⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁷ Ibid. This synopsis is just a small portion of the complex and revealing theoretic premise Jones presents in the text. For our use here, we want to understand the difference between Performance Art and Body Art, and how that will inform our understanding of Beecroft's work.

⁴⁸ Amelia Jones, "Survey," in *The Artist's Body*, edited by Tracey Warr (New York: Phaidon Press, 2000), 16-43.

practice so prominently within the realm of the body, body image, and the site of intersubjectivity, invites one to evaluate her work within the same parameters as other female body artists working prior to and concomitant with her. Her work is live and provocative. She deals with female identity, but in a dramatically different way than it has been treated in the past several decades in live work. Somehow we expect Beecroft to acknowledge the political history of Body Art, but she doesn't do so directly, as her process is derived more from a visionary tableaux-vivant photographic enactment rather than Performance or Body Art. Due to the *live* aspect, she can categorize it as *performance*, although it only narrowly relates to Performance Art/Body Art of the past largely given its lack of activism, and commitment to embodiment.

The first critical issue is what one learns from looking at the inception and progression of the work. Beecroft didn't *intend* to be a Performance Artist; the live aspect of the work was coincidental and driven by her obsession with body *image* and food. The girls were the *visual aspect* of her book and drawings (therefore drawing the gaze), and her oft-quoted description of the work being a tableau of Piero della Francesca paintings and/or Goddard movies indicates that she was trying to re-visualize a representational image in the form of a photograph or movie still, not to script or perform some sort of statement of feminist ideology. Yet very quickly, the girls become the show or event, not just a tableau vivant version of a painting or movie heroine, but a distilled essence and extension of Beecroft herself. Therefore, as Beecroft comes to terms with this progression in her work, she realizes it *is* a performance, yet not anything quite like the Performance, Body or Live Art that had come before.

By comparing her work with the work of Carolee Schneemann and Robert Morris, Hannah Wilke, and Cindy Sherman, the relationship of Beecroft's work to Performance and Body Art will become clearer. Each of these artists endeavored to re-present or perform the female body in ways that interrogate the nature of representation and femininity in new ways, and therefore inform our understanding of Beecroft's performative works.

The first comparison one sees is with certain types of tableaux installation done in the 1960's. Robert Morris and Carolee Schneemann pair up in a performance in 1964 called *Site: Performance* (Figure 29). In this work Schneemann poses as Manet's *Olympia* while Morris, painted and masked in white, moves a series of plywood panels in and out of the space. Jill Johnston of the *Village Voice* describes the performance:

Dressed in white, wearing work gloves and a skin-tight, flesh-colored mask, Morris stands before a white box containing a tape recorder which makes the constant rumbling sound of a pneumatic drill (previously recorded from his studio window). To his right is a stack of three large rectangular plywood boards painted white. He removes one and stands it up vertically a few yards away. He removes the second and takes it off stage. After a few moments he returns, grasps a corner of the third, and pulls it away swiftly to reveal a reclining odalisque, backed with white pillows, and her skin covered with faint white make-up, so that she looks dewy and transparent. She is also a facsimile of Manet's *Olympia*. Morris makes the famous Manet painting his "found" object as a live entity on the stage. She remains transfixed while he manipulates the plywood board, making a moving sculpture of body and object, with the additional visual effect of shifting relationships between Morris, the odalisque, the small white box, and the stationary vertical board.⁴⁹

The description here persuades one to see how a performance can reference an image, either directly or indirectly, and introduce the idea of animating the image through

⁴⁹ Jill Johnston, "The Object," *Village Voice*, May 21, 1964.

movement in Morris' term the *labor of making*. Schneemann and Morris "insist on thinking about *Olympia* in terms other than those of painting. Whatever site is--- tableau, theater, dance, sculpture---it represents painting, and leaves it behind."⁵⁰ The performance of *Site* represents not only Morris' contention that art is no longer a static and final object, but that art is a form of durational work that results in disorientation and shift and the activity of change.⁵¹ Johnston's description of the event also draws attention to the analogy between body and sculptural object, and in this way highlights a relationship to kinetic sculpture. This moving form of sculpture has a way of 'filling out' its own space in the same way in which a dancer can move about and articulate a stage space. In this sense one can understand *Site* as a work that cannot be contained by the spaces articulated within it. "Painting is transformed to sculpture, sculpture into dance. And dance itself is transformed into ordinary vernacular movement."⁵²

One can apply these premises to Beecroft's work in that Schneemann is presenting herself as the immobile object of desire (a direct correlation to *Olympia* and all that she means) in a similar way to how Beecroft installs the posed models (a collage of femininity) in the gallery. Beecroft is articulating a two-dimensional painting or image

⁵⁰ Henry Sayre, *the Object of Performance, the American Avant-Garde since 1970*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989), 70.

⁵¹ Robert Morris, *Conceptual Art*, edited by Ursula Meyer (New York: Dutton, 1972), 184. This theory was presented by Morris for the 1970 Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects exhibition at the New York Cultural Center.

⁵² Henry Sayre, *the Object of Performance, The American Avant-Garde since 1970* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989), 71. This translation of dance into vernacular movement was an important contribution of the Judson Dance Theater, of which Morris was a part.

in sculptural form, and therefore animating the image through the use of the pose and corresponding other (vernacular) movements that occur within the duration of the event. Both *Site:Performance* and Beecroft's events begin with an image as reference, but unfold through the duration to become more through presence, movement, and gesture.

Morris worked with the Judson Dance Theater (1962-1964) closely at this time, and several artistic principles developed by Yvonne Rainer of the group are exhibited in *Site*. From the list of principles, introduction of unitary forms, literalness, simplicity, and repetition, are just a few that surface during the *Site* performance. A further analogy comes from David Antin and Henry Sayre on *Site: Performance*:

In Morris' performance the plywood divides 'the space into an inside (hidden) and outside (revealed)...and though one might discover the most extraordinary things inside the box—a nude Carolee Schneemann...Morris consistently finds ways to make the revelation of the inside ordinary...Schneemann becomes the image of a nude...if anything is remarkable it is that nudity would appear so ordinary. This ordinariness is, in fact, the mark of all minimalist art.⁵³

This reduction of the nude to the commonplace is something Beecroft ascribes to, but isn't able to achieve. She uses uniformity (of the models) and multiple versions of them as a method to introduce this sense of literalness into the event, but the female body, as Beecroft presents it, is a site too charged with desire and spectacle to be reduced to the literal in this way.

While working with Morris, Schneemann was concocting her own strategies of performance exploring emerging feminist themes through the enactment of her own

⁵³ Henry Sayre, *the Object of Performance, The American Avant-Garde since 1970*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 71. David Antin quoted as part of larger discussion of Minimalist art.

body as art. In such works, Schneemann sought to explore “...sacrosanct boundaries separating female sexuality and artistic authority.”⁵⁴ Her involvement in collaborations with Morris and others provoked a response to the male-dominated art movements of previous decades and encouraged not only exploration of flesh as material, but of the female body which could not be divorced from the history of its socio-cultural signification. Schneemann notes, “The nude was being used in early happenings as an (often) *active* object. I was using the nude—myself—as the artist and as a primal archaic force which could unify energies I discovered as visual information.”⁵⁵

In *Eye/Body* (Figure 30), Schneemann created a kinetic environment in her own loft using 4 x 9 foot wood panels, broken glass and shards of mirrors, photographs, lights, and motorized umbrellas. She incorporated her naked body into her construction by painting, greasing, and chalking herself and performing a “kind of shamanic ritual.”⁵⁶ In this work Schneemann was not only the *artist* but the image or *work*. The terrain of her body was the site. This new form of messy, raw performance was ill-received and misunderstood at the time of inception by the New York art scene. As Schneider states, “Nudity was not the problem. Sexual display was not the problem. *The agency of the body displayed, the authority of the agent*—that was the problem with women’s work.”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: E.P.Dutton, 1976), 122.

⁵⁵ Carolee Schneemann, *Imaging her Erotics: Essays, Interviews, Projects* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2002), 55-56.

⁵⁶ Rebecca Schneider, *the Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 32.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 35.

If Schneemann in *Site:Performance* utilizes the body as objectified visual representation as a counter to Morris' agency of making, in *Eye/Body* she confronts this subject/object split by enacting the artist as object and the artist as subject. While this work engendered a response by viewers countering the "embodied artist" as a self-indulgent narcissistic display, Schneemann continued her emblematic quest to explore the boundaries between self, female representation, and artistic authority.

Hannah Wilke is another artist who used her body as a vehicle for exploring the perception of the idealized female form as a source of power, identity and strength. In response to criticism of her work as vain and narcissistic, Wilke claims, "Exhibiting one's self is difficult for other people who don't feel good about their bodies. I could have been more humble— but if I'd been more humble, I wouldn't have been an artist."⁵⁸ Her performative posing or 'performalist self-portraits' have often been the subject of debate amongst critics (Figure 31). Leslie Jones in *Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the 1960s and 1970s* states, "Although (Acconci's) engagement in transgressive femininity and his attempt to 'become' a woman (*Conversions*, 1971) were perceived as valid art practice, body manipulations by Hannah Wilke and Lynda Benglis were deemed narcissistic or pornographic."⁵⁹

A feminist Performance Artist then must deal with this dichotomy of interpretation (narcissistic or enacting artistic authority?) by either acknowledging or repudiating it.

⁵⁸ Amelia Jones, *Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 151. Hannah Wilke quoted here from a 1985 taped interview by ernst from archives at the Hannah Wilke Estate.

⁵⁹ Leslie Jones, "Transgressive Femininity: Art and Gender in the 1960's and 1970's," in *The Artist's Body*, edited by Tracey Warr (New York: Phaidon Press, 2000), 262.

Wilke not only addresses the criticism of narcissism, but her approach to display is considerably different than Schneemann's. The latter's approach was to propel the body to action, to not only activate the space, but to reinforce the idea of female subjectivity in conjunction with artistic authority. With Wilke's Body Art practices, she didn't engage in a sense of action like Schneemann, nor does she utilize live installation tableaux as a frame for the body. It is immediately apparent that Wilke is putting her body at the center of production (like Schneemann), but clearly she is not engaged in action but in *posing*, and in this case not only for viewers but for the camera. Wilke is miming the popular image of women as objects and using photographic imagery as her method of subtle deconstruction.

In relation to this concept of the pose in Wilke's work, Jones states,

Precisely *because* feminist body artists enact themselves in relation to the long-standing Western codes of female objectification (what Craig Owens has called the 'rhetoric of the pose'), they unhinge the gendered oppositions structuring conventional models of art production and interpretation (female/object versus male/acting subject).⁶⁰

Thus this reiterative performativity in which Wilke engages confronts the disinterestedness of the viewer's gaze, enacts femininity as inexorably performed, and immobilizes the 'gaze' by presenting exaggeratedly erotic 'feminine' poses. Therefore, although not clearly deconstructive in nature, her work does solicit a "...careful scrutiny of the models through which art history and criticism legitimate (male or masculine)

⁶⁰ Amelia Jones, *Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 152.

critical and artistic subjects in a closed and exclusionary circle of masculine privilege.”⁶¹ Beecroft certainly uses the pose as a strategy to explore the notion of female beauty, the dynamics of a crowd, and the scopophilic gaze. Although she is directing the pose rather than performing it, if one views the models as extensions of the artist herself (as we have proposed here), then Beecroft views or “sees” (these extensions of self) concurrent to when she is directing or constructing the field of perspectival vision. She is creating the “...to be look-at-ness of her own self.”⁶²

Cindy Sherman, perhaps the most widely known female contemporary photographer, also explores the construction of identity and nature of representation through a form of portraiture. Her images, although ‘performed’, are conceived as photographic documents rather than live performance, and in this way are inherently different from the other artists discussed here. Her early work, often said to be inspired by Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Adrian Piper,⁶³

“...consisted of black and white self-portraits depicting the artist in a variety of elaborate costumes, playing exaggerated feminine types from classic postwar cinema...however, instead of directly appropriating these roles from the imagery of others, she rather confiscated the symbolic constructions of women that popular culture often promotes, creating eerily familiar but entirely original characters and scenarios.”⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid, 155.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Roberta Smith, “Photographer’s Agent Provocateur: Cindy Sherman at Museum of Modern Art,” *New York Times*, February 23, 2012.

⁶⁴ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality and Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 296.

Contrary to other artists discussed here, Sherman didn't use her own identity as artist to inform the subject of the portraits, but instead she merges her own physical form with this 'symbolic construction' of feminine identity to reveal the artifice inherent in gender identities in a media-saturated culture. In her *Fashion* series (Figure 35), Sherman was commissioned to make a series of fashion photographs for *Interview* magazine, and as Warr noted, "The resulting images subverted the glamour of high fashion as a masquerade of caricatured 'feminine' stereotypes in exaggerated costumes and highly mannered poses."⁶⁵ Beecroft similarly uses feminine stereotypes, glamour, and visual language of fashion as an erotic signifier to elicit a response from the viewer. But, in her case, the construction of the live spectacle of nude models installed in formation and shifting over the duration of the event creates an ambiguity of vacillating subjectivity and objectivity between viewer and models. This intersubjectivity between the group of observers and the girls destabilizes the roles of the viewed and the viewer in new ways.

While evaluating the documentation from all these performances one views different qualities in the photography that inform our understanding of the events and subsequent meaning within each image. As Amelia Jones states,

"By the late 1970s artists had generally moved away from the relatively modest, raw staging of themselves in body art projects. Body art mutated into either performative photographic work, such as the 'film stills' of Cindy Sherman or large-scale, ambitious, and at least seminarrative performance art practices such as Laurie Anderson's theatrical, proscenium-bound *United States*."⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Tracey Warr, ed., *The Artist's Body* (New York, Phaidon Press, 2012): 151.

⁶⁶ Amelia Jones, *Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998):21.

This shift seems to necessitate the need for more than 'documentary' styles of photographic practice, especially those that derive from the Sherman film stills prototype. The mediated, fabricated photographic image becomes an essential medium for interrogating post-modern identity. This shift prioritizes the visual and subordinates the phenomenological body, which is a dramatic change for feminist production.⁶⁷ Beecroft's work seems to intentionally conflate these two methodologies by facilitating spectacular events designed to engage the viewer visually, but then allowing the duration of the events to produce phenomenological results between models and viewers that cannot be reduced to an altogether distanced visual experience. Beecroft then documents these events in a way that resembles fashion photography; with strategic cropping, still shots, in some cases an implied narrative of luxury, and commodity practices. So her live events mimic the photographic, inviting the gaze of the viewer, by facilitating the voyeurism of the crowd to the point of discomfort and perhaps shame.

One must also address the idea of the erotic body as an aspect of Body Art.

Maria Buszek notes,

Few issues have caused more debate within feminist history than the sexualized representation of women...Feminist activists and scholars have long tangled with the issue of whether images liberate women from or enforce traditional patriarchal notions of female sexuality...contemporary artists as varied as Judy Chicago and Renee Cox, Cindy Sherman and Lisa Yuskavage have appropriated icons, objects and stereotypes that speak to traditions of representing women as sexual creatures...these artists effectively subvert these methods and image

⁶⁷ Ibid, 21-22. Jones elaborates on the "shift away from the body" that happens in the 1980s, and how Body Art from the 1960s and 1970s was viewed by Feminists (of the Marxian or poststructuralist bent) as "naïve essentialism."

types to assert the pleasure and power feminist women may find in them—a clever bait and switch process perhaps best described by art historian Kate Linker as *seduce, then intercept*.⁶⁸

Beecroft clearly appropriates imagery from film, painting, and fashion media when creating her installations. Over time the relationship to a direct source is lost and her imagery—like Sherman’s—becomes a ‘symbolic construction.’ Jan Avignos states, “Beecroft works within a fairly narrow range of feminine stereotypes: the showgirl, the glamour girl, the working girl...they may still function as her surrogates—her persona, her empowerment, her control, her pain, her fantasies...part of the provocation of the performances is the subtext of illicit eroticism that is “performed’ publicly—not by the hired models per se, but by the audience itself.”⁶⁹

Comments vary about the nature of her voyeuristic performances. Judith Thurman notes, “Her work is certainly sexually provocative, or it uses sexual imagery as a provocation. I’m not sure there is that much sexual content to it.”⁷⁰ Jeffrey Deitch explains, “If one is present at a Vanessa Beecroft performance, they are not erotic. You feel the power of the women’s presence. It is an intimidating image.”⁷¹ Claire Bishop states, “How could anyone dupe themselves that libido was absent, given the crowd

⁶⁸ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality and Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.

⁶⁹ Jan Avignos, “Let the pictures do the talking,” *Parkett*, no. 156 (1999): 107.

⁷⁰ Judith Thurman, “A Wolf at the Door,” *New York Times*, 3/17/2003.

⁷¹ Jeffrey Deitch quoted in “Dare to Bare,” by Nick Johnstone *Guardian* March 13, 2005, 8.

outside clamouring to get in, and the silent gawping of everyone inside?”⁷² Thus there exist a variety of interpretations of how sexual or erotic the Beecroft productions really are, given the appropriated imagery, the live girls, the crowd, and the spectacle of the event.

While Beecroft’s performances are administered through galleries and museums as high spectacle, they are in fact filled with the nuances and subtleties of exchanges (glances, movements, socializing) that circumvent a unanimous reading. Consequently one could conclude that although Beecroft uses the sexual and erotic to seduce, the interception and subversion evident in the work of other contemporary female artists remains elusive, at best in Beecroft’s. Through these comparisons to Performance and Body Art works one concludes that Beecroft deploys many strategies and methods used by prior Performance and Body Art artists, but her synthesis of these with other techniques derived from Post-Modern practice, intercepts a straightforward reading of Beecroft’s practice as strictly evolved from Body Art.

MINIMALISM, MULTIPLES, AND THE OBJECT

I have an aspiration to Minimalism that never gets satisfied when I realize a performance, but it doesn’t have anything to do with cloning. I usually pick each girl for her looks and portraiture. I can still identify each of them in the mass portrait that a performance is. When I think of a performance I think of a monochrome.⁷³

Beecroft is drawn to and influenced by certain principles of Minimalism: the paired-down simplicity of the sculptural objects, monochromatic or achromatic color, the

⁷² Claire Bishop, “Vanessa Beecroft: VB43,” *Make, the Magazine of Women’s Art*, no. 88 (Je/ August, 2000): 32.

⁷³ Vanessa Beecroft and Gerald Matt, *Interviews* (New York: Outside Europe, D.A.P., 2007), 53.

'movability' of the objects or body in relationship to the architectural space, the relationship of viewer to object and the meaning created by such relationships, the duration of time, and the use of multiples to reduce the implied preciousness or uniqueness of the sculptural objects. Certain Minimalist principles have been adopted by popular culture and designers, and the application of these visual aspects of Minimalism are not always constitutive of the initial theory laid out by the artist working in this way in the mid 1960s and early 1970s. Beecroft's statement clarifies her interest in some of these visual aspects of Minimalism, but is she really interpreting Minimalist theoretical principles in a new way, or just co-opting the reductive qualities of the visual works? She insists her work is *portraiture*, so then how can she aspire to Minimalist ideologies of production and meaning?

In *The Crux of Minimalism*, Hal Foster challenges the notion of the reductive and idealist qualities initially ascribed to Minimalism. His retrospective analysis posits the Minimalist's break with Modernist critical theory in several ways: a rejection of the artist as existential creator and as formal critic, a return to the readymade or avant-garde object and a sense of literalness, and an overwhelming orientation towards the phenomenological aspect of deriving meaning from the works especially through temporal duration.⁷⁴ Foster revisits seminal writings from Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris as part of this revisiting of Minimalist theory.

⁷⁴ Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism," in *Minimalism*, edited by James Meyer (New York: Phaidon Press, 2000), 270-274.

“Minimalism does announce a new interest in the body-again, not in the form of anthropomorphic image or in the suggestion of an illusionist space of consciousness, but rather in the *presence* of its objects, unitary and symmetrical as they often are (as Fried saw), just like people. And this implication of presence does lead to a new concern with perception, that is, to a new concern with the subject...For Minimalism considers perception in phenomenological terms, as somehow before or outside history, language, sexuality and power. In other words, it does not regard the subject as a sexed body positioned in a symbolic order any more than it regards the gallery or the museum as an ideological apparatus. To ask Minimalism for a full critique of the subject may be anachronistic as well: it may be to read it too much in terms of subsequent art and theory.”⁷⁵

Based on this interpretation of Minimalist practice, Beecroft is using the models as unitary objects in replication, with a presence to be felt and experienced in this phenomenological way. She strives to remove the non-essential form and features of the girls by removing ornamentation (clothing) and enhancing the unitary and symmetrical aspects by painting the skin and dyeing the hair of the models. She is trying to reduce them to live objects somehow outside of history, gender, race, and power. Although this is a very interesting premise as an exploration of body and self, with the history of discourse on the representation of the female body and femininity, it seems *impossible* to reduce the body to an object with formal qualities only. Consequently, Beecroft establishes a premise of geometric formalism for her installation process which cannot be sustained in the live performance, rendering a sense of frustration for the artist. In the course of the durational event, the still image is rendered active through the body and therefore elicits interpretations of the gendered, racial and

⁷⁵ Ibid, 271.

powerful body. If anything, the intent to suppress the organic reinforces the agency of the live body.

Although her intention is to minimize the individuality of the models, Beecroft states she can still differentiate between the girls visually. Yet, this wasn't always the immediate response of the viewer to the formation of girls. Jan Avignos states, "The perfect and perfectly problematic picture, quite literally falls apart."⁷⁶ Here Avignos implies the picture is perfect (with repetition and duplication) to begin, yet problematic in the execution over time. It is this aspect of time that allows the viewers to witness the unfolding of differentiation through enhanced perception and subtle movements that occur. Although it seems her intention is to do so, Beecroft cannot circumvent the discourses of gender, race, and sex on the site of the human body. The creative choice, perhaps inspired by her orientation towards fashion and commodity, to pursue this course of reductivism signals a certain refusal to acknowledge that the live human form cannot be reduced to a readymade or inanimate object. Once Beecroft documents the performances through photography, the conversion to fetish or inanimateness is complete. Beecroft succeeds in creating a time-based work that constructs meaning through phenomenological experience, yet the spectacular nature of the events, the live female form as object, distance the work from basic Minimalist critical thought.

⁷⁶ Jan Avignos, "Let the Pictures do the Talking," *Parkett*, no. 156 (1999): 107.

Matt Gerald sees in Beecroft's work a relationship to the theory of Kracauer where he uses the visual iconography of the Tiller Girls⁷⁷ to demonstrate his theory of mass spectacle and how the individual is lost within the crowd.⁷⁸ Kracauer compares the moving geometric formation of the Tiller Girls to the mechanical motions of the factory worker and capitalist production. The multiples in Beecroft's performances work to reinforce the idea of mass production and commodity fetish. A more contemporary take on this idea of repetition comes from Craig Owens in his essay titled *Allan McCollum: Repetition and Difference*, "While the specific combination of these three variables (scale, proportion, and color) seemed to constitute each surrogate as singular, the potentially endless repetition of essentially identical objects prevented us from mistaking difference for uniqueness."⁷⁹ In discussing McCollum's use of serial objects (empty frames hung salon style), Owens states,

Minimalist in their monochromism, their investigation of framing, and their repetitiveness, the generic paintings employ only the *vocabulary* of Minimalism: for what McCollum has devised is, in fact, an effective, all purpose strategy...with which to expose the contradictions of cultural production in a market economy: the inescapable fact that, in exchange, all work of art are reduced to equivalence.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ The Tiller Girls were a group of troupe chorus-line performers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. The troupe was first created by John Tiller, whose intention was to introduce precision and uniformity to the theatrical dance troupe. Members of the troupes were selected not only for their dance skill, but for their height, weight, body type, and general appearance. These selection criteria worked to make the dancers appear as repetitions of each other, rather than unique in talent and skill.

⁷⁸ Gerald Matt, *Interviews* (New York: D.A.P., 2008): 53. "You arrange people into homogeneous uniform components of a 'mass ornament' as Siegfried Kracauer described it".

⁷⁹ Craig Owens, "Allan McCollum: Repetition and Difference," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992): 118.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 117.

Here Owens reinforces the notion of art as a capitalist enterprise and of the relationship to commodity fetishization. Beecroft also uses the concept of multiples to try to reduce the uniqueness of each model, to evoke the notion of literalness inherent in Minimalism, and in doing so she reinforces the cultural and capitalistic aspect of the work (especially the late work), where we see the development of not only the sexual fetish due to the erotic nature of the female body, and dress (high heels, etc.) but the commodity fetish as well. This presentation of the body on display for consumption (visually and monetarily) is something that Beecroft seeks to circumvent, but cannot.

RELATIONAL ART, SPECTACLE, AND SOCIAL SPACE

Artistic practice is now focused upon the sphere of inter-human relations, as illustrated by artistic activities that have been in progress since the early nineties...over and above the relational character intrinsic to the artwork, the figures of reference of the sphere of human relations have now become fully-fledged artistic *forms*. Meetings, encounters, events, various types of collaboration between people, games, festivals, and places of conviviality...⁸¹

This new type of artistic practice-Relational Art, a concept often applied to Beecroft's work emerges in the 1990's as a subset of installation art. The emphasis of events or shows shifts from the visual to the social exchange or activity between museum goers. This practice further removes the viewer from the relationship directly with the art to how they interact with other participants while attending the event. Nicholas Bourriard defines this practice of Relational Art, especially in relationship to Beecroft's performance; "The exchanges that take place between people, in the gallery or museum space, turn out to be as likely to act as the raw matter for an artistic work.

⁸¹ Nicolas Bourriard, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 28.

The opening is often an intrinsic part of the exhibition set-up, and the model of an ideal public circulation.”⁸²

In this context, one posits that Beecroft is using the spectacle of the gallery show opening to create a heightened encounter between the viewer and the models formed into a pristine form of visual perfection. Perhaps this interest stems from her first encounter in her drawing class at *Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera* where she realized the visual impact of a live model was more interesting than any reproduction.⁸³ Her habit of finding women with a ‘certain look’ on the city streets to enjoy a voyeuristic moment, in which she somehow feels connected, leads to an exploration of this visual connection within the museum space.

This idea of public voyeurism, a more intense and pervasive aspect of capturing the world around the viewer, is one Beecroft has created within a “micro-utopia.” A framing device used by the Relational Artist to create and define the social ‘space of interaction.’⁸⁴ The public viewing (of the girls and environs) occupies this participatory social space within the boundaries of the gallery space which maintains certain pre-existing criteria of viewing. The tension created by multiple codes of viewing as well as the inherent discomfort of coming face to face with unexpected live nudity in a public space provides a landscape for vacillating responses of authorized spectatorship and guilty voyeuristic pleasure. Feelings of discomfort elicit from the viewer the inter-

⁸² Ibid, 37

⁸³ Vanessa Beecroft, “Conversation Piece,” in *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2003), 17.

⁸⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002), 28.

subjective experience of viewing the models and being viewed in return and cause the viewer to engage in the social environment of the event as a way to cope with these feelings. The premise of distanced, objective viewing of art presumed to happen within a gallery or museum context is brought into question by the emotional response of the viewer.

Another critic and curator, Nancy Spector, interprets Beecroft's work of the 1990s in a similar way as Bourriard. In the catalog for the Guggenheim show *the anyspacewhatever* in 2008, Spector describes the work as,

A shift from a focus on the individual aesthetic object to more ephemeral, situation-based work, and a marked turn from the overriding, largely didactic influence of theory, to an embrace of the mutability of meaning...the ideas of diversity, potentiality, fluidity, and simultaneity inform the work (from the 1990s), which opens itself onto the world, eschewing introspective critique in favor of engagement, activation, entertainment, and seduction⁸⁵

Beecroft isn't part of this show at the Guggenheim, yet her work certainly can be understood within this new context of activation, entertainment, and seduction. Her heightening of the extravagant nature of the museum or gallery opening lifts it to pure spectacle. Spector elaborates,

(The work is) less about circumventing the all-consuming reach of the spectacle than the subtle infiltration of it. They [the relational artists] work within the limitless boundaries of spectacle culture, borrowing and manipulating myriad pop, mass-mediated, and fine art references...⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Nancy Spector, *The anyspacewhatever: An Exhibition in Ten Parts* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, D.A.P., 2008), 15-16.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 20.

Certainly Beecroft is modeling and even expansive in her reference to the society of the spectacle.⁸⁷ She is often criticized for her collusion with the commerce of the art world and transparent ties to the fashion industry,⁸⁸ yet her strategy of modeling this relationship with such transparency would suggest she is perpetrating a subtle caricature of the system of art and commerce in which she is so tacitly imbricated.

One thing that sets Beecroft apart from other artists framed as Relational Artists is her continued focus on the visual, and in particular the nature of representations of the female form or portraiture. This choice elicits comparisons to the aforementioned works of Body Art from the 1960 and 1970s and performative photography practices of the 1970s and 1980s. Claire Bishop furthers such a discussion by comparing the genre of Installation Art to Relational Art practices,

It is basically installation art in format, but this is a term that many of its practitioners would resist; rather than forming a coherent and distinctive transformation of space (in the manner of Ilya Kabakov's *total installation*, a theatrical *mise-en-scène*), relational art works insist upon use rather than contemplation.⁸⁹

If we apply Bishop's interpretation of Relational Art to Beecroft's performance, how does her work insist upon usage? We certainly *use* the visual experience to evaluate our

⁸⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995). Debord argues that the rise of commercialism produces a singular market consciousness or what he calls "the society of the spectacle." In a world of mass consumerism of press, advertising, and market products, the spectacle represents the dissemination or mediation of commercial images that lack content. With the pre-fabricated desires and choices presented by (capitalist) commercialism and government regimes, individual subjectivity recedes and converges into a singular commercial consciousness.

⁸⁸ Claire Bishop, "Vanessa Beecroft: VB43," *Make, the Magazine of Women's Art* 88 (JE/Ag, 2000): 31-2.

⁸⁹ Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics" *October*, 110 (Autumn 2004): 64.

perception of the relationship between the various models, between ourselves and the models, and between ourselves and the other viewers. This social *micro-utopia* does, in fact, mirror everyday life in a similar way to other Relational Art micro-utopias, yet the idea of usage and interaction at a Beecroft event is controlled by the direction of the artist, often resisting the viewer's first inclination of wanting to completely interact visually, auditorily, and physically. Although Beecroft does create a social space for interaction in the form of an opening night event, her work fails to engage the spectator in active participation in a way other Relational artists do.

Our investigation concludes that Beecroft cannot be categorized into an individual genre, and her self-proclamation of being a performance artist is perhaps far from how viewers and critics might categorize her work. Nonetheless, we can see how Performance, Minimalism, Installation, and Relational Art practices have informed her work. This collaging of various approaches while directing the live event not only affects our understanding of her work as far as genre, but also informs her work in other critical ways which we shall discover through looking at her relationship to photographic practice and critical theory.

PERFORMING THE IMAGE

Ways of looking and theories of how we make meaning from the visual emerge from various forms of representative art -- painting, photography, film, and sculpture. In most cases the theoretical underpinnings of two-dimensional art attempt to deconstruct the inherent illusionism of how the flat surface of the image mediates our viewing experience, while three-dimensional art assumes an immersive environment resonating with spatial relationships and duration of time. Beecroft conflates these two experiences by re-presenting the flat image as an arrangement of objects in space. This practice has historical roots in a process known as *tableaux vivant*⁹⁰ yet Beecroft's way of presenting the genre is contemporary in form and concept. Historically this practice employed known works of art as subject matter and rendered it live on stage, or subsequently as photographic imagery.

By tracing Beecroft's development from an emerging artist to mid-life retrospective, one can ascertain her progression from presenting a traditional *mise-en-scène* (with allusions to specific films) to collaged archetypes of popular cultural representation, multiplied *en masse*. Consequently, Beecroft shifts attention away from historically accurate, found imagery to a condensation of images of women in the form of idealized perfection. By her investigation of *tableaux* in an innovative and very

⁹⁰ Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: a Cultural History* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2002), 153-55. *Tableaux vivant*, literally living pictures, were popular subjects for early photographers. The recreation of paintings and classical sculpture in *tableaux* became a common practice for theatrical productions as well as for documentation through photography. This approach was used to enhance the perception of photography as an art not science.

contemporary way, Beecroft's performance encourages new interpretations and critical approaches.

Certain strategies and outcomes historically linked to representation influence Beecroft's work; concepts of stillness in the (photographic) pose, limitless reproduction or replication, the simulacral, and the fetish-- sexual, photographic and commodity -- all inform the methods of production and subsequent reception of these performance. The concept of the *pose* executed strategically is to draw or to command a look. This reciprocity of the gaze (the viewer and object both consciously involved in the gaze) is essential to understanding Beecroft's performances, as the conflation of various art forms draws emphasis to how the viewer is expected to receive the work.

The relationship of reproduction to the photographic process entails understanding not only the ability to physically reproduce many copies of one "negative" or digital file, but also with the premise of the *simulacral*-depictions or copies of images or objects, that are poor imitations of the original or have severed a connection to the real to begin with. As Rosalind Krauss notes,

By exposing the multiplicity, the facticity, the repetition and stereotype at the heart of every aesthetic gesture, photography deconstructs the possibility of differentiating between the original and the copy.⁹¹

Krauss' premise on photography and the simulacral re-defines the critical understanding of originality, personal expression, and formal singularity in photographic practice. Her

⁹¹ Rosalind Krauss, "A Note on Photography and the Simulacral," In *The Critical Image*, edited by Carol Squires (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 15.

examples from both art/professional and documentary/amateur representational oeuvres delineate the how the process of replication within photographic practice undermine and extinguish the boundaries between original and copy. As put forth by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation*, this premise also encourages the investigation of one's perception of reality as it corresponds to signs, symbols, and copies.⁹² Altogether these strategies encourage our observation of the image and its relationship to actual objects.

The concept of fetish, although interpreted independently as sexual, photographic, or commodity, all have the similarity of bestowing special power to an object for erotic, visual or mimetic, or economic reasons. Beecroft's performances evoke the ideas of fetish through the use of clothing and imagery deemed visually erotically, through the use of certain photographic techniques and documentation and the inference of the artist's and models' labor and economic value as substantive of the content and interpretation of the work.

In addition to these theoretic models of representation, certain genres of photographic practice inform Beecroft's work visually, iconographically, and procedurally. Fashion photography influences her work through techniques such as cropping and staging that reference sexual fetish and through the relationship of fashion photography to commerce that establishes Beecroft's work as sexual fetish and commodity. Again, in fashion photography a certain type of pose is elicited from the models, which encourages the reception of the body as fetish.

⁹² Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

Constructed/theatrical photography⁹³ informs her work as a way to interrogate the gesture of the pose in reference to classic works of art and modern film and how that might question notions of gender and identity. Tableaux vivant emerged in the twentieth-century as a “form of attack on bourgeois concepts of what constituted a masterpiece.”⁹⁴ Therefore, the perception of tableau vivant as an art form with a historical precedence as avant-garde, or politically driven, and with the propensity for institutional critique is supported.

Documentary photography, while intending to capture realistic subject matter under actual social conditions, substantiates the signification of the *real* as early as Talbot’s experimentations with calotype, the negative and multiple prints.⁹⁵ This premise of documenting an event, objects or people for the purpose of creating an exact record of the event becomes the method of documenting early performance art. Yet, as Marien notes, “Once a simple means to record Performance Art, photography gradually

⁹³ Michael Köhler, *Constructed Realities: the art of staged photography*, (Zürich: Edition Stemmler, 1995), 8. Constructed Realities was a four institution show in the mid 1990’s that sought to investigate contemporary photographic practice concerned with the constructed photograph-the pre-arranged and prepared motif. These practitioners “invent their motifs, freely combining the real and the invented, photography and painting, photography and stage design, weaving historical and mythological references into their works, and do not hesitate for a moment to manipulate reality.”

⁹⁴ Sabine Folie, Michael Glasmeier, and Gerald Matt, *Tableaux Vivants-Living Pictures and Attitudes in Photography, Film, and Video* (Wien, Kunsthalle, 2002). This exhibition in 2002 presented tableaux, both historic and contemporary, as steeped in veiled critical intentionality: “As presented in the introduction, the genre has been used as an attack on the bourgeois concept of a masterpiece, a symbol of the conflict between art and the quotidian, and as a method to enhance the staging of one’s own bodily presence. In feminist art, they physically expressed subversively problem-oriented attitudes to femininity.”

⁹⁵ Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: a Cultural History* (New York: Harry Abrams, 2002), 30-31.

becomes integral to the initial conception of performance pieces.”⁹⁶ Consequently, although Beecroft effectively documents her events through photographs, one must conclude that the prints of one particular event will inform the subsequent events effectively referencing not only Beecroft’s work, but other staged performances and images as well.

This shift corresponds to other changes in photographic practice in the 1970s that coincide with the advent of Conceptual Art and other postmodern practices. Marien describes this movement as photography-by-artists and asserts it “. . . was intended as part of a broad social intervention, aimed at exposing the so-called illusions of individuality and originality that formed the bulwark of the art market.”⁹⁷ Cindy Sherman became the poster girl of this movement, and her work is often compared to Beecroft’s due to the similarity of the subject matter (stereotypes of women in media) and the deconstruction of the photographic process as substantive to the interpretation of the work. In short, the advent of postmodern photographic practice and the investigation of the use of and meaning in female representation through the medium influences Beecroft’s performative practice, and therefore a thorough investigation of her work should include interpretation through these critical lenses.

POSING (INVITING THE GAZE)

Posing is an act of stillness that invites others to look. To gaze at a person or

⁹⁶Ibid, 399. Marien states this premise in regards to the performance artist Orlan who uses images of women in history as models for her plastic surgery performances.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 427.

crowd demonstrating or executing the pose is to engage in the elicited response of looking. Panofsky argued that,

Renaissance perspective placed the viewer at the centre of the hypothetical 'world' depicted in the painting; the line of perspective, with its vanishing point on the horizon of the picture, was connected to the eyes of the viewer who stood before it. A hierarchical relationship was understood to exist between the centered viewer and the 'world' of the painting spread out before him. (Panofsky) therefore equated Renaissance perspective with the rational and self-reflexive Cartesian subject (I think therefore I am').⁹⁸

This doctrine presents the viewing subject as whole, privileged, and centered. . . In western art this subject was presumed to be male"⁹⁹ This convention also reinforces the notion of art objects as having holistic meaning determined by the artist. Such meaning is received by the viewer through distanced optical contemplation. This principle is derived from the way one looks at a painting or other two-dimensional works of art. In twentieth-century criticism, Panofsky's theory is closely aligned with formalist critics and forms of abstract painting prevalent in mid-century modernism. This theory is re-interpreted for film and photography, which present the world thru an aura of realism not evident in other forms of two-dimensional works.

One seminal essay touting a psychological feminist bent, Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema*, identifies an active male viewer that engages in voyeuristic consumption of the imagery of women presented in film and photography. This look she deems the *male gaze*, also referred to as the patriarchal gaze; it is a look

⁹⁸ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as a Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 10.

⁹⁹ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13. Bishop discusses Panofsky's theory (which is interpreted as male and privileged) in relation to theories of activation and decentering (which deconstructs this hierarchy).

that reinforces the premise of men acting or consuming and women as the objects of the gaze for purposes of erotic pleasure.¹⁰⁰

In the 1960s and 1970s, these ideologies are questioned by Poststructuralist who seek to deconstruct this premise of a centered Renaissance perspective by arguing,

Each person is intrinsically dislocated and divided, at odds with him or herself . . . that the correct way in which to view our condition as human subjects is as fragmented, multiple and decentred – by unconscious desires and anxieties, by interdependent and differential relationship to the world, or by pre-existing social structures.¹⁰¹

The Poststructuralist discourse is exemplified by certain artistic practices that emerge concurrently with each other, most notably installation art, a type of art in which the viewer is immersed into the art and the experience is designed to heighten the viewer's awareness of the space. Installation art as a broad term has diverse influences from Performance Art to set design to cinema. Minimalist sculpture and Relational Art practices also exemplify this notion of experiential viewing and the activated spectator in order to investigate the decentred subject.¹⁰²

The pose is a gesture which commands a look or the gaze, and for some theoreticians this gesture is a way to deconstruct or interrogate the nature of the gaze. Craig Owens articulates several interpretations of the pose as used by artists to deconstruct the images of the sexual body. In the *Medusa Effect*, he states, "...to strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen,

¹⁰⁰ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18.

¹⁰¹ Claire Bishop, *Installation Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 13.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, 6-13.

immobilized—that is, already a picture.”¹⁰³ Based on this observation one can conclude that Beecroft is intentionally cultivating a live visual experience using the pose as a way to promote and emphasize how we as a society look at images of women. Her visualization of the event *imagines* an *image*, which is how the performance begins. The viewers approach the display as prescribed in a museum environment-distanced and reflective. Yet, as the live performance unfolds, the image dissolves and the viewer is forced to experience more than the visual; they are asked to actively participate in the social phenomenon of looking and immersing themselves into an art performance. This phenomenological visual experience is presented as a way to promote a vacillation between a centered, rational, interpretive viewpoint to a decentred multiple- perspective participatory role.

Certain theorists premise the idea of the pose as a way to not only elicit the gaze, but to refute the power of the controlling gazing of viewer. Dick Hebdige, quoted in Owens’ *Posing* notes, “To strike a pose, is to pose a threat ---- based on the self-display of punk women who, posing, supposedly ‘transformed the act of surveillance into the pleasure of being watched.’”¹⁰⁴ This premise articulates what the viewers of a Beecroft event might experience; the discourse of the patriarchal gaze is refuted by the return of the gaze by the models and by their acceptance of, perhaps even pleasure in, the role of being surveilled. Owens goes on to state that, “a stereotype is an apotrope; posing as

¹⁰³ Craig Owens, “The Medusa Effect, or, The Spectacular Ruse,” In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, edited by Scott Bryson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 192.

¹⁰⁴ Craig Owens, “Posing,” In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, edited by Scott Bryson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 202.

a mirror-image of social reality, its adequate, identical reflection, it is engineered to immediately immobilize the social body.”¹⁰⁵

In presenting the models en masse, envisioned as a collage of stereotypes, Beecroft attempts to ward off the consumptive nature of the patriarchal gaze through providing a sense of power to the models. This premise of immobilizing an entire social body, in this case the viewers, through mimetic imaging forces the viewers into a self-reflexive interrogation of their own scopophilic desire. It has already been noted that Beecroft perceives the models as extensions of herself. Here she is staging an opportunity for others (especially women) to identify with *looking* in a similar way at our collective stereotypes of women. This strategy may be interpreted as a way to present a media-derived ideal woman as tableau vivant and posed as a projection of the artist's visual fantasy of such imagery. Such a strategy can also be interpreted as a self-reflexive vehicle of deconstruction of social relationships derived through private and public scopophilic practices.

REPLICATION (ACTIVATING THE SIMULACRAL)

In the seminal essay, *A Note on Photography and the Simulacral*, Rosalind Krauss offers examples from all forms of photographic production- family portraiture, art photography, fashion and commercial photography-to support this idea of a lost connection between original and copy, or the simulacral. This is especially reinforced by the process of creating multiple prints from one negative, or of the idea that multiple viewpoints from different photographers of the same object essentially create the *same*

¹⁰⁵Craig Owens, “The Medusa Effect,” In *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, edited by Scott Bryson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 198. This was stated in relation to Barbara Kruger's work.

image. Each one of these methods extinguishes the link between one original and one copy. Multiple views expand on the premise of the fragmented viewpoint, or in the case of staged photography, the original scene is a copy of a *fantasy* rather than the *real*. One artist whose work exemplifies this premise is Cindy Sherman whose work is described by Krauss as “A concatenation of stereotypes, the images reproduce what is already a reproduction---that is, various stock personae that are generated by Hollywood scenarios, etc...”¹⁰⁶

This Shermanesque performative methodology of creating stereotypes of womanhood in mise-en-scène for the camera lens becomes Beecroft’s performative *performance* within the gallery or museum space. As noted in the first chapter, Beecroft’s models elicit comparisons to uniformed school girls, exotic dancers, and noted emotive film characters from the European avant-garde. The use of many models arranged in an exacting formation and identified as visually similar reinforces the multiplicity inherent in photographic processes. This is a repetition exemplified through the ability to create multiple prints. By presenting a mass of similar models in the tableau, then using photography (a replicative technology) to document these performances, Beecroft is stacking layer upon layer of repetition. Consequently, this process works to reinforce the idea of the simulacral – a model without an original- due to the multiple mediations. Altogether the performative photographic process establishes an arena in which we the viewer question the ‘*realness*’ of the representation-even in the live event. Beecroft’s development of this iterative process

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

happens over the course of years, as she experiences her predisposition for creating events rife in uniformity and perfectionism. In a similar circuitous reasoning, one might note that in presenting such perfections for the viewer, she mirrors her own experience of viewing the perfect bodies mediated through popular culture devices.

In her essay on fashion photography, Rosetta Brooks states, “Media technology is structured for the repetition and proliferation of images as commodities appearing and disappearing in and out of mass circulation. Images are seen in relation to one another, as stereotypes going in and out of currency.”¹⁰⁷ In this way, Beecroft’s simulacral image, in the way she envisions the perfect performance, and then photographs the event, works to strengthen the stereotypical image within the cycle of mass circulation and enhance its value as a commodity. This circuitous process of a presentation, an enlivening, and subsequent documentation of a media-derived image, also supports Beecroft’s insistence that her serial events are in essence one performance with iterative episodes, with each one having a relationship of commodity stereotype in common.¹⁰⁸

As presented in the previous chapter Craig Owens, in discussing the serial object or seriality as it relates to the Plaster Surrogates series by McCollum, comments on how

¹⁰⁷ Rosetta Brooks, “Fashion: Double-Page Spread,” *The camerawork essays: context and meaning in photography* edited by Jessica Evans (New York: New York University Press, 1997,): 208.

¹⁰⁸ Marcella Beccaria, “Conversation Piece,” *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, edited by Marcella Beccaria (New York: Rizzolli International Publications, 2003): 20. Beccaria states in her interview, “You have often insisted on the fact that your entire body of performance is a single work, and that in the course of any single event, nothing happens.” Beecroft doesn’t respond in the interview, and no other mention of this premise can be found in any interviews with Beecroft.

repetition works to highlight our perception of difference in any given series of objects, as well as drawing comparisons to the seriality of manufactured consumer objects in the marketplace. These premises of repetition, seriality, and mass production relate to Beecroft's work in several ways.

While her presentation of multiple (similar) models is perceived as intentional *sameness*, they are in fact each slightly different. Yet, apropos of McCollum, the models are not unique as they are iterative of various (and slightly different) feminine stereotypes. This critical lens forces the viewer to determine how we perceive and value repetitive representation as part of scopophilic practice in culture. Also, the iteration of her performance(s) as one event over time rather than individual instances enhances the premise of simulacrality between the recurrent performances. Although each one is characteristically slightly different, the serial nature of the photographic document-sold in editions-as a record of the event concretizes the serial nature of Beecroft's work.

The use of repetition in her work reinforces the notion of how we subvert the individuality of women through the use of stereotypes and how the (fashion) media is instrumental in the creation and distribution of these images. She promotes the sameness of the models to form physical and psychological connections between them, which allow the models to operate from a more powerful position as a group. Although this strategy may be successful initially, the dissolution of the visual similarities over the duration of the performance operate to re-establish individualities between the models, but consequently leaves them open to moments of vulnerability.

Owens continues his discussion of surrogates by commenting on the sheer visual beauty of the installation mostly due to the number of objects presented. In this same way Beecroft presents the models as a visual spectacle, and it is difficult to not be mesmerized by the event. Now, one could conclude the difference between *Plaster Surrogates* and Beecroft's performance is figural representation. McCollum creates his (painted) objects as emblems of what a painting *is* and removes all image specific representation from his installation, while Beecroft is using the image to critique the notion of representation. Yet, in both cases, there is reference to the marketplace.

In an interview for Art 21, McCollum recalls of both *Surrogate Paintings* and *Plaster Surrogates*, "when you walked into a gallery you would recognize you were playing a role in a social game of what a gallery is; aware of yourself as a gallery go-er as you went in, instead of losing yourself in the landscape of a painting. I recognize we don't understand what a painting is until we understand what a gallery is; and we don't understand galleries until we understand stores and showrooms."¹⁰⁹

McCollum's intention here is to make the viewer aware of the environment and experience of the gallery and museum system, as well as, how that compares to looking or finding objects in a commercial space. By extension, this process reveals how the gallery and museum system is imbricated in the overall capitalist mode of production and exchange. Although Beecroft and McCollum use slightly different strategies, they both court the idea of the art object and the repositories that display them as systems of economic exchange.

Beecroft's use of multiples, repetition, and seriality reveals how certain cultural mechanisms reinforce the notion of the simulacral. She endeavors to make the models appear the same, to efface their difference, yet through temporality the models become

¹⁰⁹ Allen McCollum, interviewed by Wesley Miller, "Plaster Surrogates" & "Surrogate Paintings," (<http://www.blog.art21.org>)(accessed April 15, 2014).

noticeably different. This process deconstructs the cycle of perception, as the viewer re-evaluates the image and its meaning over time. The referencing of photographic and media-derived images in the creation of Beecroft's performances along with the subsequent capturing of the event through photography establishes a circuitous cycle in the performances. This is then enhanced by Beecroft's declaration of intended seriality, an iterative process. These mechanisms establish and reinforce the simulacral, which itself results in a questioning of the real and a decentering of our cultural experience.

FETISH (VOYEURISM AS COMMODITY)

The fetish or fetishism has a variety of historic meanings and modern iterations that are addressed as a mode of contemporary critical thought in a seminal anthology *Fetishism as a Cultural Discourse*. This collection of essays deals with the concept of fetish in three ways: "the historical construction of gender identity; the social life of capital; and the lived ideologies in visual culture."¹¹⁰ The first two sections further explore the sexual and commodity fetish, developments of the late nineteenth century, in light of contemporary developments and artistic practice. Editor Emily Apter notes, in an introduction, the re-emergence of the fetish in the decade of the 1980s, from the initiation of the concept of female fetishism in the work of Mary Kelly's *Post Partum Document*, to the transgressive voyeuristic paintings of David Salle and Eric Fischl.

¹¹⁰ Emily Apter and William Pietz, *Fetishism as a Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993), ix.

Beyond these developments, certain female artists “reframed the commodity fetishism of the female body in its function as hackneyed trademark of advertising culture.”¹¹¹

Most notable of these artists is Cindy Sherman, poster girl of reappropriated film stills, fashion ads, centerfolds, and other popular culture iconography. As demonstrated by the diversity of source materials for her work, Sherman reinforces the intertwining of sexual and commodity fetishism and how it extends and manifests as part of visual culture as a whole. The third section of the book titled *Scopic Fixations* is concerned with the linkage of fetishism to *scopophilia*. According to the Freudian model, “fetishism works to obstruct, displace, or refocus the scopophilic gaze rather than facilitate its attachment to the longed-for object... [and] that visual interdiction may serve to intensify the scopic pleasure of looking and being looked at.”¹¹² This conflation of sexual and commodity fetish presented visually, as a way to interrogate the connections of human desire, material objects, and social power, presents a compelling opportunity to deconstruct the way representation determines our way of looking.

One author represented in the compilation, Abigail Solomon-Godeau in *The Legs of the Countess*, expands our understanding of these three ideas, relating nineteenth-century photographic practice to contemporary theoretic underpinnings. She enumerates,

The confluence of three fetishisms... the psychic [sexual] fetishism of patriarchy, grounded in the specificity of the corporeal body; the commodity fetishism of capitalism, shrouded in what Marx terms the ‘veil of reification’ and grounded in the means of production and the social relations they engender; and the fetishizing properties of the photograph, a commemorative trace of an absent

¹¹¹ Ibid, 2.

¹¹² Ibid, x.

object, the still picture of a frozen look, a screen for the projective play of the spectator's consciousness.¹¹³

Historically, a fetish was an object believed to have magical powers in a way to protect or aid the owner. In late nineteenth-century psychoanalytic theory this meaning was expanded to include the inclination of a person to imbue an object or body part with the erotic power necessary to achieve sexual gratification. This psychological fixation on an object or body part as the only means of personal sexual satisfaction has supplanted the more historical interpretation of a fetish in contemporary culture.

Concurrent with the development of this psychological interpretation, a Marxist translation of fetish was unfolding. In this theory, the idea of reification, or the objectification of human activities or social relations, is tantamount to the sexual fetish in its conversion of the animate into the inanimate. Reification infers the attribution of animate beings or qualities to an inanimate object or, in other words, the inversion of subject/ object relations. Commodity fetish is a form of reification in which the goal is the equating of a concrete economic value to human labor or relations or the eliciting of extreme desire for the commercial consumption of objects for pleasure.

Commodification then, as applied to femininity and the representation of women, is the packaging of sexual desire for exchange within a capitalist market. The third and final fetish to emerge in the mid-nineteenth century is the technology of replicable imagery, or photography. The unique qualities of painting are usurped by the photograph, an easily reproducible image in which multiples can be made and sold in

¹¹³ Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," *October* 39, (Winter, 1986): 67-68.

the same fashion as assembly-line-manufactured objects. The photograph serves as a link or reference to an event, experience or coveted object. This eliciting of memory by the inanimate photograph predisposes the photographic object to fetishization.

In Beecroft's work one recognizes all three of the fetishes described by Solomon-Godeau. The format and style of female representation as sexual fetish derived from nineteenth-century photographic images continues today as a common apparatus for establishing the cycle of patriarchal scopophilic fixation. As discussed previously, the prevalence of the male gaze (as proposed by Mulvey and others) emphasizes the effect of the film industry on the hierarchy of the gaze—men as the purveyors and women as receivers of—and therefore the woman/female body is in constant threat of becoming a spectacle.

The mechanism of the pose in some ways disperses and challenges the gaze. The live enacting, by the models and viewers, of this scopophilic system heightens our perception of the fetish and system of viewing. The models acting the part of photographic representation become the manifestation of the sexual, commodity, and photographic fetish. Beecroft reinforces this interpretation by using signifiers of sexual fetish common to the fashion industry and popular culture --- high heels, undergarments, cosmetics -- all tools of culture to enhance the enticing visibility of the female form. Women are often fetishized, presented in phallic forms, as well as photographed in parts or in a truncated shot, as Beecroft does with the girls. This representation of disembodiment reinforces the objectification of the body and all of the fetishized parts. Again, the views and angles used in the capturing of Beecroft's events promote the fetishistic nature of the work and the voyeuristic nature of the camera.

A deeper investigation of commodity (or Marxian) fetish is furnished by Hal Foster in *The Art of Fetishism: Notes on a Dutch Still Life*: “Marx maintained that in commodity exchange people and things trade semblances; social relations take on the character of object relations, and commodities assume the active agency of people.”¹¹⁴ This interpretation of Marx’s premise of reification promotes further scrutiny of Beecroft’s performances as arenas of economic transaction. The Marxian logic posits the person as object and the social interaction between people as having economic value. Beecroft’s events present the object of desire (the girls) as initially inanimate (a still photographic image), but through the duration of the event they become animate (through movement).

Beecroft also installs the performance in a way that demonstrates the traditional model of the gaze (i.e. dominance of the patriarchal gaze). Yet through duration, the viewer’s attention and perception shifts from the visual presentation of the girls to a self-reflexive determination of experience. This dual vacillation of visual and phenomenological experience introduces a level of ambivalence for the viewer. One can compare the fluctuating stasis and animation presented in the performance through the girls moving in and out of formation, to the conversion of human *subject* to *object* of economic transaction. The social phenomenon within the event is also translated as an economic proposition. Beecroft formulates the visual experience, presents the girls, and allows the duration of the event to operate as a commodity fetish- i.e. the sale of the organized experience of communal public gazing. The photographic documentation of these

¹¹⁴ Hal Foster, “The Art of Fetishism: Notes on a Dutch Still Life,” in *Fetishism as a Cultural Discourse*, edited by Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1993), 254. Often referred to as reification.

events is the outright commodification of the artist's production, as these limited-edition color photographs are available for purchase through the gallery/museum system of commerce.

Another aspect of the commodity fetish as it operates in contemporary artistic practice is the idea of the artist as an economic entity. In this premise, it isn't just the artwork or object that has value; the fame or notoriety of the artist is an additional part of the economic matrix. In her investigation of this premise, Amelia Jones, in her essay *The Contemporary Artist as Commodity Fetish* states, "since the 1960s...artists have explored the role of photographic imaging technologies in rendering or conveying the self, and correlatively in circulating the artist as image (a commodity that can be reproduced, looked at, purchased, and/or downloaded and 'possessed')." ¹¹⁵ Here, Jones not only acknowledges the idea of fame or notoriety as being essential to the artist's success, but outlines how the image, self-portrait, or other manner of self-representation of the artist has become prevalent in late twentieth-century artistic practice.

In her discussion of Beecroft and others, Jones posits:

Through deliberate self-fetishization in projects revolving around pictures of their own bodies, artists from Yayoi Kusama to Nikki Lee have performed themselves as images—images that are inherently commodified and yet are positioned so as to be seen, displayed, and consumed as art. There are thus two profound paradoxes linked to this kind of artistic production: (1) while these images are produced as art

¹¹⁵ Amelia Jones, "The Contemporary Artist as Commodity Fetish," in *Art Becomes You: Parody, Pastiche and the Politics of Art; Materiality in a Post-Material Paradigm* edited by Henry Rogers and Aaron Williamson (Birmingham: Article Press, 2006), 133.

(that is how they have their value), they are simultaneously overtly circulated as commodities and mass cultural products; (2) enacting themselves first and foremost as *objects* of cultural desire, the artists' "subjectivity," if we can call it that—or their agency—rests in the "authority" that substantiates our interest in their production of themselves as spectacle.¹¹⁶

This conflation of investigative strategies in identity politics and the shifting role of the artist in society elicit further inquiry of Beecroft's work as part of this development in contemporary art. As previously discussed, Beecroft consciously courts the idea of the performance as an extension of her own experience as a woman with a body image dysfunction. The models represent an extension of her idealized self as well as provide a visual spectacle to be viewed and consumed. By executing her performances in galleries and museums, Beecroft's works are recognized as art, yet they are also overtly linked to mass cultural representation.

This relationship of high culture as end product and popular visual culture as inspiration engenders a link between the museum and consumerism. Beecroft is drawing attention to the latent economics of the museum community even though her process, by nature and historically, is designed for ephemerality. In the case of Beecroft, it is not the true image of herself she is peddling, it is the experience of looking at others as extensions of herself and feminine iconography as a whole.

Jones addresses Beecroft's work specifically as it pertains to performance art and the artist's portrait as commodity fetish:

Coming full circle from the situation in the 1970's body art, the photographic documentations of Beecroft's elaborately simulacral performances (which render *other's* bodies as artifice) are now subconsciously marketed as fine art fetishes.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

There is no pretense of Beecroft being interested in the raw energy of live performance; the events themselves are rigorously choreographed, the models directed to control their bodies as much as possible. They are pictures even before they are pictures (many if not most of the photographs are taken in controlled circumstances *before* the actual event takes place). The live has been subordinated *before the fact of its enactment* to the commodity object of the photographic document.¹¹⁷

This interpretation of Beecroft's work astutely coalesces the various fetishes present in the performances as well as the documentation of the events. As Jones notes, Beecroft's performances are not the active, often politically-charged events we recall from 1970's Body Art. Beecroft's intention is to present an *image* in a live setting and to elicit a response from the viewer. So subtle is her intention that a viewer may miss the oblique parody this environment engenders in relation to the museum system and its relationship to commerce. This tenuous web of scopophilic pleasures, derived at the expense of the girls enacting the fine art (and photographic) fetish presents an occluded caricature of the marketplace and the desires evoked in economic process.

Although the inherent mutability of meaning in Performance, Minimalist, and Relational Art is due to the temporal and phenomenological aspects of the media, Beecroft's insistence on overt visual spectacle in her events renders the intellectual substance of her work occluded and mutable rather than forthright. Her inspiration, taken from the photographic image and its processes, also reinforces the idea of the simulacral. The simulacral, in turn, obstructs a direct relationship in perception of

117 Amelia Jones, "The Contemporary Artist as Commodity Fetish," in *Art Becomes You. Parody, Pastiche and the Politics of Art; Materiality in a Post-Material Paradigm* edited by Henry Rogers and Aaron Williamson (Birmingham: Article Press, 2006), 145-146.

meaning between viewer and object, as the simulacral experience unmoors the viewer from traditional modes of interpretation and understanding. The viewer is left to experience the spectacle of this simulacral event through a self-reflexive interrogation of scopophilic pleasure, rather than determine inherent meaning in the visual spectacle.

In her conclusion, Jones lambastes Beecroft for, “unabashedly [deploying] the triple regime of fetishisms Solomon-Godeau noted to profitable ends, while totally missing the point of racial fetishism by deploying it deliberately on one end and failing to see its significance (and the role it plays in substantiating the class values embedded in her work) on the other.”¹¹⁸ Jones’ criticality of Beecroft’s work is not due to the use of the fetishized female body, but only of her lack of insight into how the artist’s body and subsequent value of the work is contingent upon the perceived identity of the artist-in-her case slim, beautiful, and white. In presenting work from several other artists who respond to Beecroft’s work through parodic spoofs of her events- the Toxic Titties and Vaginal Crème Davis, Jones notes, “the piece[s] mock the precious asceticism and the assumption of homogeneity that underlies the art world value systems...[and critique] Beecroft’s *seemingly unwitting or uncritical manipulation* of the quadruple fetishism.”¹¹⁹ While these performances do reveal Beecroft’s inadvertent miscues relating to racial fetish in certain performances, in those events where she chooses to present women of

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 146. Racial fetishism is the fetishization of a person or culture belonging to a race that is not one’s own. Often the inference is that fetishization also includes stereotyping and objectification of the person of culture, and therefore is dehumanizing.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

color, she is often accused of colonialism.¹²⁰ Notwithstanding, Beecroft chooses to produce her most powerful work from the point of view of her own (perceived) gendered, racial, and sexual orientation.

Privileged or not, the experience of women universally judged by appearance and the ramification of living in a world besotted by the commerciality and sexuality of images is a more intriguing project for Beecroft, than the politically-charged landscape of racial otherness. The exploration of contemporary representational strategies and certain outcomes of the processes- posing, replication and fetishization provide ample methods to deconstruct and heighten our experience of public and private scopophilic pleasure. Beecroft's intended collision between fine art fetish and personal voyeuristic habits concedes a relationship between art and the quotidian. Her subtle infiltration of the art market paired with a canny mobilization of contemporary techniques and genres allows her to critique the system all while participating within it.

¹²⁰ Vanessa Beecroft presented VB61 at the 52nd Venice Biennale titled *Still Death! Darfur Still Deaf?*, a performance involving 30 women. During the performance, approximately 30 Sudanese women lying on a white canvas on the ground, simulated dead bodies piled on top of one another. The bodies, darkened by make-up, remained motionless as Beecroft covered the canvas and the women's bodies with red paint.

EPILOGUE

Comparison of Beecroft's work to several genres of art and creative practice within contemporary art reveals that her production is representative of the pastiche evident in postmodern practice. She amalgamates several key components of Performance, Minimalism, and Installation Art all while deconstructing the photographic process in a way that draws attention to the inherent simulacral nature of representation in contemporary society.

If one views Beecroft's events as reconstructions of hybridized/amalgamized fashion shoots, then one can deconstruct her approach as *animating* the image, which in itself was never animate, as a *pose* inherent in fashion photography is intentional, still, and artificial. She states her intention is to facilitate a performance. Perhaps one can interpret her process as a refutation of the photographic image as end-product, to elevation of the performance as primary? Yet how can one conclude performance as *primary* when the ***performance is really an animated image?*** The entire process seems to be a critical view of the photograph and the mediated-image culture to which we all belong.

If her intention is to reconstruct this image of her imagination (which may in fact be derived from decades of commercial and personal images synthesized into a perfect fantasy), then the duration of the event is the crux of the disintegration, and any "documentary" photography does little to capture this animated interplay. The cycle plays out in the construction, duration, and documentation of the events as they mirror the cyclical nature of her creative process; of imagining a 'perfect' *image* of a woman,

creating the visual *spectacle* of the imagination, allowing that to disintegrate, and then capturing it in a “perfect” instantaneous *pose*.

Even though Beecroft is not overt in her messaging, one can see a sense of parody or caricature in the use of photography as a documentation of performance. Insofar as, the *performances* are really enactments of a hybridized commercial photographic image. Though Beecroft’s work does not follow the trajectory of increasingly politically-imbued Performance or Installation Art, her nuanced performative installations still evoke subconscious and overt psychological responses from the viewer leading to powerful self-reflexion. This obtuse parody of “looking” is so closely aligned with the “gaze” and other forms of power that it is a careful study within museum practice of *how* we view art and how photographic practice operates within this system. One can see, through the progression of her work, the transformation from autobiographical narrative/film stills to a Minimalist-staged photograph. This propensity reveals some of her personal obsessive behaviors as well as the invisible hand of the gallery/museum system in promoting a spectacular event.

The entirety of Beecroft’s work, each individual event and the sequence of events viewed as a whole, is a demonstration of the premise of the *society of the spectacle* as proposed by Debord: the live performance of a singular commercial experience as it supersedes individual subjectivity. This experiential moment for the viewer, especially through duration, also elicits introspection of how society as a whole seeks authentic human experience, only to be catapulted into an endlessly simulacral experience.

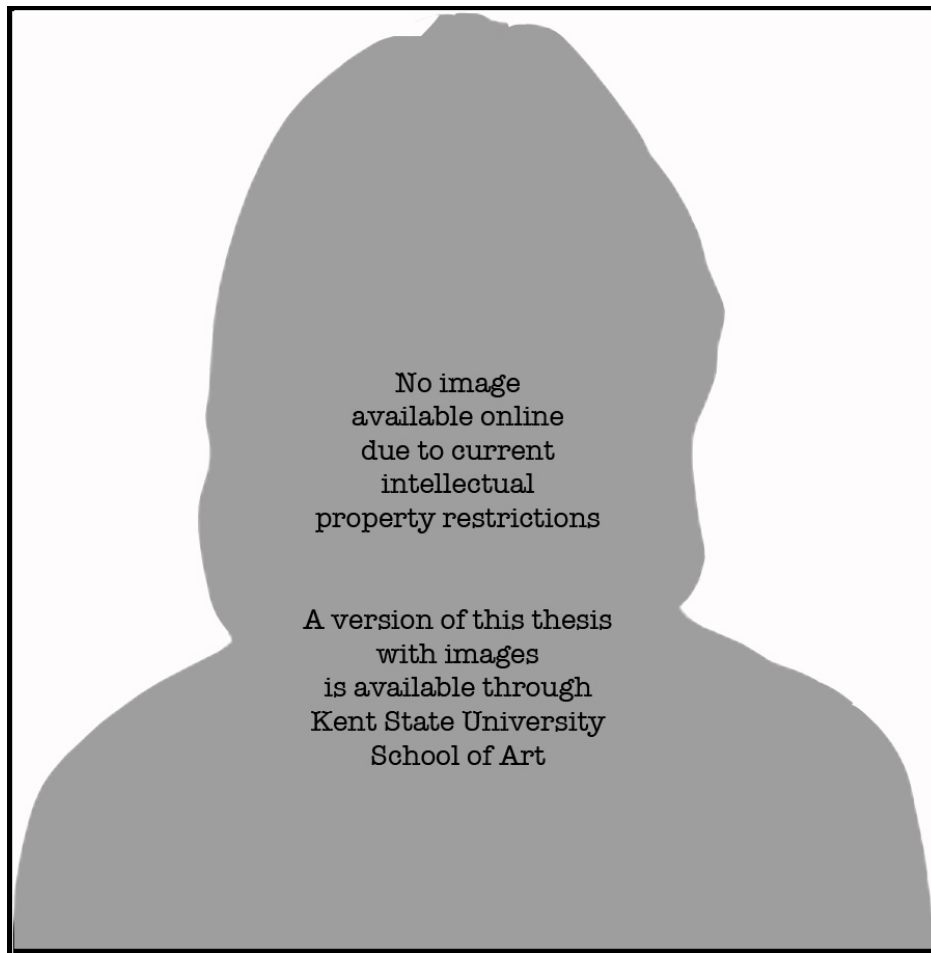


Figure 1. VB01 (original title: *Film*). Galleria Luciano Inga-Pin, Milan, June 1993.¹²¹

"It happened by chance. Invited to my first exhibition by a far-seeing professor, I had decided to show *Despair*, the typewritten diary of food that I had been keeping since 1983, made into a book and shaped like a white cube. I then invited a "special audience" of thirty girls found on the street, who reminded me of Renaissance portraits and actresses from movies of the 1960s. The girls were given some of my clothes to wear. The colors of the clothes made reference to a group of watercolors placed on the floor. The main feeling present during this performance was one of shame and personal exposure, but the achievement was in identifying where the visual importance in this material lay: the girls."¹²²

¹²¹ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 48.

¹²² Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 45.

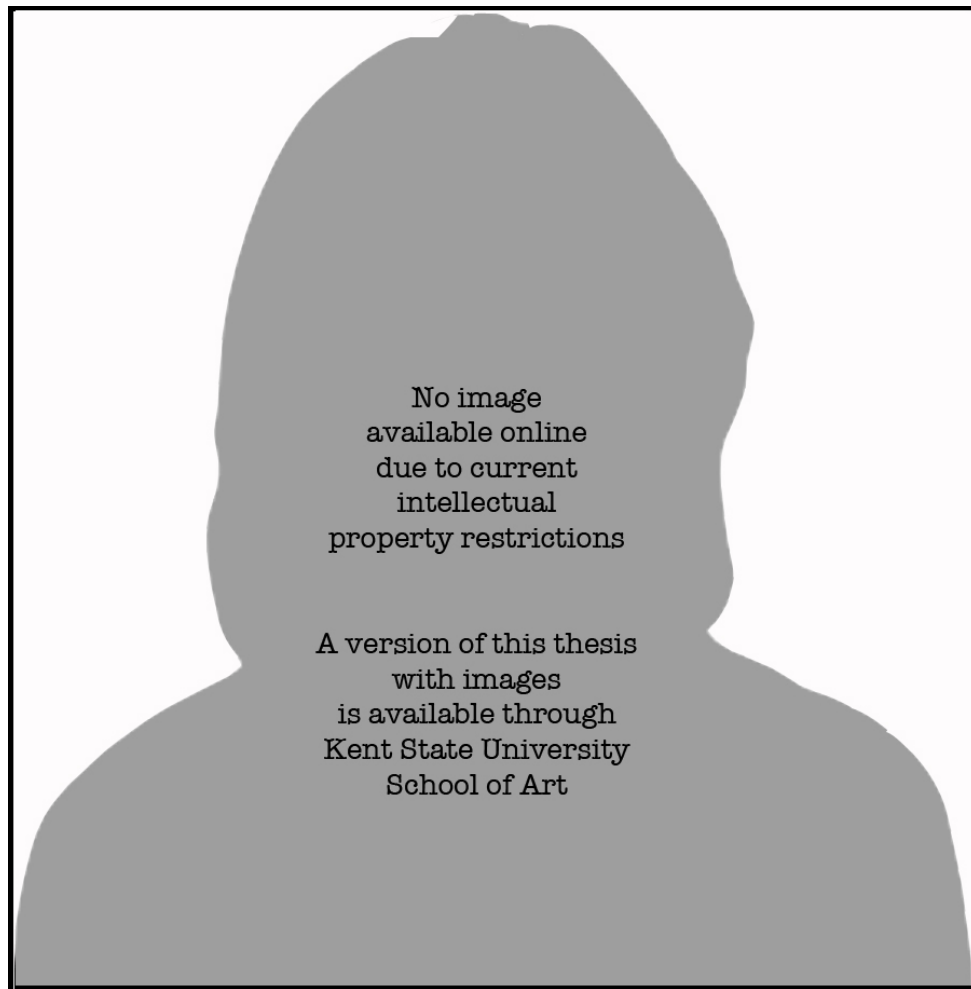


Figure 2. *VB01* (original title: *Film*). Galleria Luciano Inga-Pin, Milan, June 1993.¹²³

¹²³ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 49.

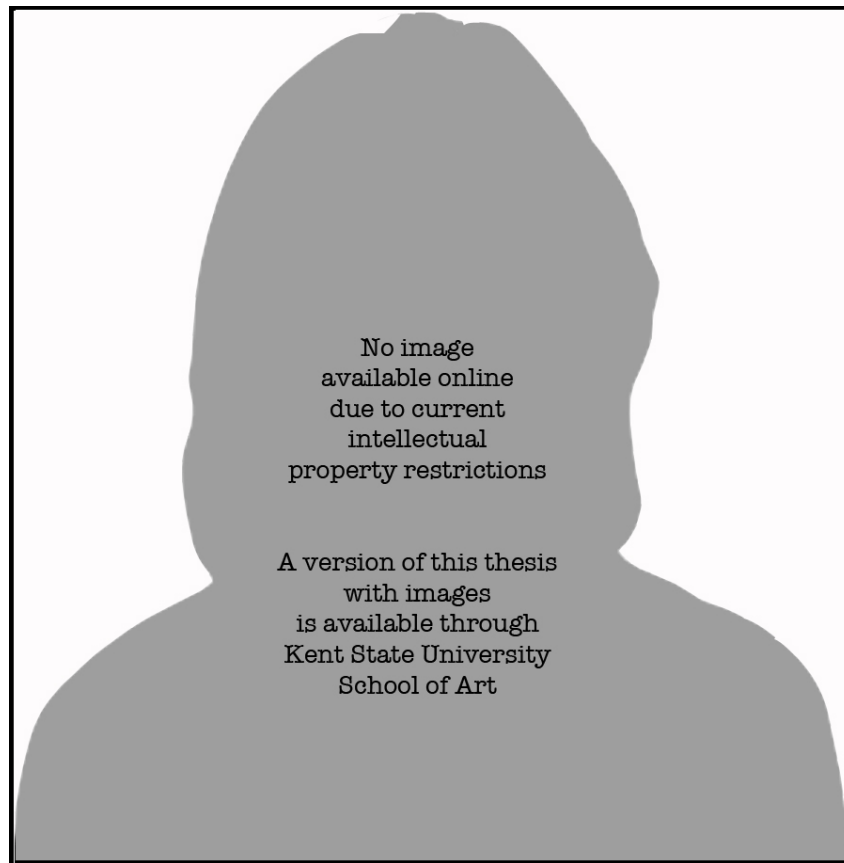


Figure 3. VB02 (original title: *Jane Bleibt Jane*). Galleria Fac-Simile, Milan, February 8, 1994.¹²⁴

“This was my first solo show in a gallery, which was designed and painted like a contemporary chapel with figures enlarged from my A4 sized drawings. Despite opposition from the gallerist, I included three girls, chosen for their symbolic faces, to create a connection between drawings on the walls and reality. The girls wore red/magenta wigs in a reference to the Marxist-Leninist heroine played by Anne Wiazemsky in Goddard’s *La Chinoise* (1967). The title *Jane Bleibt Jane* (Jane remains Jane, 1976) is borrowed from a movie that I have never seen. Jane wants to be Anne Wiazemsky, but remains Jane. She puts her fingers down her throat to vomit, while appearing as calm and beautiful as a Madonna. Here, the first rule for the girls to follow was established: “do not talk.”¹²⁵

¹²⁴ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 51.

¹²⁵ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 51.

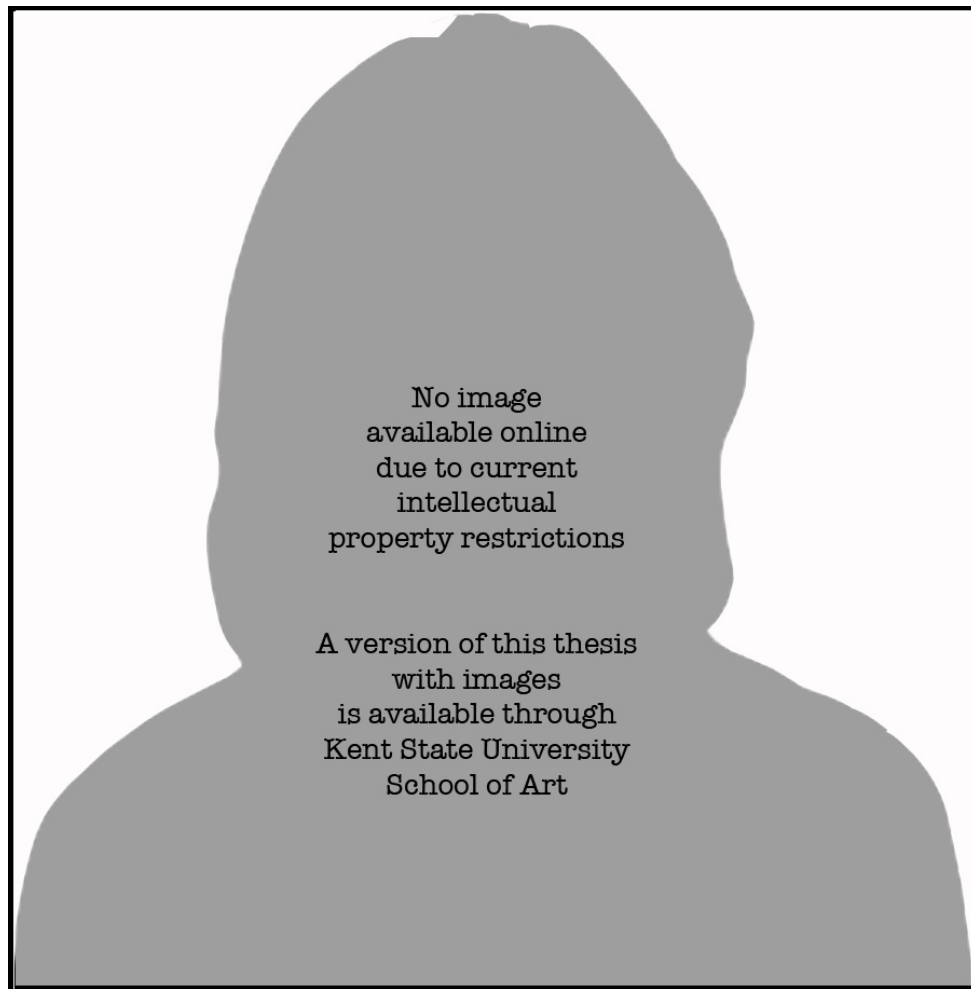


Figure 4. VB02 (original title: *Jane Bleibt Jane*). Galleria Fac-Simile, Milan, February 8, 1994.¹²⁶ (photo credits Armin Linke)

¹²⁶ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 54.

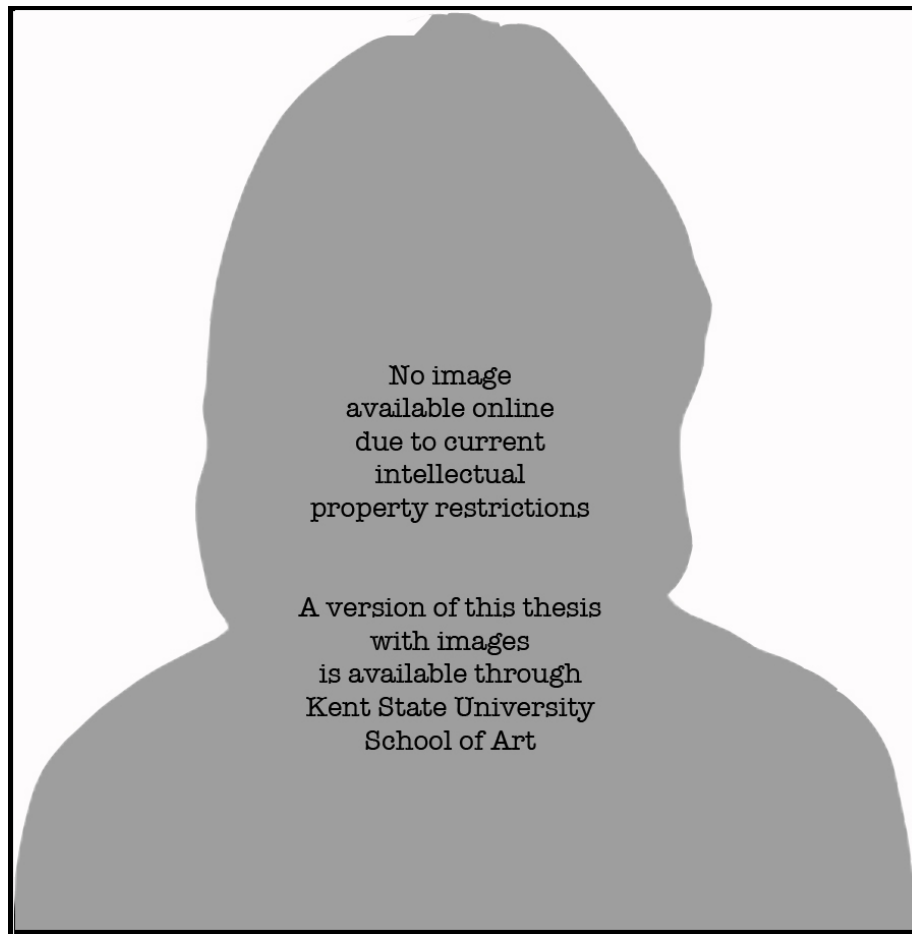


Figure 5. VB09 (original title: *Ein Blonder Traum*). Galerie Schipper & Krome, Cologne, November 11, 1994.¹²⁷

"I asked the gallerist to find thirty young German girls who resembled Edmund in Rossellini's *Germany Year Zero*" (1947), and who had the bright yellow hair of my A4 drawings. I left the floor empty except for seven white volumes of drawings. I cut a window in the locked gallery door so that viewers could not enter the space but could only look at the picture from outside. After the performance, the space was left bare apart from the books of drawings. The anxiety of anticipating the disappearance of the girls after the performance is imminent in the event and foretells the girls' loss."¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 82.

¹²⁸ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 80.

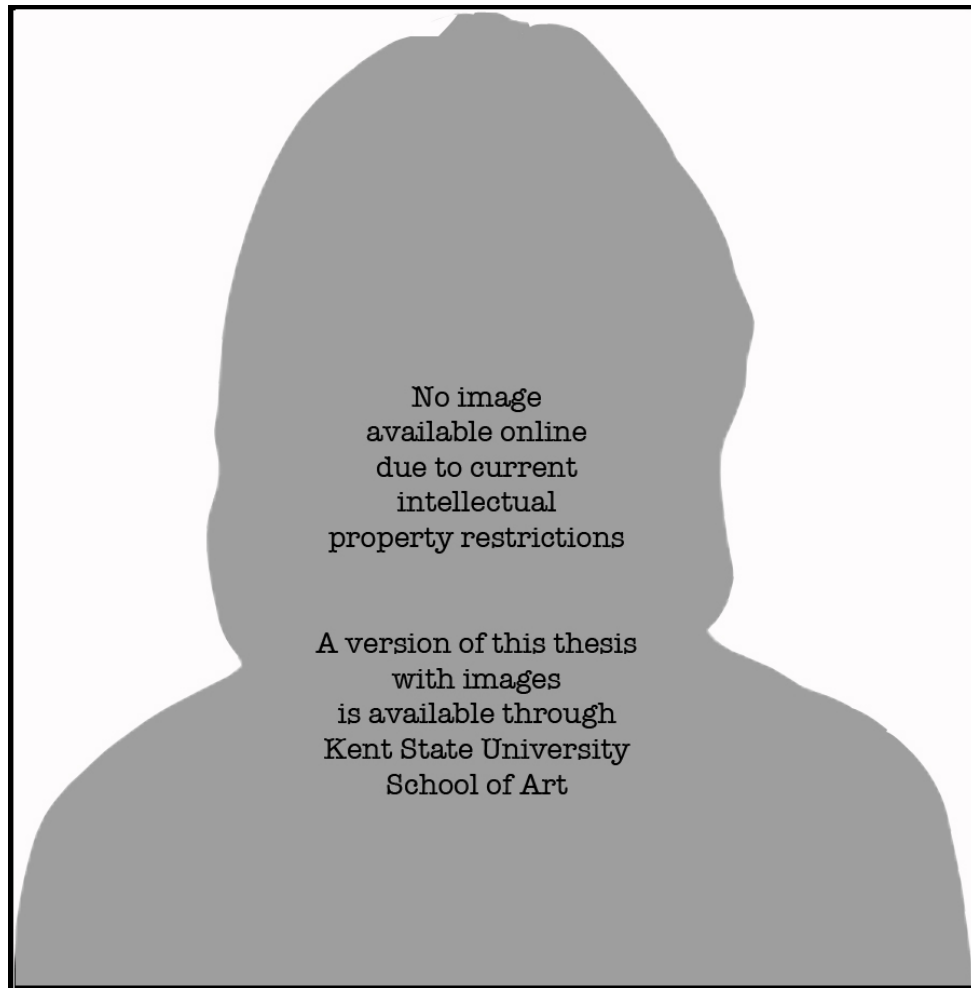


Figure 6. *They Come*. July 1995. Studio Milan.¹²⁹

“I wanted to reproduce Helmut Newton’s photograph *Sie Kommen* (They are coming, 1981) on film, but when it came to the shoot, the models refused to undress. The result is a short sequence of the four clothed girls walking forwards.”¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 102.

¹³⁰ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 102.

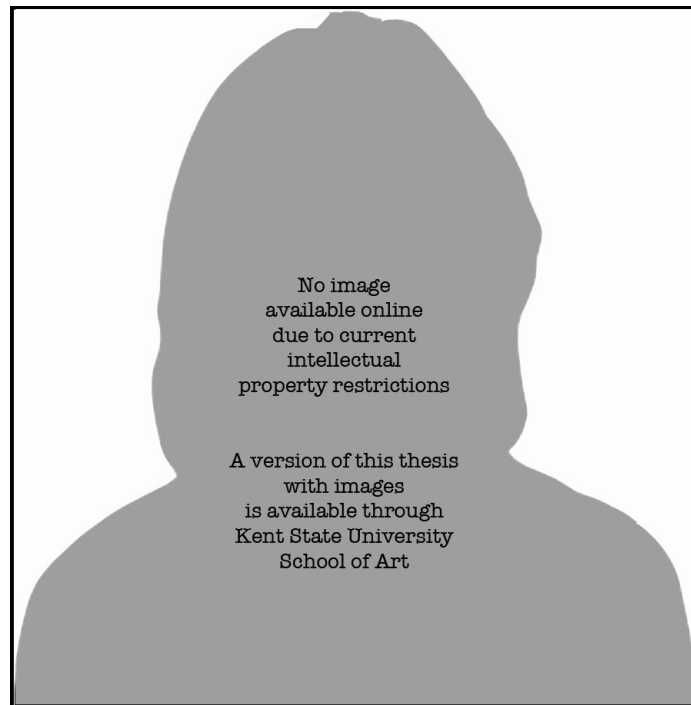


Figure 7.VB16 (original title: *Piano Americano-Beige*). Deitch Projects, New York, January 11, 1996, (Photo Credits: Armin Linke).¹³¹

“At Christmas in 1995 Jeffrey Deitch telephoned my apartment in Milan inviting me to open his new gallery, with only two weeks’ notice. I decided to realize a beige monochrome and let the nudity of the girls surface. My reference for the wardrobe was a Jürgen Teller photograph of a model wearing sheer Agent Provocateur underwear, Chanel slippers and a green dress like lettuce. During the casting, in reference to the personae of Hanna Schygulla and Irm Hermann, I chose a partner for the actress Brooke Smith. The two women would represent the alter ego of the girls left in the background, anonymous and naked. In contrast to the beige monochrome of the background, a girl in a green dress is posed on the floor. This was the first time that a full set of rules for these performances was established: “Do not speak, do not move too slowly or too fast, do not act, do not laugh, do not fall down together, keep the initial position as long as you can, move in the space at your discretion and eventually go back to your initial position. You are a picture, your behavior reflects on the others...”¹³²

¹³¹ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 108.

¹³² Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 106.

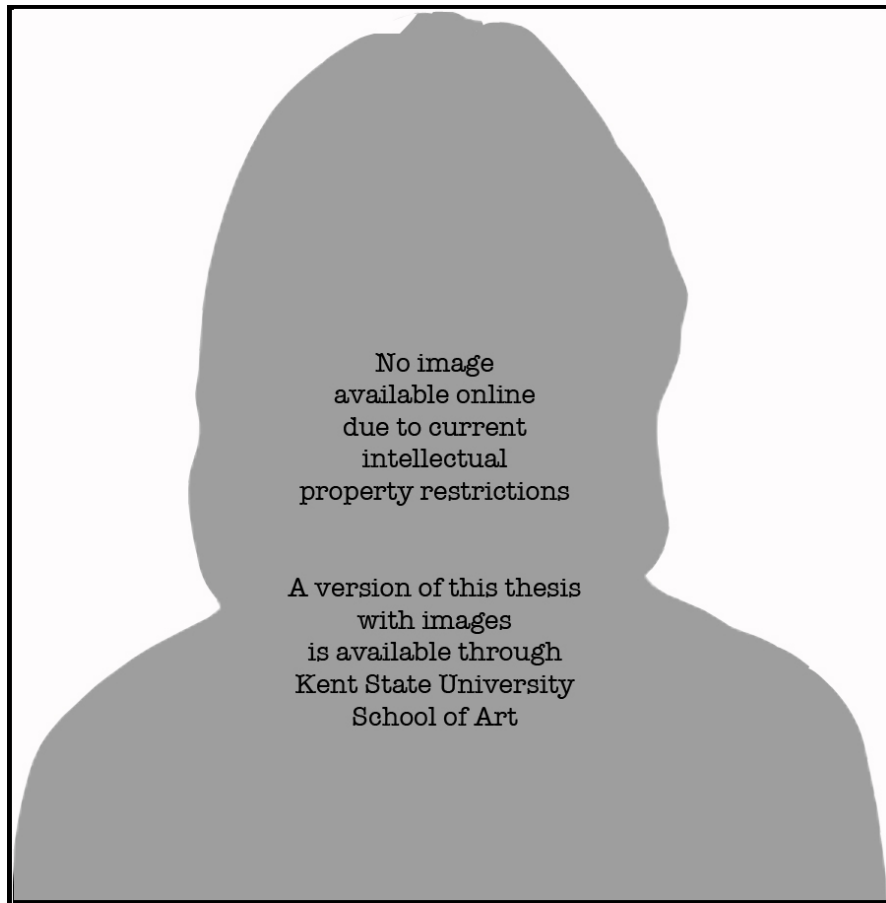


Figure 8.VB16 (original title: *Piano Americano-Beige*). Deitch Projects, New York, January 11,1996, (Photo Credits: Armin Linke).¹³³

¹³³ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 112-113.

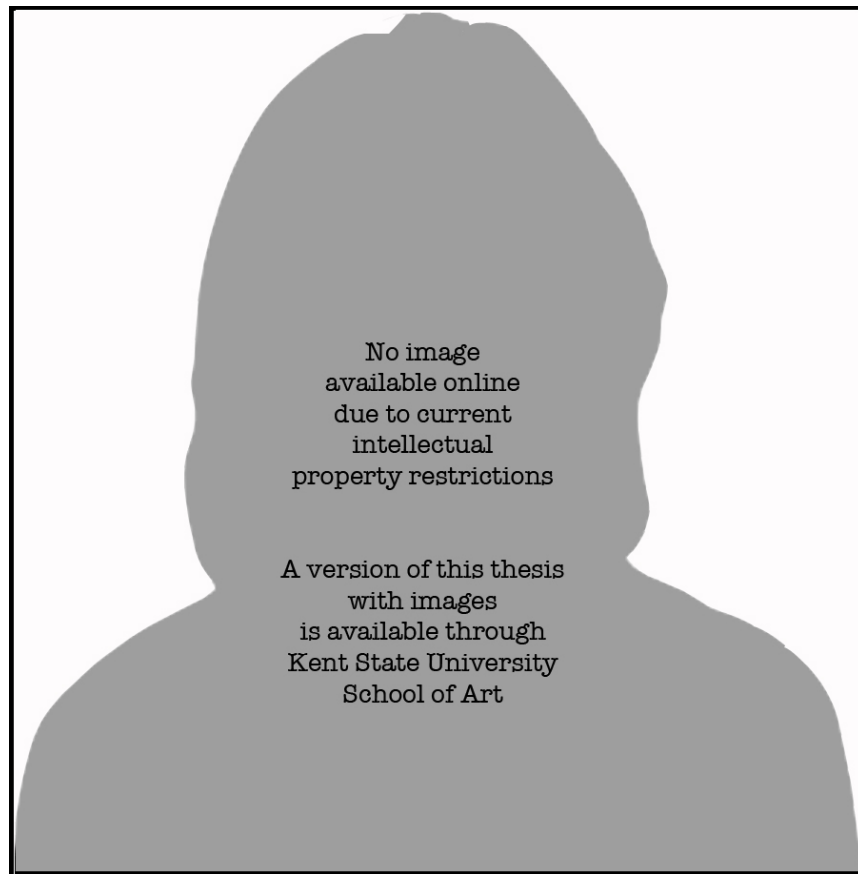


Figure 9. VB25. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands. December 15, 1996¹³⁴

“I was invited to realize a performance for the group show *ID*. Despite my aversion to such concepts and my unwillingness to use wigs for this piece, I surrendered to the curator’s vision of homogeneous look. I used old black wigs cut in a way that reminded me of fifteenth century paintings. I also took inspiration from the light in Rembrandt’s portraiture. The wardrobe came from an old underwear store in Milan, while the white sandals were a generous donation from Prada. The Dutch girls, selected from local art schools, were a happy surprise in the grayness of Eindhoven. They collapsed on the floor, taking no notice of the presence of the crowd, who walked around them, almost tripping over them.”¹³⁵

¹³⁴ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 155.

¹³⁵ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 155.

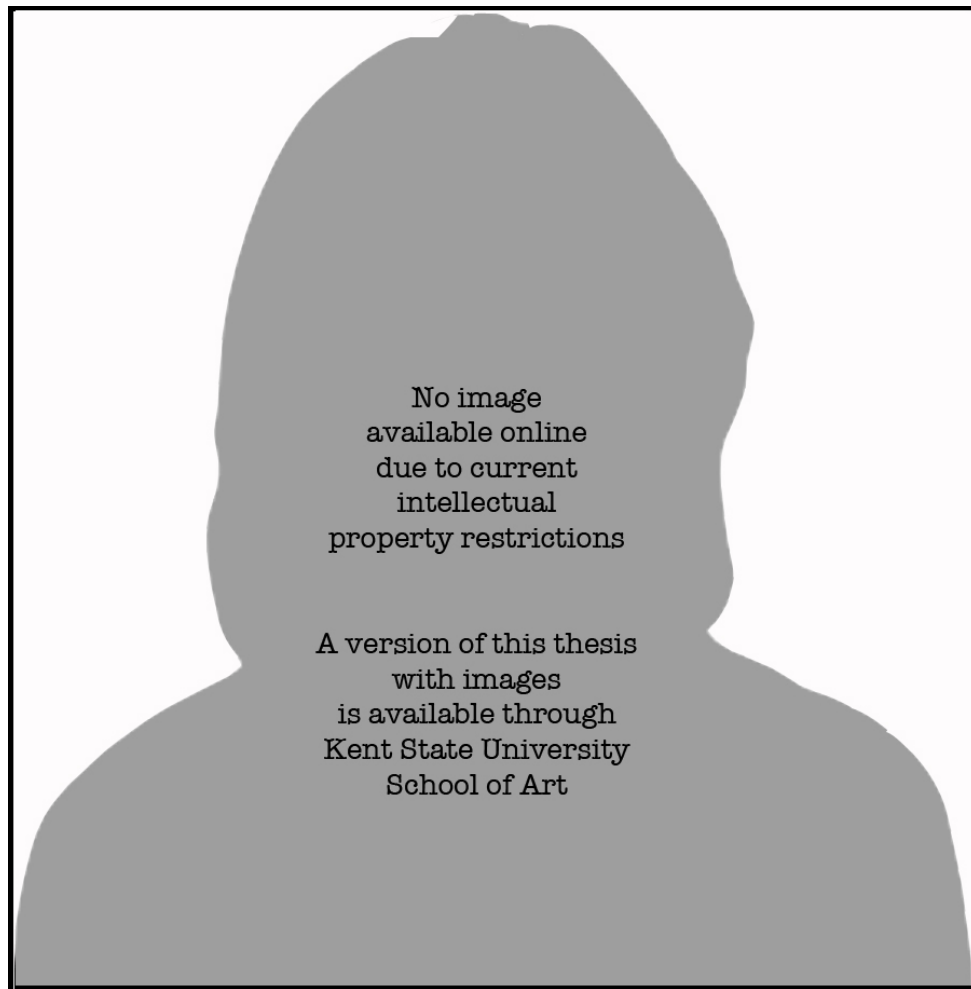


Figure 10. VB25. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, December 15, 1996.¹³⁶

¹³⁶ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 156.

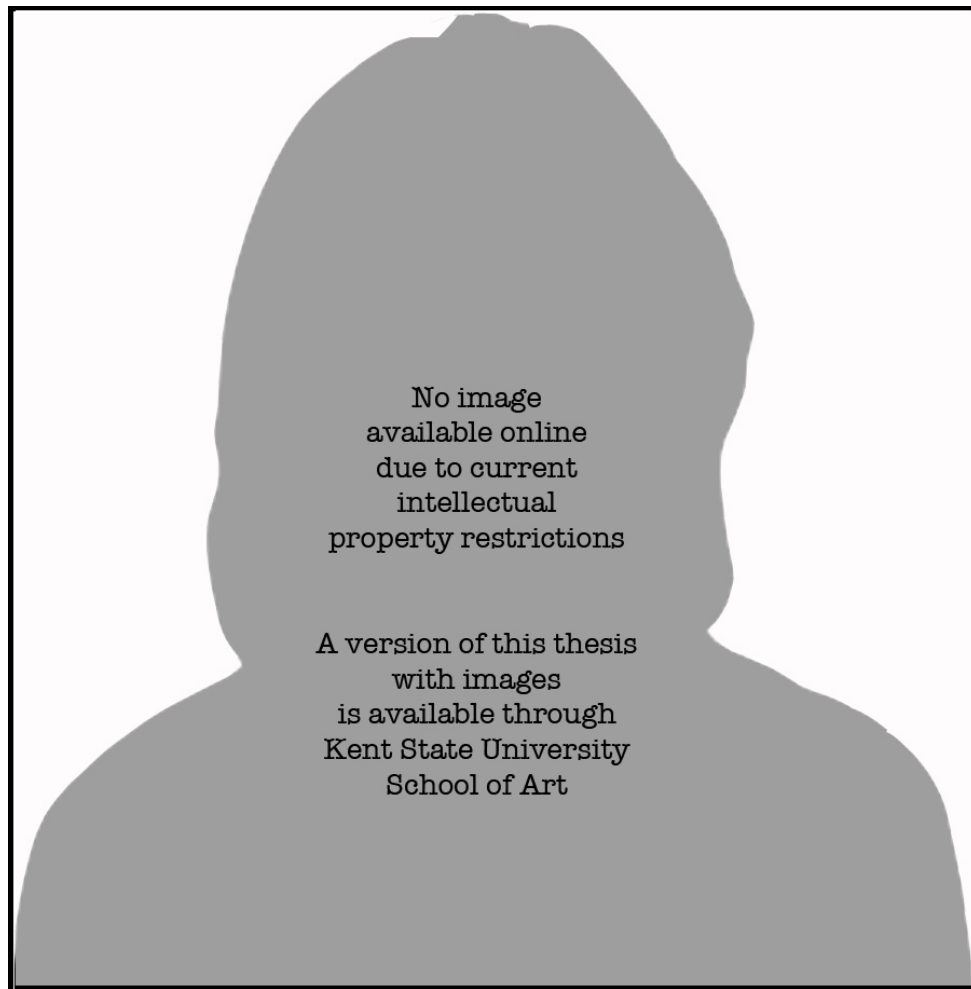


Figure 11. VB25. Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands, December 15, 1996.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 160.

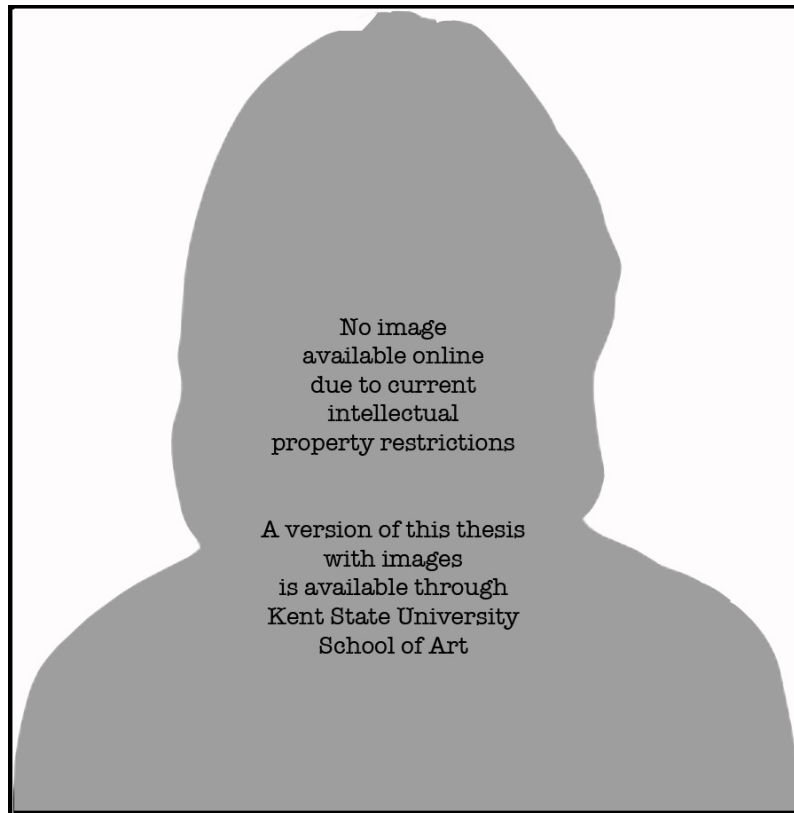


Figure 12. VB29 (original title: *Jesse*). Institut d'Art Contemporain, Franc-Rhône-Alpes/Nouveau Musée, Villeurbanne, France, June 26, 1997.¹³⁸

"For this performance I only selected Jesse. I told her to walk back and forth in the hall designated for the performance. Eventually she sat down and stretched out in front of the video camera and without instructions created her own little show. I allow the aleatory element of a performance to create unforeseen moments, not because I like chance, but because I cannot avoid it: the girls act by themselves even when they follow my rules. I find the rigidity of a formal closure stressful, so I leave the performance open to make itself."¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 183.

¹³⁹ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 183.

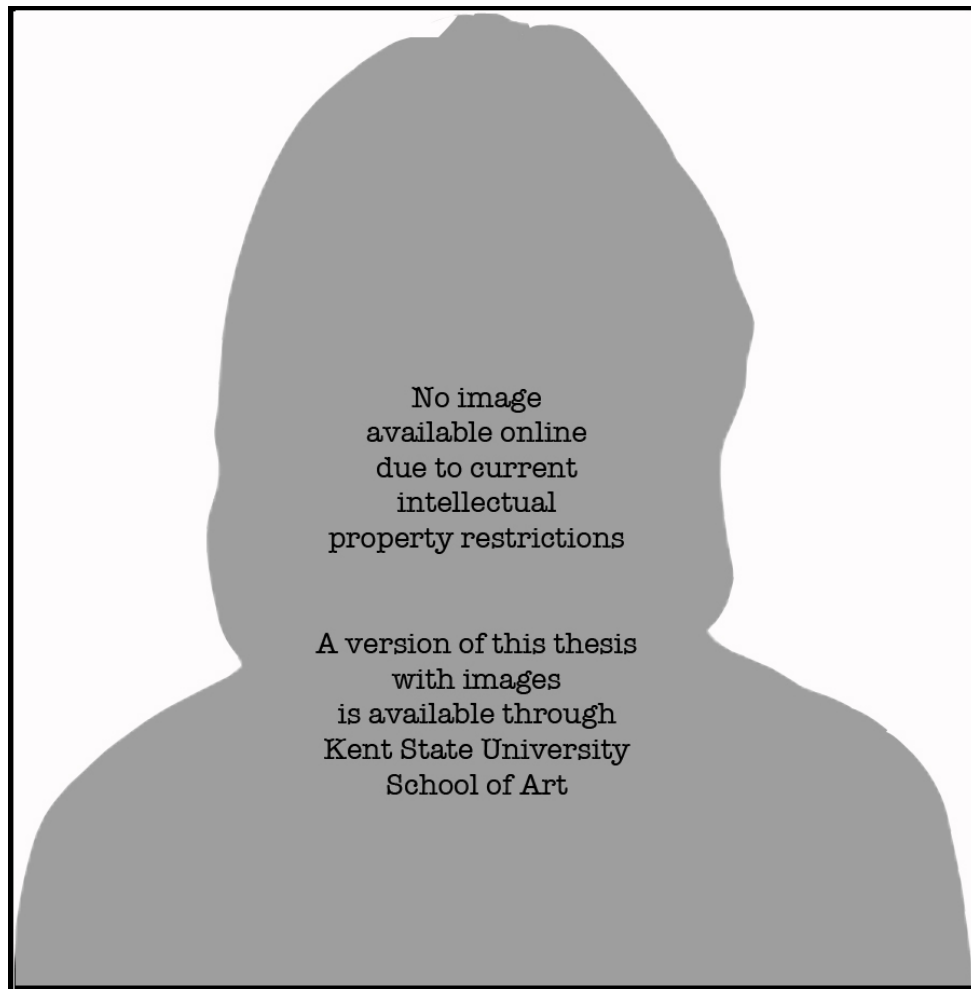


Figure 13. VB29 (original title: *Jesse*). Institut d'Art Contemporain, Franc-Rhône-Alpes/Nouveau Musée, Villeurbanne, France, June 26, 1997.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 186.

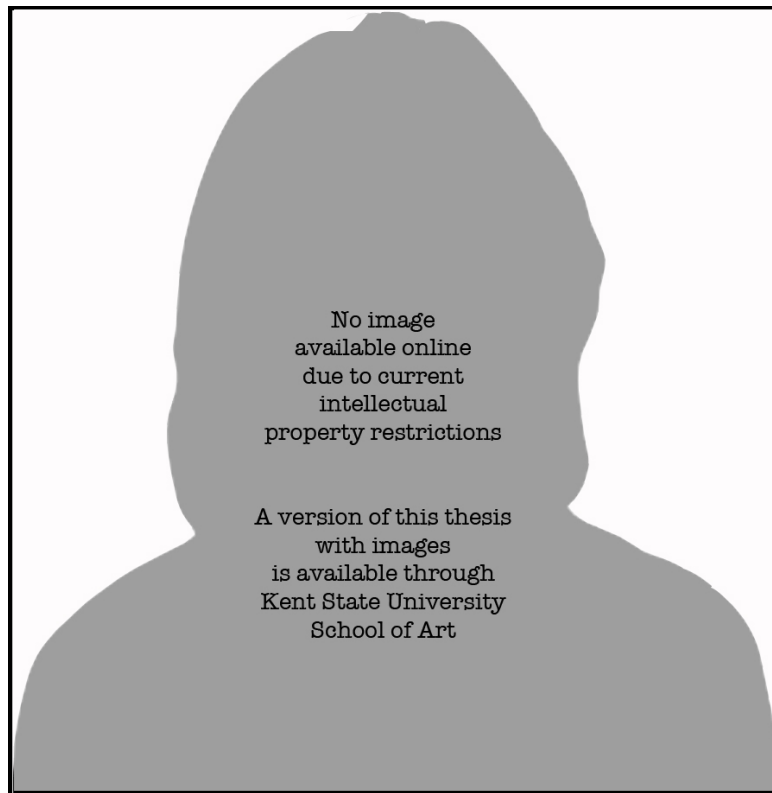


Figure 14. VB 35 (original title: *Show*). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, April 28, 1998, (Photo Credits: Mario Sorrenti, Vanessa Beecroft, Annika Larsson).¹⁴¹

"This work, commissioned by an independent curator, Yvonne Force Inc., was originally conceived as a collaboration with a fashion designer. Unable to think of a wardrobe, however, I came up with a nude piece specifically for the Guggenheim building. The nudity I wanted to show was an urban nudity, not naturalistic or anthropological. It was another type of outfit, a statement, a uniform. I wanted to assume non-natural poses. At the end I had to submit to the independent curator's plan and was only allowed five naked women. Three of them flew out from Sweden, having already taken part in VB34. The fact that some women were naked and some were not created a hierarchy and sense of injustice. As we stare at the girls, their appearance makes us feel out of place, improper, inadequate. We face our desire and fear at the same time—a girl is unknown, hidden inside an opaque world, unapproachable, separated from us, foreign, lonely."¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 220-221.

¹⁴² Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 213.

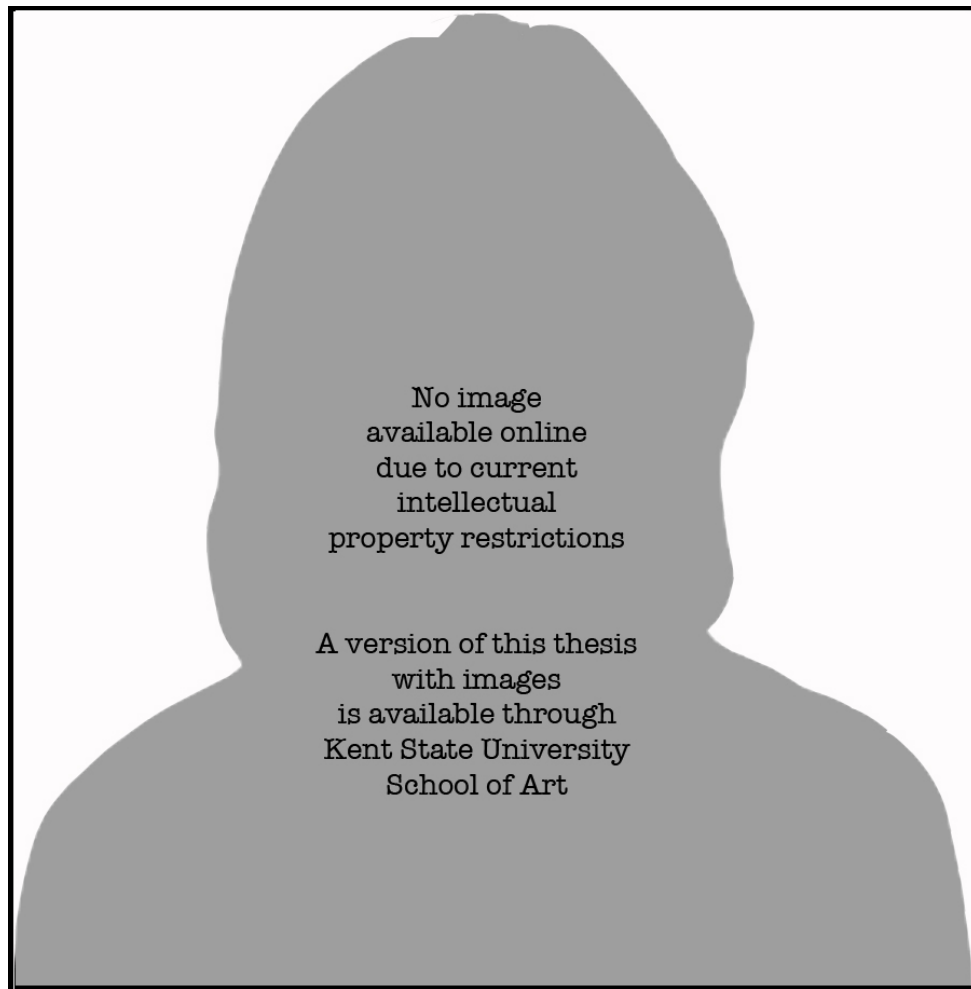


Figure 15. VB 35 (original title: *Show*). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, April 28, 1998.¹⁴³

¹⁴³ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 222.

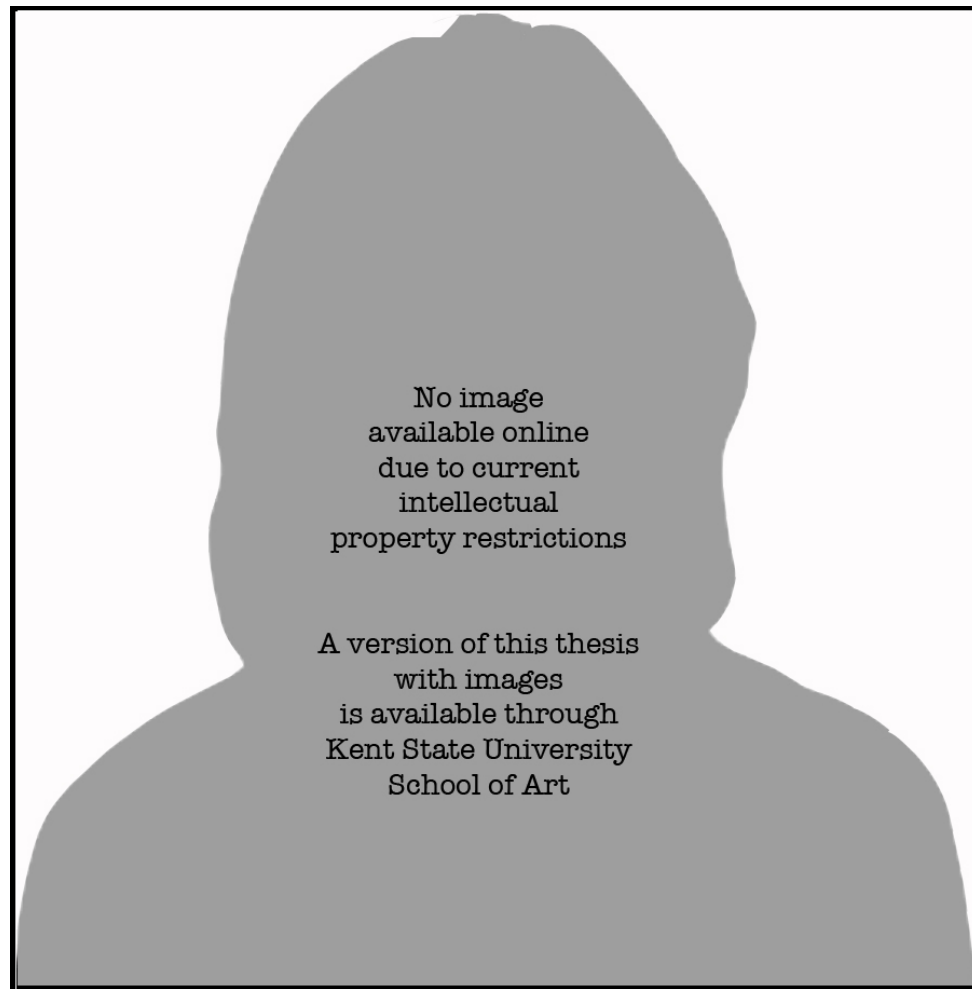


Figure 16. VB 35 (original title: *Show*). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, April 28, 1998.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 216.

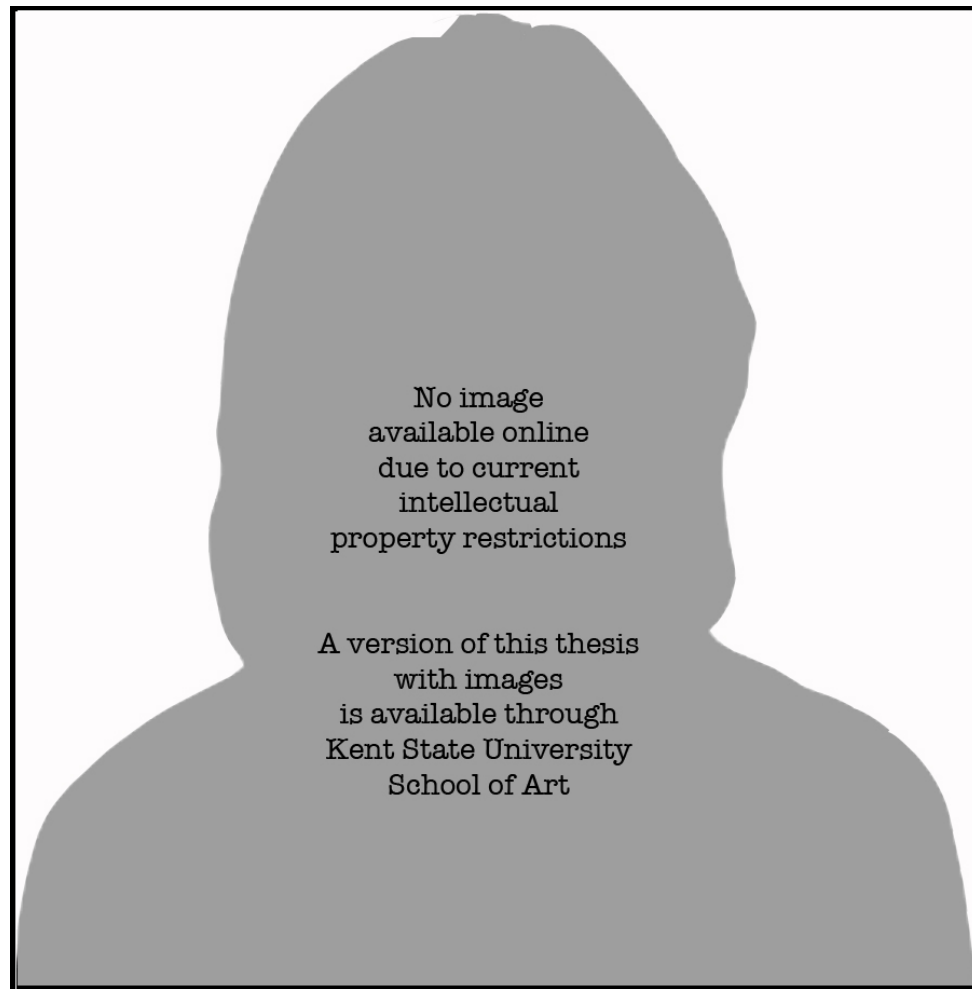


Figure 17. VB 35 (original title: *Show*). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, April 28, 1998.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁵ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 218.

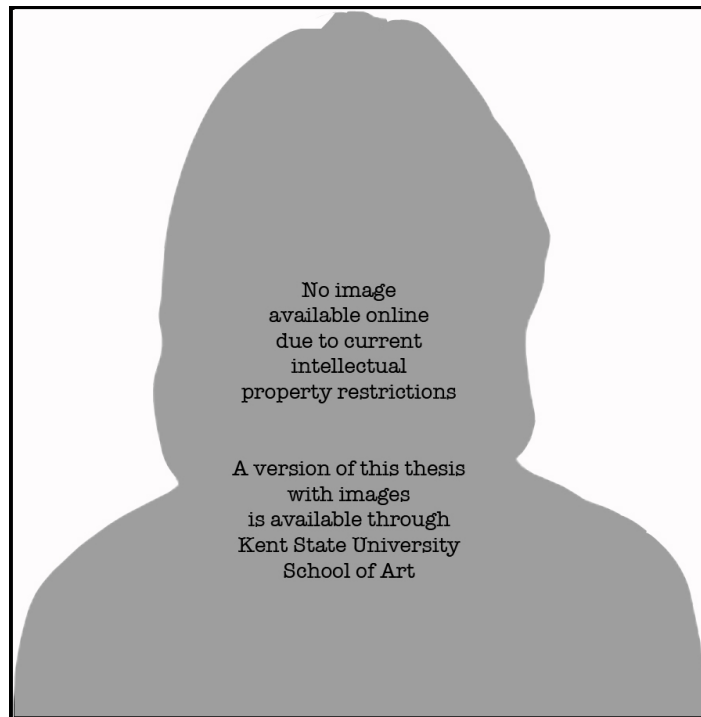


Figure 18. VB45. Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, February 16, 2001, (Photo Credits: Dusan Reljin, Armin Linke).¹⁴⁶

After a visit to Vienna during the construction of the new Kunsthalle, and having met the director, I based this piece on Minimal Art and the aesthetics of power. In the drawing of the performance a black line in the middle separates the heavy, black lower part from the enlightened, dreamy, yellowish upper part. Bodies and heads were painted yellow. The models stood upright, arranged in a regular order, looking ahead as if in military formation until they slowly fell to the ground, altering the picture. A constant element of the performances is to start from a drawing of a precise concept and move towards the loss of order and the beginning of chaos. I consider girls bearers of an image that cannot be entirely dominated by rules. A performance begins like a Donald Judd and ends like a Jackson Pollock. After the first half hour, when girls start falling to the floor, walking from their assigned positions-forgetting to go back to them-assuming overly natural poses, looking in other directions, becoming melancholic and tired, they gained the individual quality that I was seeking, even at the cost of the general picture. Each performance is rich in variables that, added to each other, form a unified experience.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 310-311.

¹⁴⁷ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 306.

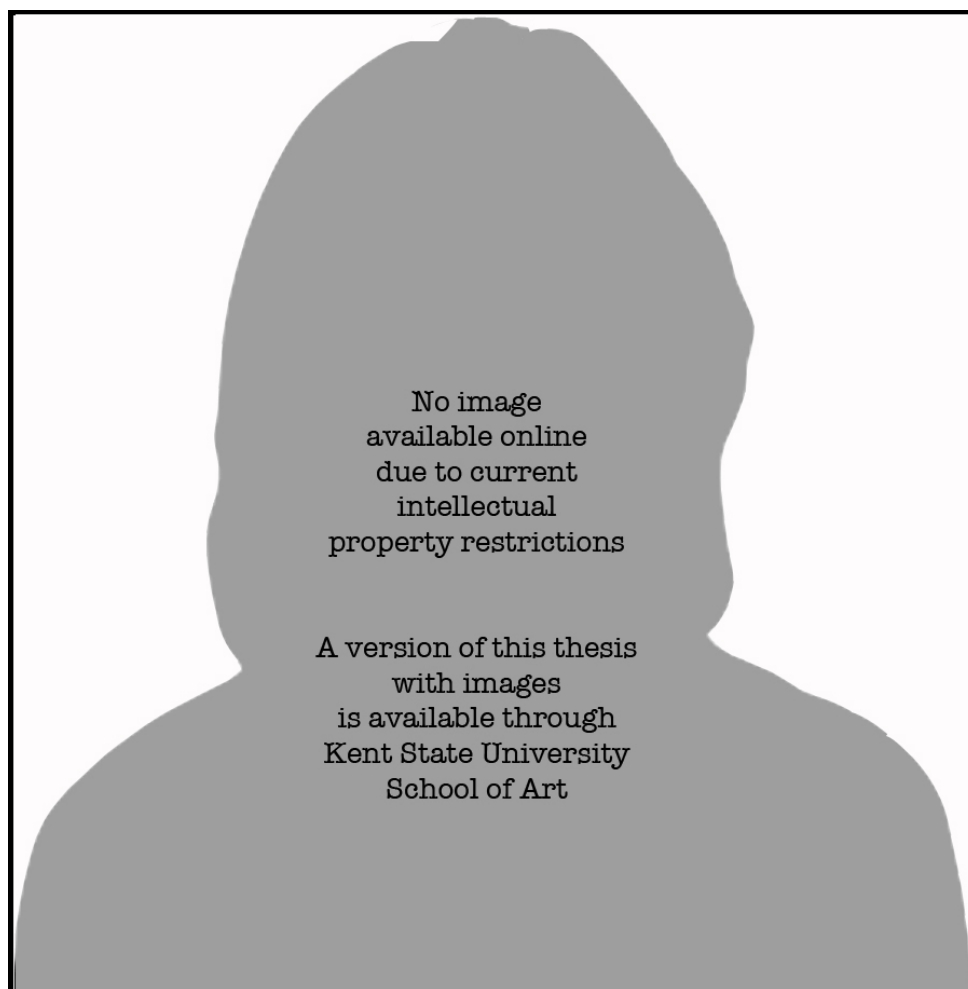


Figure 19. VB45. Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, February 16, 2001.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 315.

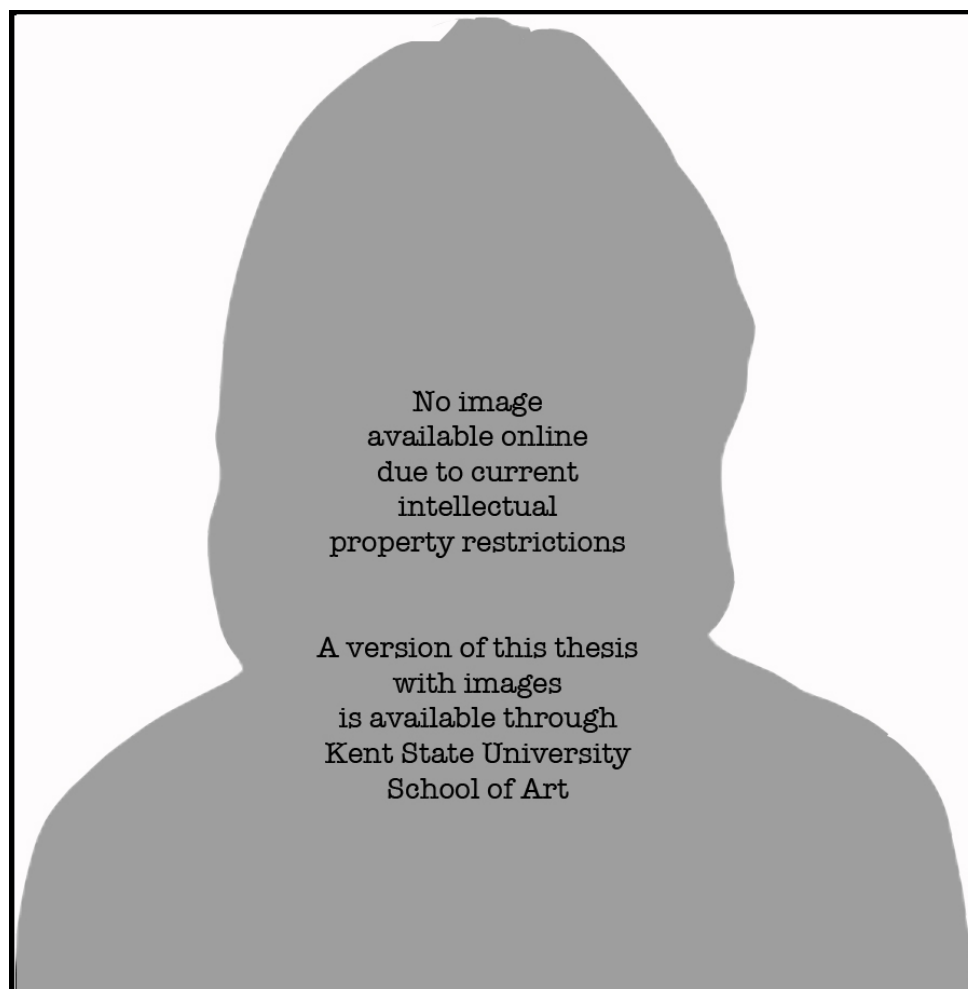


Figure 20. VB45. Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, February 16, 2001.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 324.

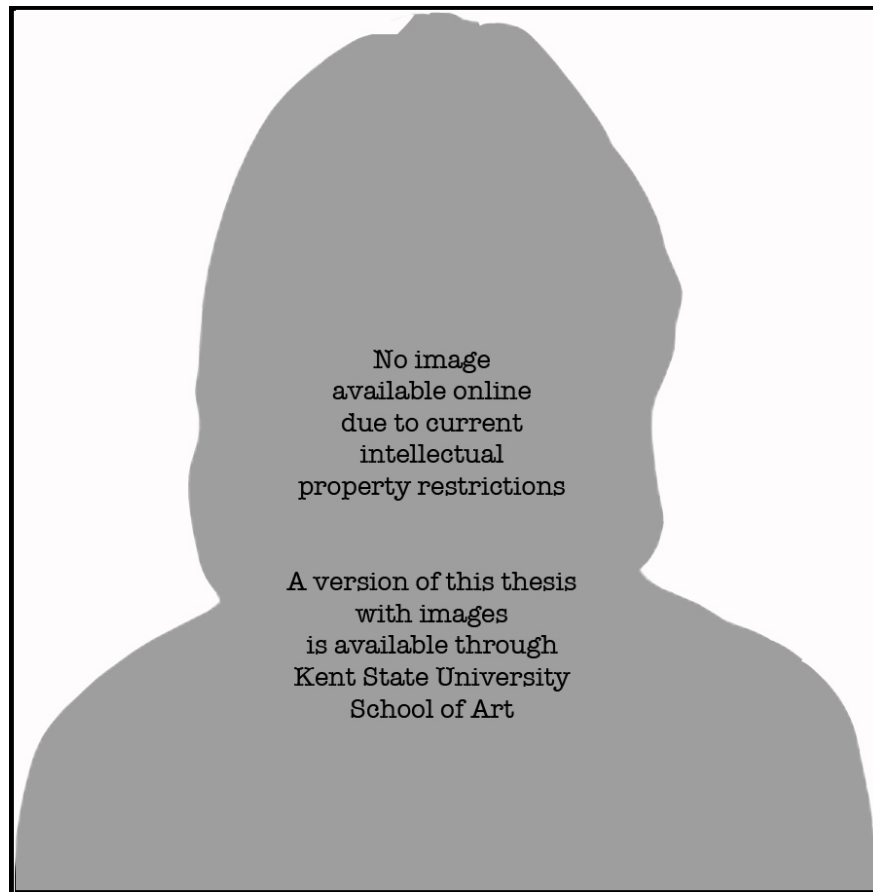


Figure 21. VB46. Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, March 17, 2001, (Photo Credits: Dusan Reljin, Armin Linke).¹⁵⁰

“This performance was intended to be a white monochrome. I asked for flat-chested, boyish looking girls with short hair, bleached and painted white. I required white body make-up. During filming and photography, the girls were installed in a seamless white 360-degree cyclorama at the Sony studios in Hollywood. Then, in the Richard Meyer space of the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills, they were displayed in public. I recognize that the more I try to make the image minimal and pure the more fetishistic it looks. My reaching for an ‘invisible picture’ cannot be achieved by extreme attention to details because that type of sophistication gets close to the decadence of *Death in Venice* (1971), where the make-up insensibly melts on Aschenbach’s face.”¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 325.

¹⁵¹ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 325.

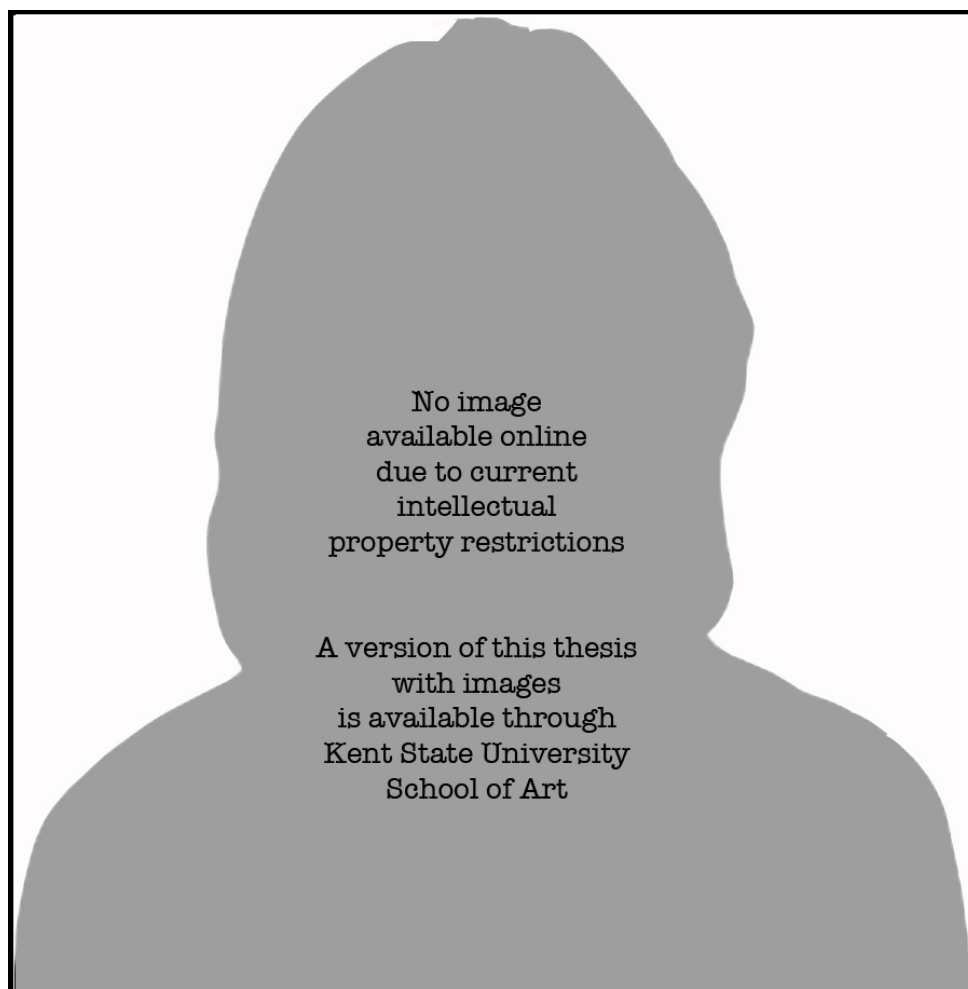


Figure 22. VB46. Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, March 17, 2001.¹⁵²

¹⁵² Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 328.

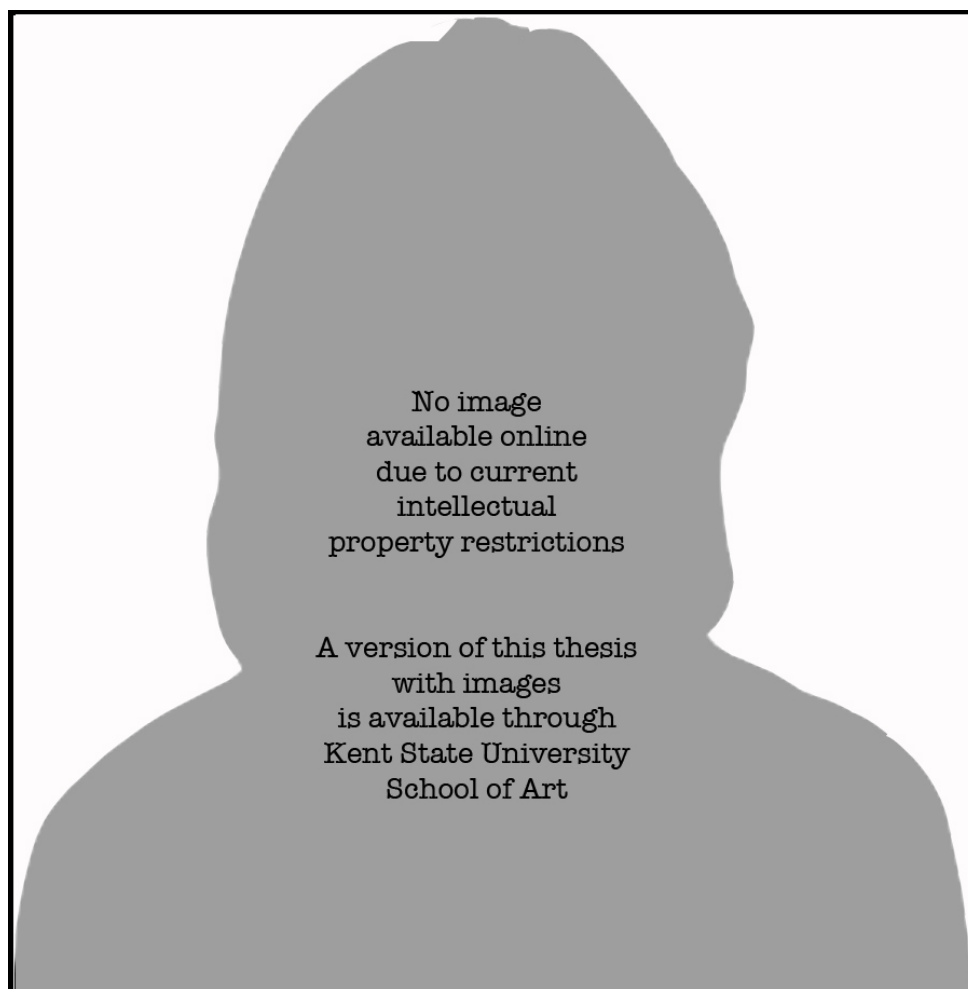


Figure 23. VB46. Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, March 17, 2001.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 335.

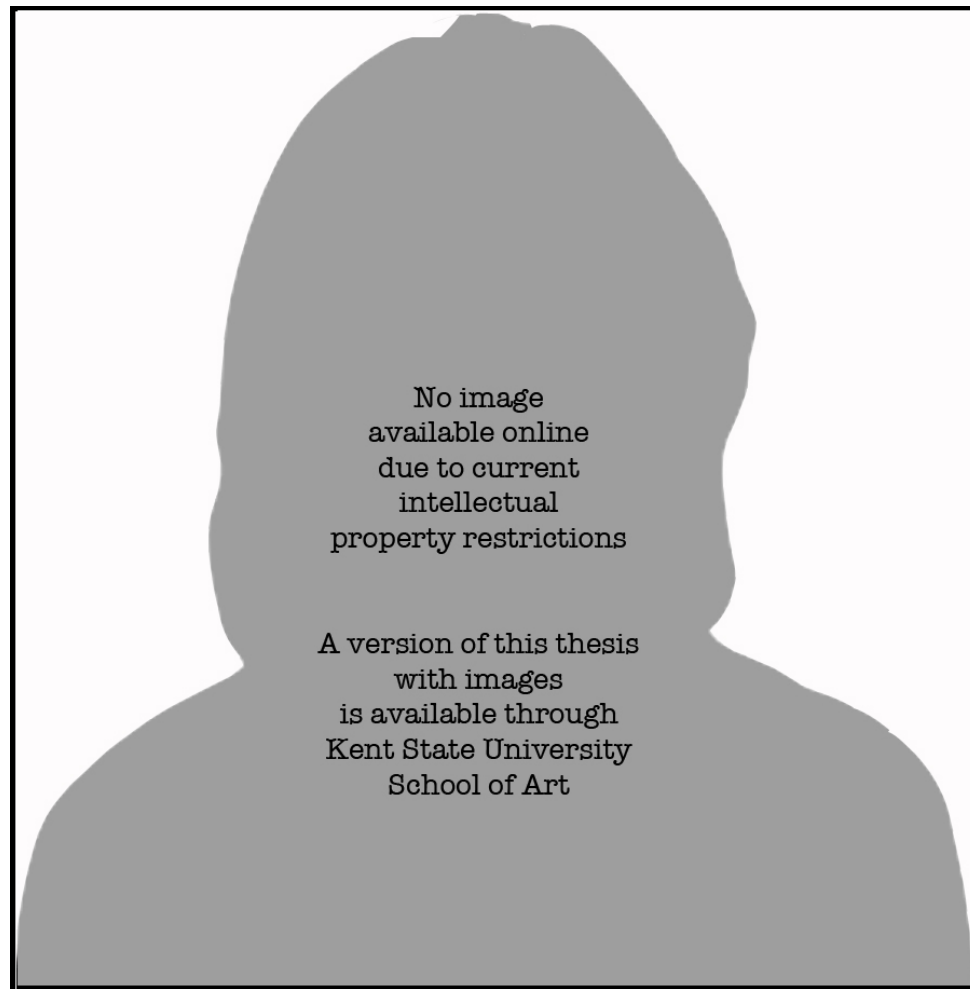


Figure 24. VB47. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy, June 10, 2001, (Photo Credits: Dusan Reljin Armin Linke).¹⁵⁴

“Peggy Guggenheim’s grandson invited me to exhibit at his grandmother’s former residence in Venice, the Peggy Guggenheim Collection. Having visited the collection as a child with my mother, I wanted to realize a work inspired by de Chirico’s metaphysical sculptures and drawings, and to show a group of headless nude girls. A designer from London realized my concept of a ‘headless hat,’ through which the girls could see without allowing us, the viewers, to confront their gaze.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 343.

¹⁵⁵ Vanessa Beecroft, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin’s Press, 2003), 51.340.

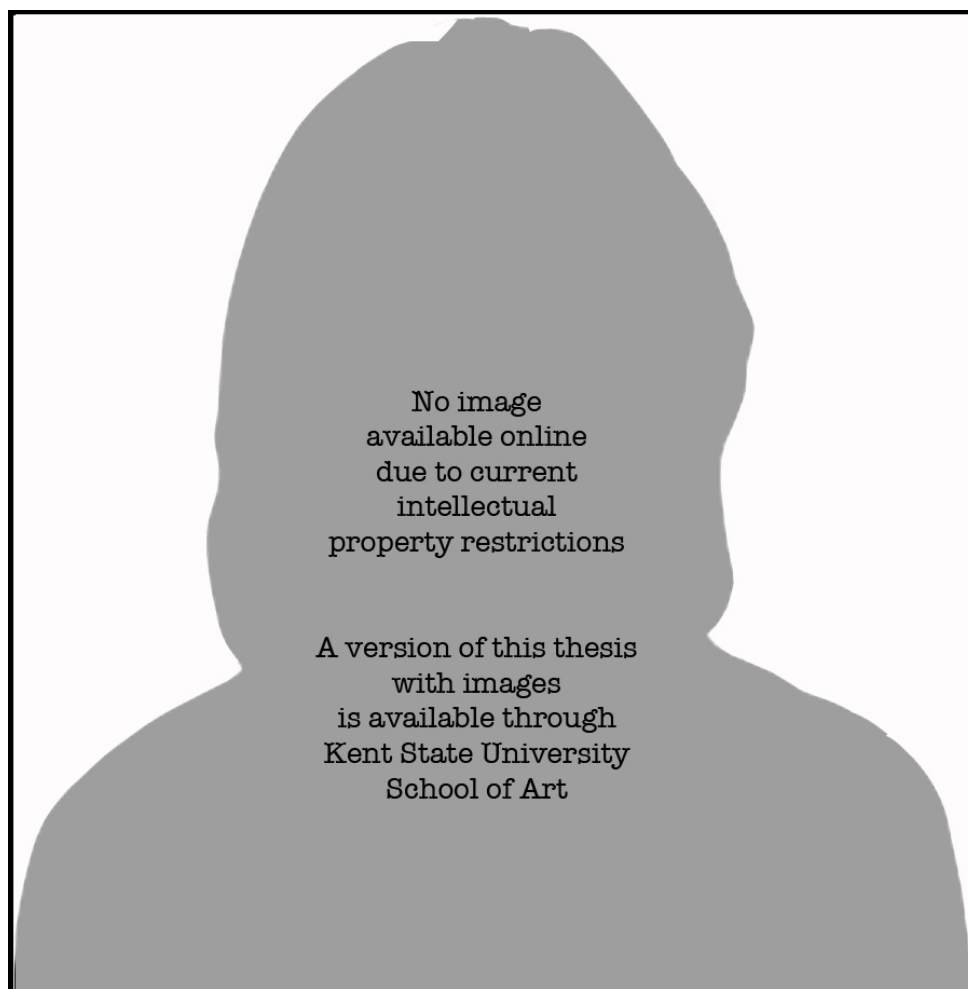


Figure 25. VB47. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy, June 10, 2001.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶Marcella Beccaria, ed., *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 347.

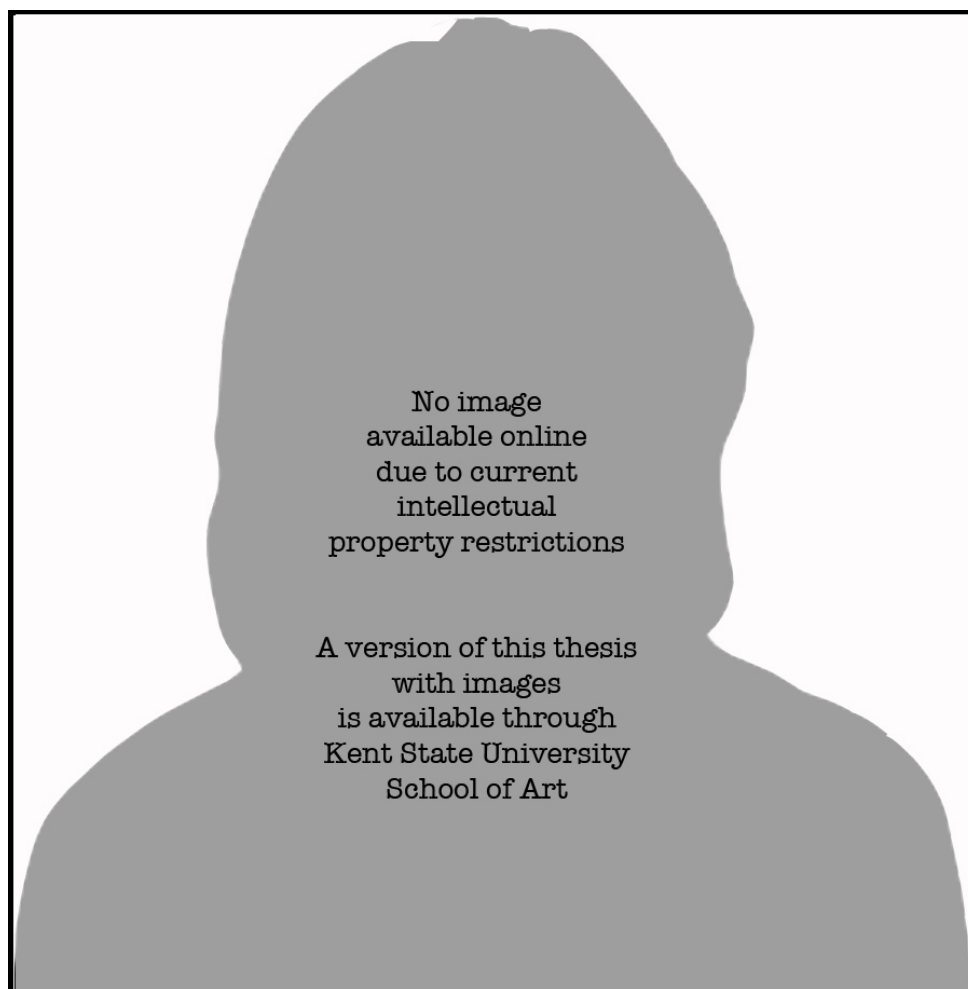


Figure 26. VB47. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, Italy, June 10, 2001.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁷ Marcella Beccaria, *Vanessa Beecroft Performances 1993-2003*, (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, St. Martin's Press, 2003), 351.

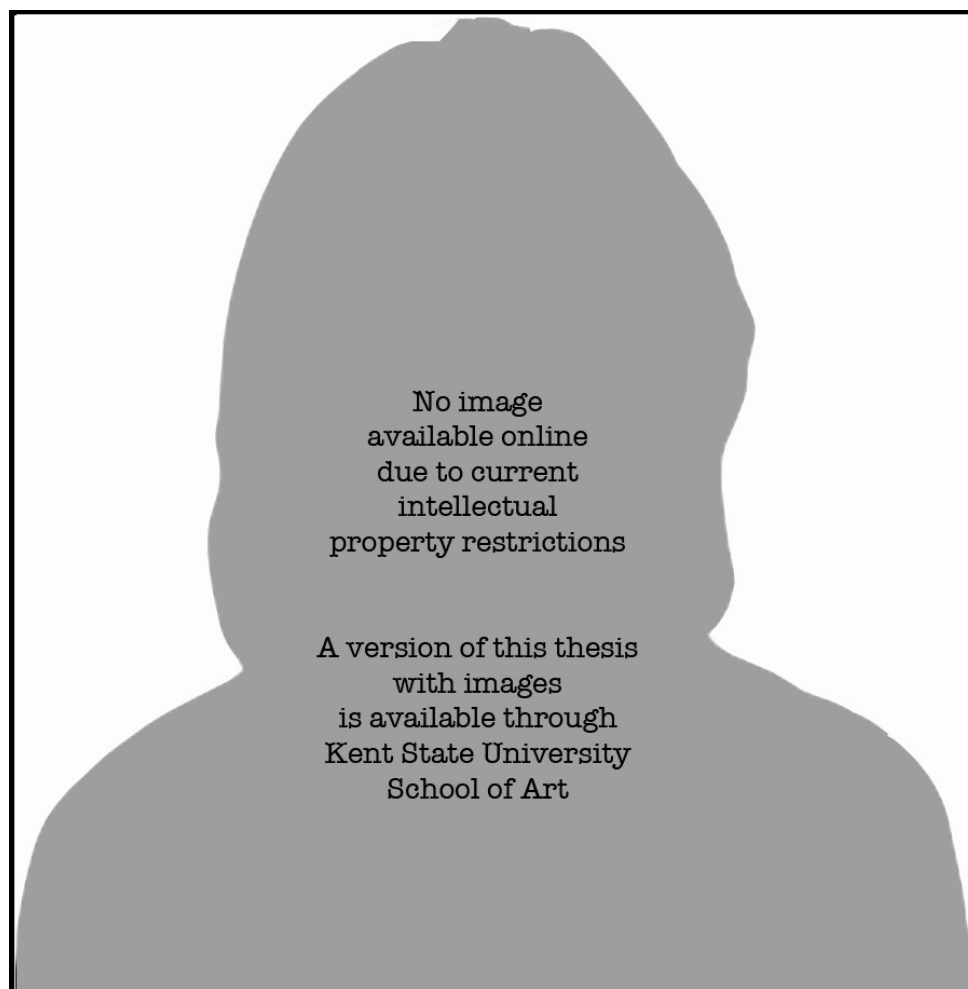


Figure 27. *Sie Kommen (Dressed)*, Helmut Newton. Paris, 1981.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Manfred Heiting, ed., *Helmut Newton* (New York: Taschen, 2000), 12.

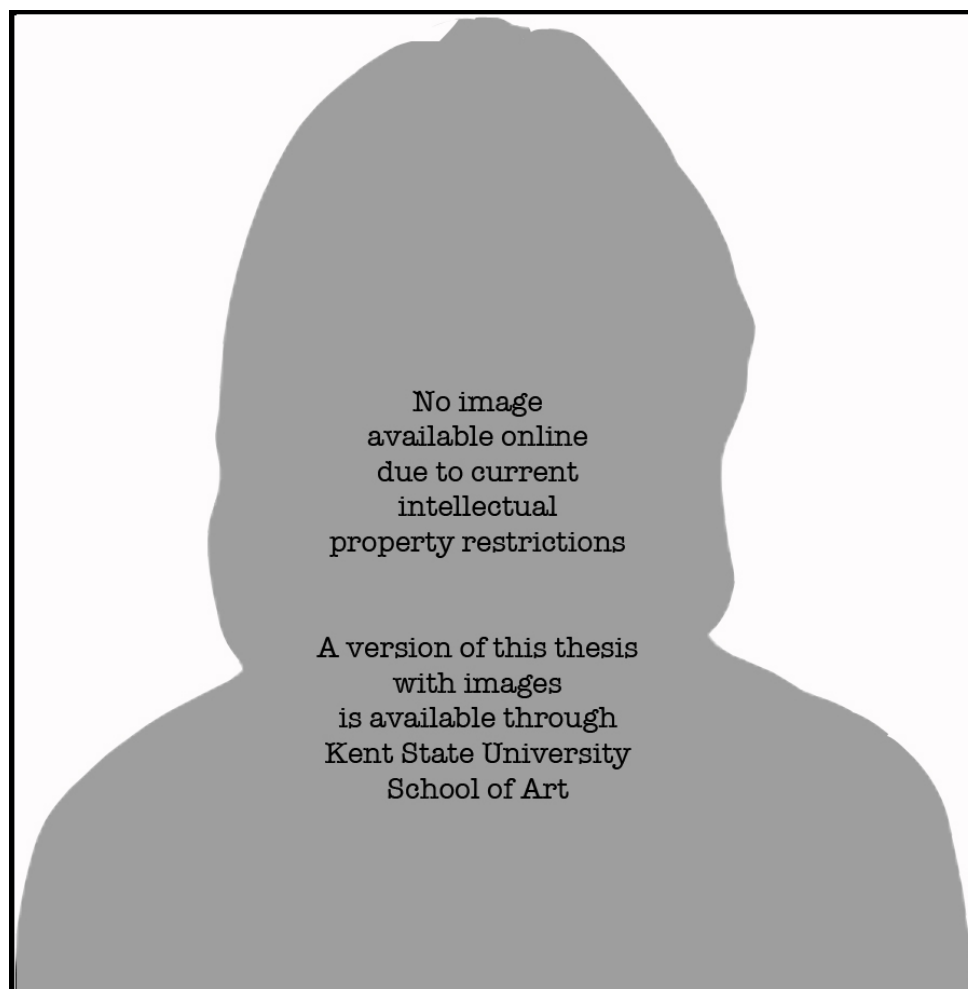


Figure 28. *Sie Kommen (Naked)*. Helmut Newton. Paris, 1981¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁹ Manfred Heiting, ed., *Helmut Newton* (New York: Taschen, 2000), 13.

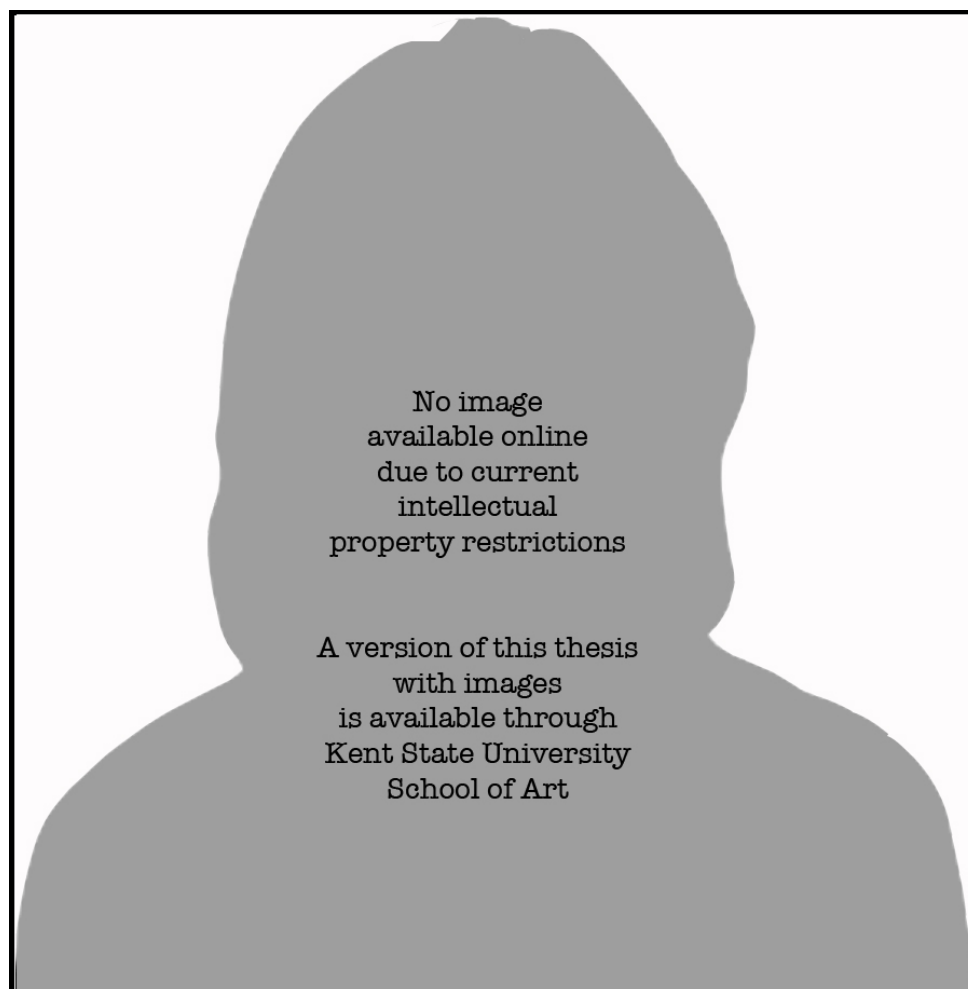


Figure 29. *Site: Performance*, Robert Morris & Carolee Schneemann, Stage 73, Surplus Dance Theater, New York, 1964.¹⁶⁰

¹⁶⁰ Robert Morris, Carolee Schneemann, *Site: Performance* in the ArtStor database,

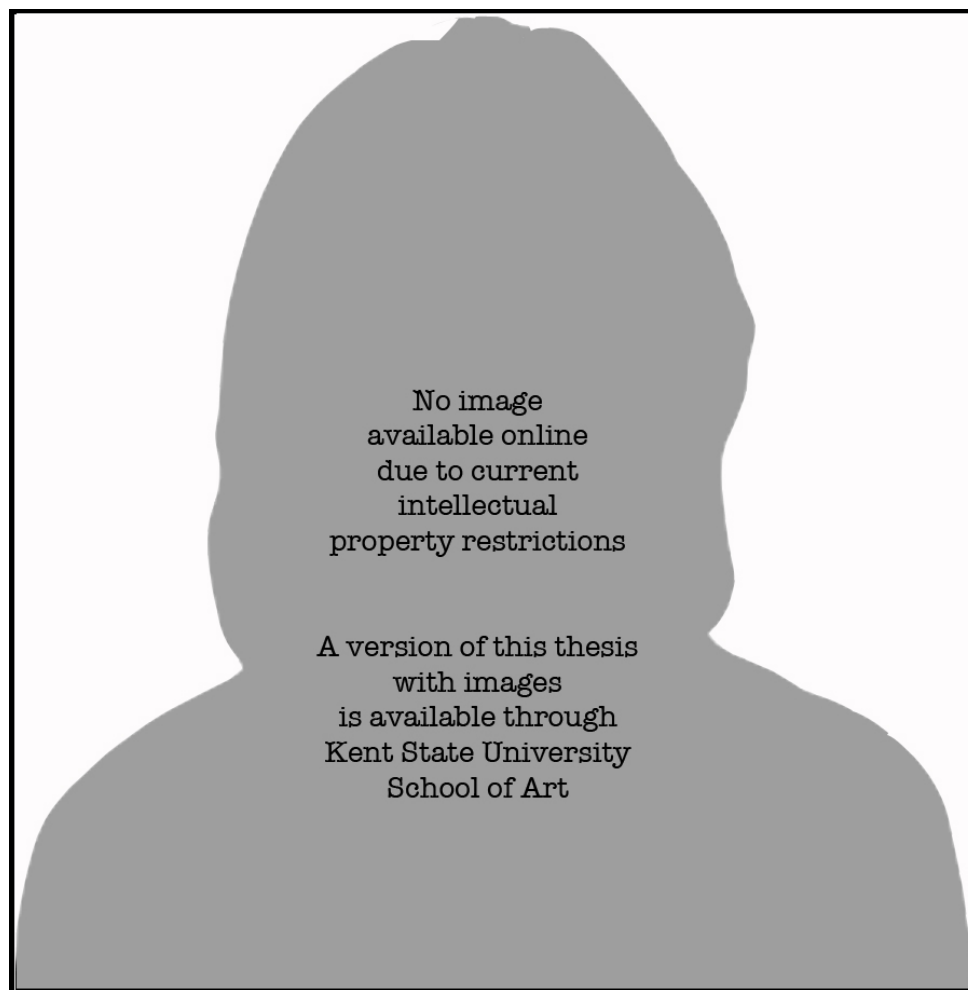


Figure 30. *Eye Body: 36 Transformative Actions*, Carolee Schneemann. New York, 1963.¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Tracey Warr, and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body* (New York, Phaidon Press, 2002), 61.

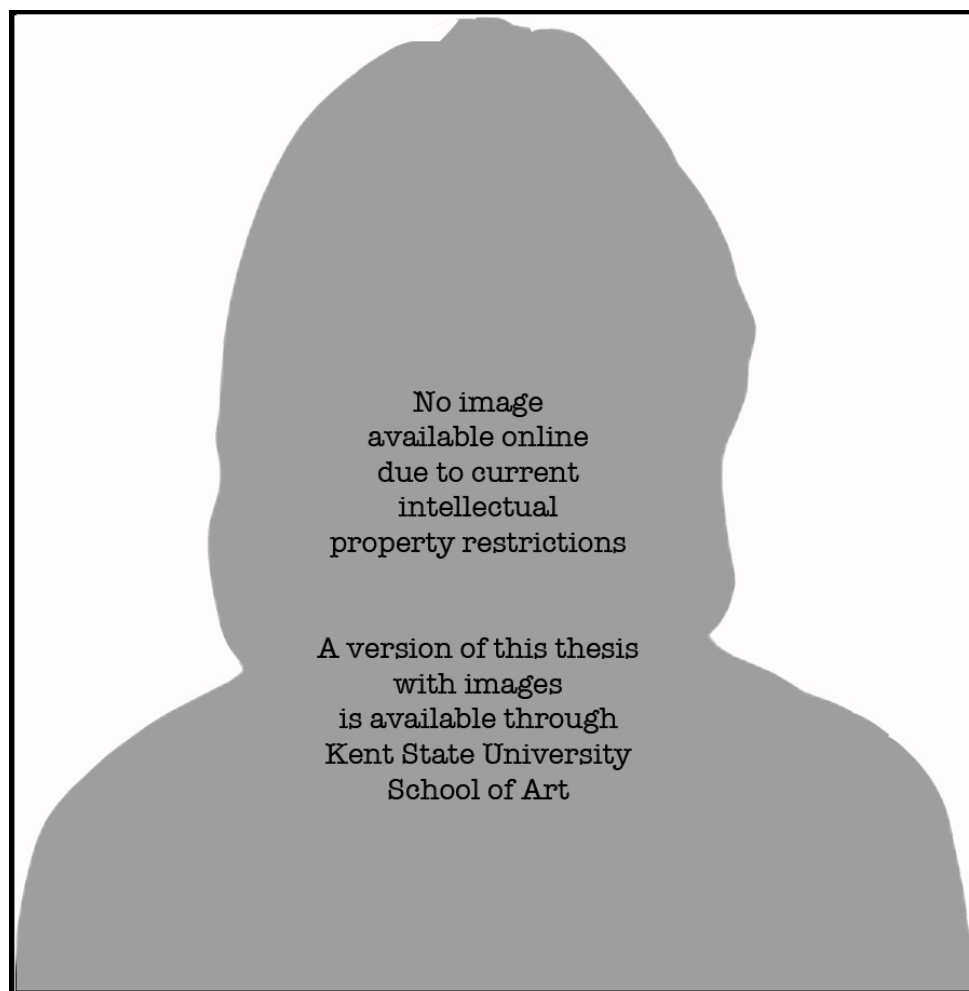


Figure 31. *Opportunity Makes Relations as It Makes Thieves Series: So Help Me Hannah*, Hannah Wilke, 1978-84.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Tracey Warr, and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body*. (New York, Phaidon Press, 2002), 148.

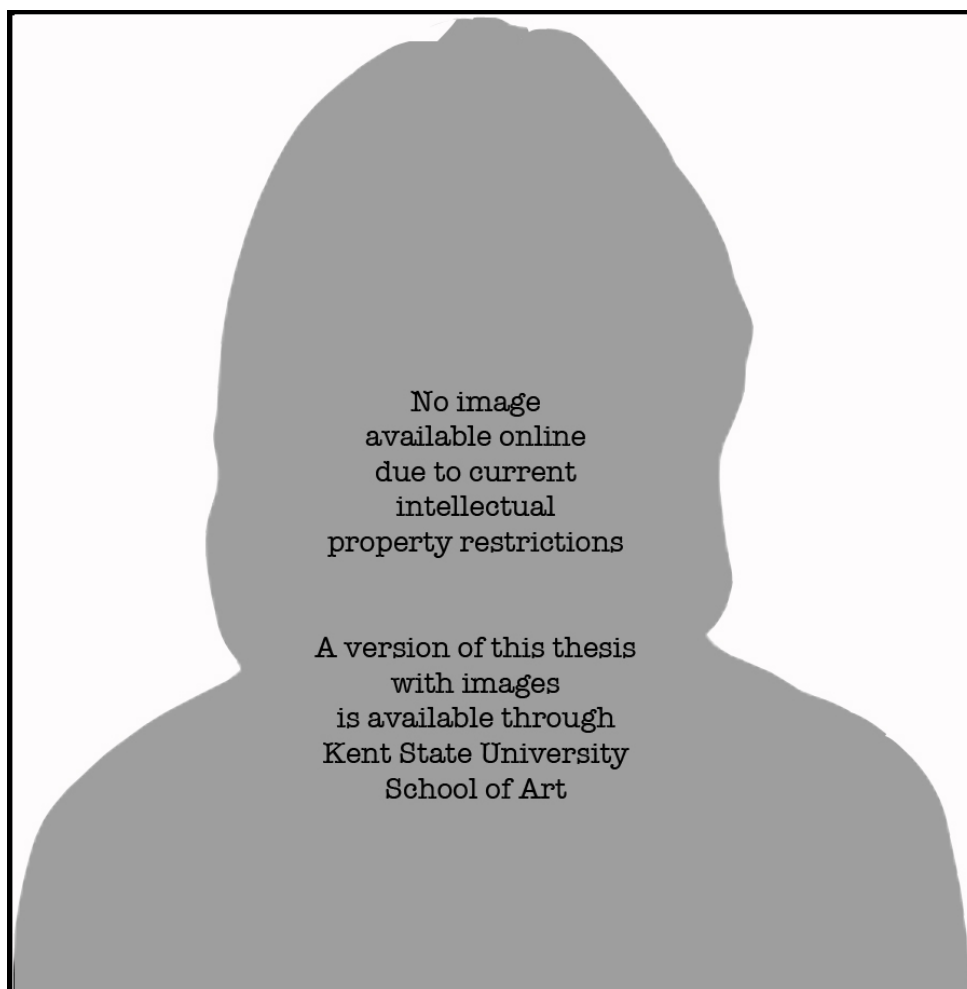


Figure 32. *Untitled No. 131*, Cindy Sherman, 1983.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Tracey Warr, and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's Body* (New York, Phaidon Press, 2002), 151.

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