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Critic's Notebook; Standing and Staring, Yet Aiming for Empowerment

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It's art; it's fashion. It's good; it's bad. It's sexist; it's not. It's Vanessa Beecroft's performance art. And one's mind can feel like Faye Dunaway's face in that famous slapping scene in "Chinatown" when confronted with it.

Since 1994 Ms. Beecroft, a 29-year-old Italian artist, has become known for pieces involving up to 20 vaguely similar women wearing underwear, high heels (or sneakers), maybe pantyhose or wigs, and not much else. The work has an anthropological logic: the performers and their costumes usually come from the city in which the performance is taking place.

Ms. Beecroft recently staged her first such event in a New York museum, a one-night performance at the uptown Guggenheim produced by Yvonne Force Inc., a curatorial consulting company. It was a circuit-jamming combination of fashion, theater and art; a two-and-a-half-hour spectacle of languorous immobility and reciprocal staring, appropriately titled "Show."

"Hooters for intellectuals" was how one skeptical art critic characterized Ms. Beecroft's work. "John Cage with subject

1

matter," another said. "Fascist and incorrect" was the description

offered by a young New York art dealer. "It didn't make me feel liberated in any way," she said of the performance.

Speaking for the defense, a budding collector, the actor Leonardo DiCaprio, was overheard to say of the piece, "This is dope," or cool indeed. A few days later, a prominent art historian described "Show" as "the best thing since Gilbert and George performed 'The Singing Sculpture' at Sonnabend Gallery." He was referring to the British performance and photo artists and their 1971 appearance in SoHo.

There may not be any easy resolution of the feelings and opinions that Ms. Beecroft's work arouses, and that may be the point; but very little art that holds our attention presents itself neatly packaged. The most that new art can do is occupy the mind in the short run, and Ms. Beecroft's work does this, connecting up to all kinds of contemporary art while reformulating ideas that have been around for three decades.

"Show" featured 20 tall, gorgeous women, mostly professional models of a certain hauteur, standing in the museum's rotunda in a loosely circular configuration and facing the same direction. Fifteen wore elegant red rhinestone bikinis and matching four-inch spike heels; the others just wore the spikes. This wardrobe was designed by Tom Ford of Gucci; the makeup by Pat McGrath

2

included light body-makeup and powdered hair that contributed to the walking-mannequin effect.

The women stared into space, aloof and indifferent. Occasionally they stretched, crouched or walked slowly around. The invited audience of about 500, also standing, did much the same, and was often just as stylishly, if more thoroughly, attired. So little was happening that when one model strolled slowly among her colleagues, as through an orchard, it counted as drama.

It soon became clear that, as with an old-fashioned Happening, everything going on around the piece was part of the performance -- the artist herself, prowling among the onlookers in body-hugging black shirt and leggings and Gucci spikes; the photographers, darting about for better angles, and, of course, the audience, its standing, staring mode mirrored by the performers.

Despite its mixed signals, "Show's" beauty could not be denied. The performers seemed to match the pale beige walls of the museum's soaring spiral, like 20 Venuses in a conch shell by Botticelli. They were resolute and self-contained, comfortable with their nakedness.

Ms. Beecroft calls them an "army" that empowers women and refers to her instructions to them as "rules." She also claims indifference to the presence of men in the audience. "Men?" Ms.

3

Beecroft said during the performance. "They can look. I don't mind." She said, with a bit of youthful arrogance, that the true beauty of women has never been reflected in art or fashion, implying that she aims for greater accuracy by presenting the real thing in this highly artificialized, structured form.

The first thought that "Show" inspires is that Ms. Beecroft's work is so au courant in its aloof sexuality, its ambiguous borrowings from popular culture and its use of real time, real space and real flesh that it would have to be invented if it didn't already exist. (which may also mean that it is a flash in the pan, like the work of so many 80's art stars.) There's a passive-aggressive quality to this work, an unsettling beauty that is common to contemporary artists from Damien Hirst to Elizabeth Peyton.

Ms. Beecroft's efforts also relate to the girl-power approach

to feminism that has all kinds of younger female artists asserting their autonomy by adopting behavior once considered exploitative and demeaning to women. (Consider Ginger Spice, of Spice Girl fame, who is going to pose for a Playboy centerfold.)

In addition to bodies, "Show" brought into the open the quick, surreptitious looks with which members of both sexes appraise women, exaggerating the glance to excruciating lengths.

That Ms. Beecroft is a woman is essential to her work. Women are her material but also her surrogates. It is also important that her control of the piece goes only so far. Unlike Yves Klein, who

4

used naked women as human paintbrushes and arranged their paint-covered bodies on canvas, Ms. Beecroft is out of the picture once the performance begins.

Thus "Show" was also about disintegration. The women seemed to thaw out, becoming more human as the evening progressed. They sat or lay down on the floor; they exchanged glances and sometimes spoke to one another; the final 20 minutes brought several relatively prolonged chat sessions.

It was like seeing entropy -- that hallowed 70's concept -- applied on a human plane. Ms. Beecroft's work also

conjures up the 70's ideal of site specificity; her works provide sample readings of local notions of class, beauty and taste.

Her first solo show in New York, at Deitch Projects in SoHo in 1996, had a downtown focus: performers wearing demure flesh-colored underwear, pantyhose, strappy heels, short blond wigs and almost no makeup resembled a gang of Cindy Shermans getting ready to suit up for one role or another. For the Venice Biennale last summer, the women were rangy in build, had long hair and wore thongs and Pucci-patterned pantyhose. A "Hey, sailor" raunchiness resulted.

A recent Beecroft piece performed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London involved stockier women, with long blond hair, naked but for high heels and girlish gray sweaters. The sense it gave was of loneliness and tough self-sufficiency.

5

Things were decidedly tonier in "Show," Ms. Beecroft's most expensive work to date. But it may have been the performance piece that upper Fifth Avenue, or the cliché of that neighborhood, deserved.

"Show," which will live on in video and photographs, was Ms. Beecroft's 34th performance in 24 cities in Europe and the United States. That in itself is an interesting statistic.

