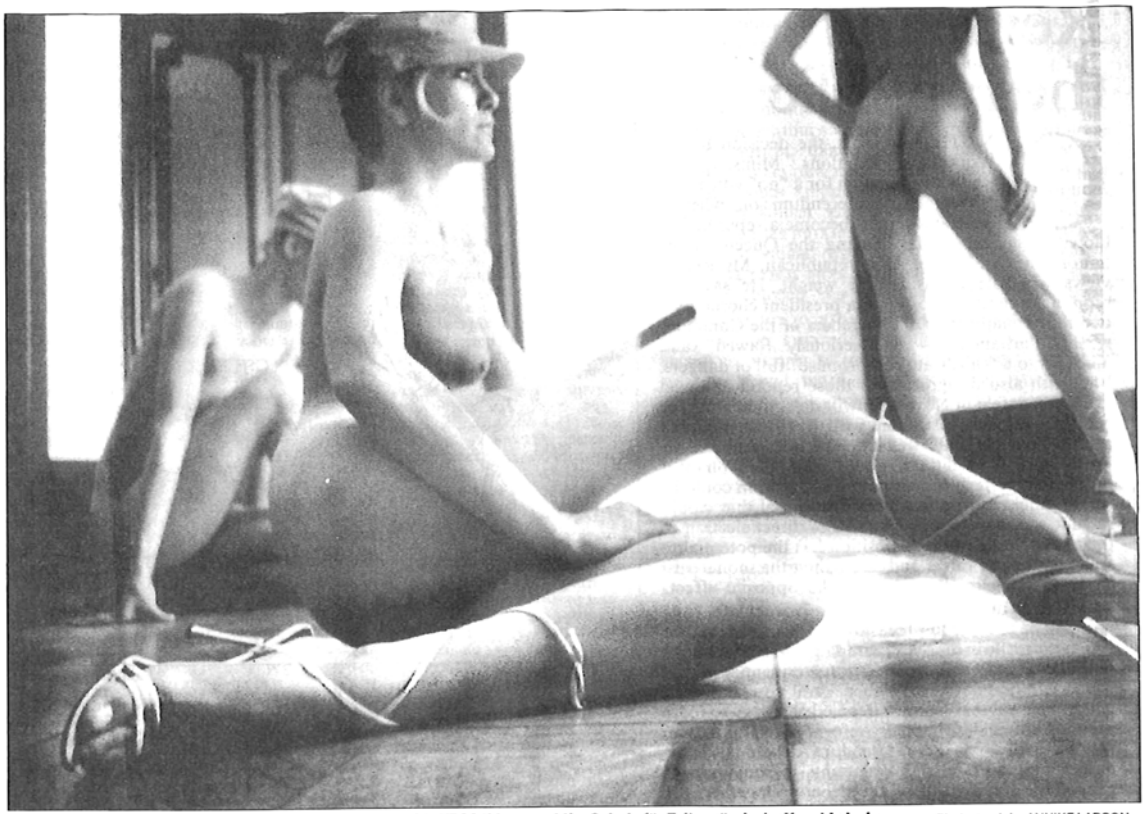
Ahem, yes, they know you're looking at them



Teutonic and titanic . . . Leipzig's finest in Vanessa Beecroft's VB36 this year at the Galerie für Zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig. Photograph by ANNIKE LARSON

By SEBASTIAN SMEE

A group of 20 beautiful Australian women – models and athletes – stands naked or semi-naked, wearing high heels, in an art gallery as 450 people watch. Will this turn out to be a pleasurable experience? Or will it rather be excruciating, boring, embarrassing?

Who, in any case, bears the responsibility? Her name is Vanessa Beecroft. She's 29 years old, and she lives in New York. She was raised in Italy, with a British father and an Italian mother. She has a beautiful voice, dark, lustrous eyes, mild Italian intonation, and a winningly fluent, yet off-key way with English.

"There is something about women that was always obscure," she tells me, like I don't already know it, "that always made me embarrassed in front of them, that I could never relate to. It's something you can never know. But it's visual: you can look at them and they know you're looking at them.

"I find women have a relation with aesthetics. I never have to explain too much what the girls have to do – they just do it. So I understood *this* is my material."

The work she will have her 20 models perform at the Museum of Contemporary Art on Wednesday and Thursday nights is called VB40, and it's a continuation of a body of work – if that's the right expression – she's been creating for five years in museums all over the world.

From everything your trusty reporter can glean (I have seen only footage of two of the performances, and Beecroft is quietly dismissive of such recordings: "I need to do them [the videos] but it's mostly souvenirs, it's not important."), the performances seem to be a cross between the repetitive, Brecht-influenced choreography of Pina Bausch and the glamorous, obsessive, charged-up photographs of Helmut Newton.

But what crops up again and again in reviews of Beecroft's work – perhaps unsurprisingly – is that writers are at a loss. Their descriptions are strangely half-baked, as if short-circuited, and they can't quite admit to themselves what exactly about the work interested them. (It's a funny old thing, wouldn't you say?)

Beecroft herself is more than aware of the gap: "Most of the time the literature that is generated by this work . . . to me it's way behind." She says this detachedly, without arrogance. "I like to insist and insist on this subject until I will see some literature that gets it. Because it *is* about the visual, it *is* about the picture . . . The picture is really the performance. All the other things are really documentary."

Two things seem clear: the performances are long (2½ hours in this case) and not much happens. Clearly, Beecroft's subject is the female body – displayed, made bluntly visible and immediate. But then, she seems to be on about much more, too: glamour, tenderness, fragility, attention, looking.

Beecroft is comfortable enough talking about her work, but she doesn't like overly intellectualising it, so the talk remains vague, allusive, imaginative, skittish. She positions her work firmly inside the fine art tradition, calling them "group portraits". The performances, she says, "remind people of fashion. But to me the reference is mostly painting."

It all started with Beecroft exhibiting her drawings. "I used to do watercolours and drawings of girls. I decided to bring 30 girls . . . so that people could refer to them, and see if they had any visual impact. And what happened was that people were horrified and they ran out. They were lightly undressed . . . so they actually became very powerful pictures themselves, and the drawings were pushed into the background. They were not important any more.

"Then I realised that was the material . . . The drawings were academic, plastic. I didn't see any purpose in it. They were nice drawings, so what? So that's why I decided I wanted those girls. They became the work themselves. They were more powerful, more visual, stronger. And what was more interesting was that people hated it, they were outraged, they were rude."

Rude in what way? "Like a casino, where you find women."

When I ask her if women seem to react differently from men, Beecroft fudges for a moment, then says: "The reaction always depends on the level of culture. The truck-driver reaction is immediate. And some writers, very good writers, had this truck-driver reaction – immediately sexual, the girl means nothing, she's just a girl, etc. It depends on the culture, not on whether it's a man or woman. And I like all of that. I like the truck-driver reaction. I don't like when it's too intellectual, when these women become something very intellectual. Because it's not."

Beecroft comes from a culture which, for better or worse, is less prescriptive about feminine sexuality than our own, less suspicious, less prudish. "I never agreed with feminism," she tells me. "For me, for my references, I like when a woman has those tricks. She doesn't lose her femininity – or, at least, she uses it.

"Sometimes I'm not sure if that's the right direction. Am I right showing naked women, or should that not be? I don't know. When they say you objectify them, I feel I'm putting myself, too, in that. I am myself involved.

"There is something in the nature of women that is more visual," she says later. "They are used to being looked at. And to me they already know how to move – you don't have to say 'Action!' – you just have to ask them not to talk and not to break this . . . beauty.

"It's not a standard beauty, it's something else. It's something that I don't know really. I don't how far it can go. I cannot identify it very well. But it's very powerful. That's why I like to show it. Because it's embarrassing. It has a potential. I like to call it an army because you never know what could happen."

Love it or hate it

"I will never forget how ravishing and creepy it all was," enthused New York critic Robert Rosenblum after seeing a Beecroft performance at the Guggenheim Museum last year.

Both Rosenblum and fellow *Artforum* magazine critic A. M. Homes included the Beecroft performance in their lists of the top 10 art events of 1998 – alongside exhibitions of Bonnard, Soutine, Rothko, Gilbert and George, and Picasso.

***The New York Times* critic Roberta Smith said of the Guggenheim performance: "It was a circuit-jamming combination of fashion, theatre and art: a 2½-hour spectacle of languorous immobility and reciprocal staring, appropriately titled Show.**

"It was like seeing entropy – that hallowed '70s concept – applied on a human plane," Smith wrote.

"Hooters for intellectuals" was how one sceptical art critic described the performance. "John Cage with subject matter," said another. A young female art dealer called it "fascist and incorrect".