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Elke Krystufek and the Obsessive Production of Persona

Issues surrounding subjectivity and representation have continuously been explored by means of artistic practice; and have increasingly become both familiar and fertile subject matter for contemporary artists such as Elke Krystufek, who uses such notions as a critique of contemporary culture and the social constructs that mark a path to visibility and legibility. By examining her work I will consider the ways in which her artistic practice comes to act as an intervention into earlier feminist practice—as a way of reexamining, and even critiquing, these practices. In the late 1960s and through the early 1980s artists such as Valie Export, Hannah Wilke, Eleanor Antin, and Cindy Sherman used their own images and bodies as raw material for their work. While there were also male artists working at this time who used their bodies as subject matter, my specific interest is the female body in the context of gendered subjectivity, representation, and masquerade. In considering the use of the body in this respect, Amelia Jones wrote, “The body, through which we experience ourselves in the world is at this time is beginning to be understood as an *historical idea*... The performance of the body is thus seen to be a way to interrogate the social situation of the subject and is, correspondingly, adopted as a key strategy for feminist and other artists intent on addressing the particularities of their bodily codings.”¹ As part of this increased focus on performativity, feminist artists created characters and alter egos that called into question stereotypical notions of female subjectivity and pushed the boundaries of their own identity. This earlier generation of women artists used their bodies as subject and object of their work in order to critique

¹ Amanda Cruz, et al., *Cindy Sherman Retrospective* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 38.

stereotypes and forcefully dismantle barriers, which excluded women from the public sphere. Today artists use such tactics to point to the fact there is no longer a *private* space, instead everything is available for public consumption and manipulation.

Krystufek's work hovers somewhere within the realm of narcissistic self-obsession, "[a]nd yet, Krystufek's whole artistic career, steered as it maybe by an almost hysterical urge to have herself noticed, to be present and visible, could also be described as an endless series of vanishing acts."² Her practice (until somewhat recently) centered almost wholly on the duplication and substitution of surrogate images of self, specifically emphasizing the female body and its position within the discourse of art history and the construction of cultural identities. Krystufek's work (especially that of the late 1990s and early 2000s) relied heavily on images of her performing various recognizable characters or stereotypes, often wearing wigs, costume, and makeup to play the parts. She used snapshot-like photographs of the masquerade as the foundation of her work. The artist's image is unavoidable, yet there is a void; there is no real subjectivity just an image, a persona, or a character performance for the audience. The artist often makes herself up as Marilyn Monroe, Michael Jackson, and other figures from the landscape of popular culture and (art) history, all the while never portraying herself or a particular someone else. Instead the portraits are a mish-mash of fabricated identities and split personalities.

In addition to actual historical figures, Krystufek masquerades as the stereotypes played out in advertisement, television, and films. Never just playing the part, Krystufek emerges as a hyperbolic version that is both grotesque and laughable at the same time.

² Peter Noever ed., *Liquid Logic: The Height of Knowledge and the Speed of Thought* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006), 57.

Masked and mirrored images of the artist dominate the cluttered visual landscape in a mode that takes on the banality of over-saturation and the frenzied mania of hoarding, a reflection of contemporary culture and the ubiquity of commodification and consumption.³ Combined, these elements elude to a consistent interest in identity, socially constructed notions of gender, and the relationship between reality and fiction. By taking on the roles of others who exist within the framework of the larger cultural memory, she points to the idea that identities are easily accessible and often interchangeable. Yet, some traces of Krystufek's personal appearance or identity remain; a complete and total transformation into the other is not accomplished. Rather, the obvious air of disguise is a necessary element. For artists like Nikki S. Lee or Adrian Piper, passing as another can be a goal to some degree. Conversely, Krystufek engages a form of blatant masquerade in order to examine notions of authenticity. No matter what identity the artist takes on, she is always tied to her existence as a woman—and it is precisely this gendered identity that is at the forefront of her work.

I am You, You are Mine was shown as part of the *I am Your Mirror* at the Vienna Secession exhibition in 1997. In the series Krystufek takes a number of photographs of her mirrored reflection. Each photograph (taken in serial progression) shows the process of transformation; the artist performs a new identity in each shot. Like a shape-shifter or artworld Zelig, she moves from meditative artist in the studio to Hindu deity to Marilyn Monroe to wild, half-naked woman. Throughout the sequence she is surrounded by images from popular culture, thus adding yet another assortment of identities from which to choose. In some photographs she holds a record in one hand and an electric keyboard

³ Noever 6.

in the other, in another she has an image of Marilyn Monroe taped over her own face, and yet another she has a leotard covering her face—performing actual masking in addition to the theoretical masquerade. She plays the part of woman, a performance seen daily, only here the act is intensified and repeated. The series of photographs presents one representation of feminine identity after another—the sex symbol, the goddess, and the lunatic—as if to unmask through masquerade.

There are two photographs in which Krystufek is closer to the mirror/camera; her body fills most of the frame; she is wearing only a pair of red tights and stands staring straight into the camera. Borrowing poses from DIY pornography she pulls at the tights exposing her pubic hair, now looking more seductive and less deranged. It echoes the seemingly private moment often played out all over the Internet on both porn and celebrity gossip web sites. “She portrays the anonymity and uniformity of media-engulfed mankind and we find ourselves mirrored ironically as private individuals. What we consider to be intimate, secured as our own sphere of life and sexuality, has become culturally normal and public.”⁴ Today the private made public can be seen just about everywhere, however in 1997 Krystufek relied on specific public figures, such as Marilyn Monroe or Michael Jackson, as code for this idea. In other work Krystufek relies on images of Princess Diana, who also lived under the constant gaze of the public. Krystufek suggests she has decided to make her life public as her artistic project; stating in an interview, “I have decided to make my life an artwork. I don’t have a private life. Everything is public. Yet as opposed to personalities like Diana, it is me who has decided

⁴ Gabriele Bösch, *Nackt & Mobil=Naked & Mobile* (Wien: Sammlung Essl, 2003), 59.

to become a public person.”⁵ And yet, this is not Krystufek, but the “public person” she created as performed identity, which is the basis of her artistic practice—the paintings, videos, collages, and photographs merely function as documentation of an elaborate performance.

Toward the end of the series, there are photographs that include images taken from the pages of magazines collaged together with those from popular culture, art history, and religion. Included in a number of these photos are images in the top right corner of what looks to be a recreation of Adrian Piper’s *Mythic Being* series. A mysterious face appears out from the black background with a text bubble floating above the figure’s head. *Mythic Being* is a series created by Piper in the early to mid 1970s in which she transformed images of herself into an African American male. Using the imagery from popular blaxploitation films and the Black Power movement, Piper played on the stereotypes of young African American men—specifically that of sexual aggression and violence. Krystufek is also feeding into related types of fears and stereotypes; only here it is of the abject and hysterical women. Just as Piper’s *Mythic Being* became that which was feared, *I am Your Mirror* reflects what the audience fears and projects. In addition to the reference to Piper’s work there are pictures of artwork by Lichtenstein, Man Ray, and Picasso pasted together with images of sock monkeys and a bloody vagina.

Krystufek’s identity is only legible through its attachment to images we’ve seen before. Like the familiar stranger, we recognize her and feel at ease with her identity. The

⁵ Huck, 11.

viewer can more or less know her by simply reading these visual cues. The style of the photographs, like much of Krystufek's work, gives the sense that they are part of a private moment. The photographs are staged and yet ape an intimacy of personal snapshots not meant for public display. These images of Krystufek sexing it up for the camera mimic "creepshots" and pornographic photos that allegedly (or actually) capture young women unwittingly in their bedrooms or those sent to lovers via mobile phone, thus playing to the viewer's voyeuristic tendencies and fantasies.

By posing or citing archetypes and familiar tropes the image is recognizable but also gives the subject visibility, thus allowing others to acknowledge feminine subjectivity. Expanding upon earlier psychoanalytic theories of sexuality and masquerade Mary Ann Doane suggests, "the subjects, whether male or female, invariably appear to assume a mask of femininity in order to become photographable (filmable)."⁶ Without the mask of the feminine in the form of the familiar pose of goddess/sex symbol the viewer could have difficulty recognizing the image; it would be too abject and jarring. And yet, the juxtaposition of the images, especially in the final few photographs requires a new reading of the images. Just as Judith Butler contends a different sort of repetition allows for a "breaking or subversive repetition" of the style, Krystufek's images are no longer legible in the manner of the original stereotype or icon; rather they present the viewer with a new notion of female identity.⁷

⁶ Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture* (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 212.

⁷ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and*

At the Bienal de São Paulo in 1998 and *Generation Z* at P.S.1 in 1999 Krystufek again installed the series *I am Your Mirror*. For the Bienal a number of large self-portraits of Krystufek were hung in two rows, one above the other. The photographs are mirror reflections of the artist alternating between images of non-descript photos in front of the mirror and those, which expose her naked body. No matter the pose the photos seem equally pedestrian with Krystufek staring blankly at the camera. The artist presents the work as if it were a photo diary, snapshots taken in the privacy of her own home. And still they act as a sort of “peep show” or “reality TV in art” ready for active consumption.⁸ For *Generation Z*, the installation consisted of some 1,300 postcard size photographs scattered about the gallery. Again, the photos depict the artist in various everyday situations, always modeling herself on the images of well-known figures from the cultural and historical visual terrain.

The photographs included in these two different incarnations of *I Am Your Mirror* are reminiscent of Wilke’s *S.O.S—Satisfaction Object Series*, 1974 and Antin’s *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972. For *S.O.S.*, Wilke exhibited a number of photographs of herself in various states of undress, posed as if a model. However, in the photographs she has “cuntlike bubble-gum sculptures” all over her face and chest. The sculptural element refers to both the marked and woundedness of the female body, but also the ethnically scarred identity.⁹ Wilke juxtaposes ideas of female sexuality with the abjectness of the Other. Krystufek also references the relationship of the female body to the abject and

Feminist Theory, ed. Katie Conboy, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997) 402.

⁸ Huck, n.p.

⁹ Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 182.

otherness. While it is true that Wilke does not own this technique of appropriation and feminist critique, it is clear from Krystufek's blatant use of Wilke's image in some of her collage work and through this less direct reference that she is effectively making connections between her practice and that of Wilke. Here both artists emphasize on the exoticism of otherness as well as the abject or vulnerable. In her series Krystufek stresses the ways in which western cultures have taken on representations of non-western cultures and religions as a form of aesthetic expression or identity, in doing so, displacing the *original* context and meaning—now, the Hindu deity stands in as a symbol of beauty, no different from the image of Marilyn Monroe. One of the images is a hybrid, with the body of the deity and the head of Monroe. These acts of cultural appropriations performed by Krystufek are part of a long line of appropriations that are hard to avoid in contemporary art. Krystufek later returns to questions of cultural appropriation with the 2006 installation, *Liquid Logic*. In both instances she highlights questions regarding the historical meaning of culture, identity, art objects, and the body.

In 1972 Antin created *Carving*, which was exhibited as merely the documentation of a performance that took place away from the audience. The documentation consists of a series of black and white photographs taken over a thirty-six day period in which the artist dieted. The images represent her process of *carving* a sculpture from her own body, becoming artist, subject, and object. Yet, by taking on all roles Antin removes the photographs from the realm of pure documentation. Instead the work functions as a mix of transformative performance and photographic evidence, documenting her body throughout the process of being *sculpted* into a thing of *beauty*. Krystufek also confronts ideas of female beauty as well as notions of constructed identity

in a manner that follows the art historical trajectory of which Wilke and Antin are also a part. Yet, what is offered up in Krystufek's work is not just a critique of normative ideas about beauty and the female body, but also an intervention in feminist art history and history itself. By using images of earlier feminist artists or reconstructions of their performances, Krystufek situates her work within the framework of feminisms—and more specifically, practices that question the way in which history (personal and otherwise) can be repeatedly re-written, claimed and/or forgotten without any authority. Every new interaction changes it and opens up the space for a new reading—and possible critique.

Krystufek relies heavily on the sexualized body and overt images of masquerade. She has created a public persona that appears to always be on stage, performing at every moment as a way to stress the manufactured nature of identity. In 2007, Krystufek spoke at the Brooklyn Museum as part of the *Global Feminisms* exhibition. She began by suggesting, "I'm just starting with a small security measure..." After which, she placed a nylon stocking over her head and face in order to mask her identity. Obviously, this action didn't protect Krystufek's identity as she was giving an artist talk, and clearly the audience knew who she was, still the move signaled the start of the performance. After placing the stocking over her head she continued by reading an article written for a Spanish magazine. The article is a statement of about logic, or more specifically liquid logic—a type of logic, which the artist compared to ADD. "Liquid Logic means rigid logic liquidized, fluxed, flowing, a logic of fluidity, a logic in flow, a floating logic, a change of physical state from solid to liquid, from static to dynamic.

Nothing remains what it is; it is only through steady movement that the real connects to the possible.”¹⁰ Just like the rest of her artistic practice, she presented herself as a character that is a product of our culture, always mirroring that which is around her and always changing.

Krystufek’s actions and masquerade use parody and exaggeration to disrupt the normative models of female identity. Through the use of pre-existing images and personae she creates new forms of imagery, which are purposely mapped onto her own body. It is precisely this placement of the all-too-familiar public image on her body that points to the shifting or disintegrating of conventional boundaries of subjectivity and identity. By acting as a screen that reflects cultural projections, Krystufek is trying to initiate a reconsideration of the way the female body is viewed. Through this juxtaposition of personal narrative and cultural history (or collective memory), she is able to call attention to the slippage between the realms of personal and private, and the implications such slippage has on our own perceptions of self and other. Moreover, these confrontations performed by Krystufek call into question the overall role the art world may play in fostering such conventional notions of selfhood and authenticity, and the role (art) history plays in defining such categories. By using re-appropriated earlier feminist practices as a starting point for her work she is able to reframe the argument, but rather than trying to reclaim an excluded history, she writes a new history that can be continuously rewritten, thus offering alternative hybrid notions of the self as images constructed through mirroring and/or masking.

¹⁰ Noever, 7.