

40 YEARS
KALDOR PUBLIC
ART PROJECTS

1999
VANESSA
BEECROFT



1999 VANESSA BEECROFT

PROJECT

VB40
2, 4 & 5 August 1999
Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

I unconsciously identified the male with society, rigidity, rules, the system, the military, all the negative things. The women are representative of issues that I have or that I have problems with and I prefer to extend these to a large group. I wanted to recreate an image that, despite its appearance, was not necessarily pleasant, that was abrasive to the audience and that would create a sort of shame or embarrassment or other feelings. I wanted the audience to psychologically react to it; it's not really a finished picture until the audience is part of it.

Vanessa Beecroft in an interview with Helena Kontova, 'Modern nomads: Marina Abramovic, Vanessa Beecroft and Shirin Neshat', *Flash Art International*, July–September 2007

VANESSA BEECROFT

Beecroft's performance **VB40** at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in 1999

Photo: Giasco Bertoli
Courtesy Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney



1999 VANESSA BEECROFT

INTRODUCTION

Vanessa Beecroft has been staging her tableaux vivants since 1993, including in Sydney in 1999 for a Kaldor project. She has sometimes dressed her naked or near-naked models in high heels and gaudy red, yellow or platinum wigs. Each performance, which takes up to three hours, is a challenging proposition – in every telling sense of that word – because of the way we are caught between seeing them as ‘real’ and seeing them as ‘art’. The disorienting effect of Beecroft’s displays includes both the idea of what it is like to gaze at a piece of art (women as found objects), and what happens when that piece of art seems to be looking back. Thus the women seem to be standing at the crossroads in the debate on postmodern sexuality and the politics of representation, not only in art, but in beauty contests, on the catwalk, in advertising and the movies. Chosen for their resemblance to each other, the women also conjure and question the contemporary model of the body as mannequin. Artists from the Dadaists to Charles Ray have been obsessed with mannequins: something about the way they are both abstract and real, a generalised copy bearing an eerie similarity to life.

ARTIST

Vanessa Beecroft

born 1969 in Genoa, Italy

lives and works in Los Angeles, California, USA

Vanessa Beecroft studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan, Italy. The first work in her ongoing VB series, *VB01*, was part of a show at the academy, which also included a selection of watercolour drawings of women derived from a diary she had been working on since adolescence called *The book of food* (also known as *Despair*), which was also on display. Begun in 1983, the book consisted of a log of every bit of food that she consumed, and a journal in words and pictures of the feelings – mainly self-hatred – that her struggle with her wayward appetite aroused. She intended to show it to a doctor one day, but it ended up as an art project with 360 watercolours and drawings to be published in the form of a cube-shaped book divided into coloured sections.

Beecroft suffers from exercise bulimia – a compulsion to burn off kilojoules that she considers excessive. With its cycle of binging and then vomiting (or exercising, as in Beecroft’s case), bulimia is an eating disorder that is psychologically addictive and socially contagious among young women, especially actors, dancers and models. It comes as no surprise then that Beecroft’s performances with their ritualised deportment over several hours play out an unresolved tension between control and entropy, uniformity and individuality, intimacy and impersonality, desire and resistance to desire. Though mainly using glamorous, thin, young women, Beecroft has also deployed white uniformed sailors from the US Navy (*VB39*)

at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego in 1999 as well as on the deck of the *Intrepid (VB42)*.

The performances over the years tend to be made for a specific location and thus provide sample readings of local notions of class, beauty, politics and taste. More recently the bodies have been less like mannequins, and the models more mature with less-than-perfect bodies. In Miami for *VB58*, within an open-walled model home called the Push Button House designed to fit in a shipping crate, 15 uncomfortable Haitian girls were dressed in formal maid’s costumes, making a stinging comment on race and class in America. The 2007 Venice Biennale reflected Beecroft’s visit to the genocide area of Darfur with 30 naked Sudanese women lying covered in blood on a white floor in *VB61*. On Long Island for *VB64*, Beecroft painted the women in white gesso, placing them among white sculptures, making them look the same, while *VB65*, conceived for Milan, took the form of a ‘Last Supper’ of African immigrant men, legal and illegal, dressed in suits, eating chicken with their hands.

PROJECT

In 1999 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney for a Kaldor project, Vanessa Beecroft presented *VB40*, the 40th in her ongoing series. For this work, 19 models were dressed in flesh-toned bras, red stockings and red high-heel shoes, and one wore heels only, standing nude in the centre of the group. Presented in formation, the reference for the piece was the Australian swimming team (the Olympic Games were to be held in Sydney the next year) and participants were selected for their athletic, ‘Anglo-Saxon or Irish’ physical characteristics and recruited from surf and lifesaving clubs as well as modelling agencies.

Surrounded by their audience, the women stood for a period of two-and-a-half hours for each performance; positioned by Beecroft and following her rules of deportment, which included (somewhat contradictory) instructions to ‘be still’, ‘move naturally’, ‘don’t let your mood show’, ‘if bored, show it’.

Beecroft’s statement in the *VB40* exhibition brochure explained: ‘The purpose is to work on a specific subject and to create an image or a portrait that has the effect of a monument, even if it lasts briefly. The references are classical paintings and portraits, the girls are contemporary models. The practice is to stand, not talking, and to wait until it ends, being watched as a picture and photographed as though on a photo shoot.’

WORLD EVENTS: 1999

- _ Y2K scare of computer failure when the clocks roll over to 2000
- _ Ikonos satellite can identify things on earth as small as a card table
- _ Euro becomes official European currency
- _ NATO begins bombing Yugoslavia in response to 'ethnic cleansing' of Kosovar Albanians
- _ Two US students go on killing spree at Columbine High School
- _ Massive hailstorm hits Sydney, the costliest natural disaster in insurance history
- _ First large peer-to-peer music filesharing network, Napster, launched
- _ Low-cost US horror movie *The Blair Witch Project* spawns a new style of film making and marketing
- _ *The Matrix*, made in Australia, sets new standards for movie special effects
- _ *Big Brother* TV reality series debuts
- _ Archibald Prize winning painter Wendy Sharpe sent to East Timor as Australia's first woman war artist
- _ **12th Kaldor project:** Vanessa Beecroft's performance work *VB40* presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

THEME

The gaze and the politics of representation

Art (and that can include movies and theatre) creates a virtual space where we play out constraints and taboos that we don't normally or comfortably deal with in public. The work creates a force-field, in which scenes are represented for a spectator to interact with. A lot of conventional art and mainstream cultural practices flatter the viewer, their world views and fantasies. Artists that subvert the usual structure – think of Cindy Sherman, Julie Rrap, Anne Ferran, Juan Davila or Tracey Moffatt – offer challenges that tend to play fast and loose with our cultural expectations but create new and multiple pathways that may challenge, thwart, fascinate or even punish our usual reactions.

There are mixed signals in a Vanessa Beecroft performance, a passive-aggressive quality that comes from being ambushed by a spectacle of beautiful women naked in a public space. The physical immediacy of the models combined with the accessibility to your gaze seems contradicted by their psychological unavailability. The cool context of an art gallery, unlike that of a peepshow, for example, also seems to empty the viewer of desire. The deadpan return of the gaze by Beecroft's women, and the fact that they are part of a long performance in which nothing much seems to happen, can make an audience present themselves as other than they are, thus what they are allowed to see is not what they may want to see.

Or to put it another way, the experience of the performance over several hours is very different from the impression you might get from seeing Beecroft's work from photographs in

a book. In a performance, the models seem to be in their own world, aloof from the territory that the viewer is inhabiting. In a book, they are more at the mercy of our gaze, more private and therefore more erotic. The distance imposed by Beecroft seems to refrigerate desire to a certain extent and it has something to do with the way the bodies seem hyper-real in their resemblance to mannequins or simulacra. There is also the way power seems to shift between the viewers and the viewed.

This uneasy difference between these two modes of looking, between seeing them as real and seeing them as art or as image, has been explored over the last 30 or so years in feminist critiques on the regimes of viewing in visual arts. Laura Mulvey's criticism of gender representation in traditional Hollywood film ('Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in the journal *Screen*, vol 16 no 3, pp 6–18) is one example, in which she argues that those movies reinforce the socially established interpretations of sexual differences that control images, especially erotic ones, in the 'society of the spectacle'. This analysis of voyeurism, of the gaze and of the politics of representation connects with issues such as sexual objectification and scopophilia (the sexual pleasure derived from looking), and draws heavily on that great thinker of human complexity, Sigmund Freud, and his followers, like Jacques Lacan. In Freud, the human subject is shown to be dramatically divided and internally contradictory, because of the powerfully loaded primary socialisation that takes place in the nuclear family, which itself is implicated in the story of how we are taught to behave, to look, to speak and all the mechanisms for our becoming part of the culture at large. Through Freudian analysis, we can understand more about our subjective reactions to things that take us out of our comfort zone – like Vanessa Beecroft performances, or scenes in movies – which we may find freaky or disgusting, or intense and pleasurable.

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.

Roberta Smith, 'Standing and staring, yet aiming for empowerment', *Critic's Notebook*, *New York Times*, 6 May 1998

COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection

www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection

- **Julie Rrap** (Australia, b1950)

Threshold: passion of the new Eve 1987

six paintings (photoemulsion, synthetic polymer paint on canvas); one framed colour transparency; broken fragments of sandstone with photoemulsion; one stepped wooden pyramid; dimensions variable
Purchased 1989 58.1989.a-n

The artist has photographed herself in the replicated pose of six sculptural works by Michelangelo (*The dying slave* and *The rebellious slave*) and Rodin (*The shadow (from the gate of hell)*, *Adam*, *The thinker* and *The prodigal son*). Beneath each image are what resemble archaeological shards with sections of the original sculptures photographed onto these shards in piles laid out on the floor. The work is a playful dialogue between self and other and the narratives that have situated women within male iconographies of art history.

- **Juan Davila** (Chile; Australia, b1946)

Neo-pop 1983–85

oil on canvas; 274 x 548 cm
Purchased 2003 340.2003

Davila's paintings and collage works from the late 1970s and early 1980s are among the most transgressive artworks created in Australia. His incorporation of pornographic imagery, political references and art-historical citations created a volatile mix of confrontational images and text which most famously lead to the censorship of *Stupid as a painter* by the Art Gallery of NSW, the 'arrest' of the painting by the vice squad and the subsequent intervention of the then NSW premier Neville Wran in order to return the work to public exhibition.

- **Anne Ferran** (Australia, b1949)

Carnal knowledge 1984

gelatin silver photograph; 41 x 54.8 cm image (irreg)
Purchased 1986 186.1986.6

Part of a series of enigmatic and beautiful photographs that evoke childhood sensuality, both the sexuality of the subjects – young girls – and a desiring response from the onlooker, whether photographer or viewer.

- **Cindy Sherman** (USA, b1954)

Untitled #72 1980

type C photograph; 40 x 59.9 cm (image)
Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1986 371.1986

'Even though I have never actively thought of my work as feminist or as a political statement, certainly everything in it is drawn from my observations as a woman in this culture. And a part of that is a love/hate thing – being infatuated with makeup and glamour and detesting it at the same time. It comes from trying to look like a proper young lady or look as sexy or as beautiful as you can make yourself, and also feeling like a prisoner in that structure.' Cindy Sherman 1997

- **Tracey Moffatt** (Australia; USA, b1960)

Something more 1 from the series *Something more* 1989

Cibachrome photograph; 103 x 133 cm

Hallmark Cards Australian Photography Collection Fund 1989. Commissioned by the Albury Regional Arts Centre with assistance from the Visual/Craft Board of the Australia Council, the NSW Ministry for the Arts, and the Regional Galleries Association of NSW Exhibitions Development Fund 334.1989

Moffatt's art is sharpened with pain and humour. In works such as *Something more* and, most explicitly, *Laudanum* 1999, she engages the rhetorical confusions of racism through the sadomasochistic dynamic of the colonised subject. Indeed, her avowed ambivalence about being categorised as an Indigenous artist is at odds with her commitment to the fostering of Aboriginal culture, and to the central place of Indigeneity in her work. This seeming contradiction – an apparent moral inconsistency – is resolved in her dedication to the accoutrements of success: as much as Moffatt's work is about pain, it is also about glamour.

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- _ Alexandra Polier, *Vanessa Beecroft: VB LV*, Charta, Milan/ New York 2007

Websites

- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects
www.kaldorartprojects.org.au
- _ Kaldor Public Art Projects Explorer, Art Gallery of NSW
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects
- _ Vanessa Beecroft
www.vanessabeecroft.com

ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Research the terms 'gaze' and 'voyeur'. Look at the photograph of Vanessa Beecroft's *VB40* 1999 and imagine being in the audience. Evaluate whether it makes a difference that the 'art' is looking back at you, the viewer. Be mindful of your gaze and personal response as you move your eyes around each woman's face and body. Who held more of your attention? Discuss your anticipated feelings, both comfortable and uncomfortable, in consideration of Beecroft's intention to challenge the viewer's comfort zone. Propose what you think Beecroft expects the audience to feel. Debate who is the voyeur – the artist and the model or the viewer.

Beecroft's work stimulates a dialogue on the debate on postmodern sexuality and the politics of representation, not only in art, but in beauty contests, on the catwalk, in advertising and the movies. Write down questions you would pose to some of the models to help inform this debate. Imagine how the models might feel about Beecroft's *VB40* project, taking into consideration how they might earn their living. Examine the contradictions Beecroft sets up through her performances.

If you were a lifeguard and had been approached to do the *VB40* project, would you have accepted? Pretend you are one of the models in the performance. What does it feel like to be observed for up to three hours? Does the type of audience make a difference eg if it was a fashion show audience rather than an art gallery audience? What facial expressions would you expect to see? How would you either maintain eye contact with the audience or stand non-responsive for such a long period?

List the factors that affect the degree of interaction between audience members and models during the performance. Consider how Beecroft's choreography creates visible and invisible barriers between the parties. Include in your discussion the models' deadpan faces, posture, physical distance from the audience as well as the venue and any movement of the audience and the models.

Investigate three of Beecroft's performances, outlining the range of models, costumes (or lack thereof), locations and props and how local notions of class, beauty, politics and taste are manifested or subverted through her selection of these. Using examples, demonstrate how the costumes can have symbolic meanings that underline Beecroft's discussions on sexuality, sexual politics, race, class and social roles.

Compare and contrast *VB39* and *VB42* (which featured uniformed soldiers) with *VB40* (which featured women in stockings and bras), including the type and amount of clothing worn by the models. Research Freudian analysis and suggest how it is relevant to Beecroft's performances, particularly in terms of the artist's own feelings towards power and males. Debate how these artworks might have been perceived if they had been created by a male artist. Find examples of works by male artists that also confront socially established interpretations of sexual difference.

Beecroft changes the models she uses with each work whereas artists such as Julie Rrap and Cindy Sherman place their own bodies within their artworks rather than use models or actors. Compare each artist's practice and explain how the configuration of 'materials' is integral to their artwork's resolution. Research and discuss the idea of women as found objects throughout modernism as well as the challenges brought against such ideas and by whom.

Suggest why the models' resemblance to each other and mannequins is significant to Beecroft. In her later works, the artist has sometimes integrated actual mannequins or more mature, 'real' people. What messages does this send to her audience regarding beauty? What effect might this 'composition' have had on Beecroft's success had she employed it earlier in her practice? Debate whether an artist's rise to prominence is as much a function of their time and place in history as their content and materials. Were and are the opinions Beecroft presents in line with the social consensus of the times in which the works were performed?

The exhibition accompanying Beecroft's first work in the series, *VB01*, included drawings about food, the body and bulimia. Discuss how her personal diaries made the transition into the public realm as 'art'. In what ways does the presence of such material influence an audience's comprehension of the artworks? Suggest the difference in forming an argument through the inclusion of written materials compared with visual documents. Justify Beecroft's choice of media and form to communicate her often complex views on socialisation, objectification and desire.

Articulate the difference between a fashion shoot, fashion show and Beecroft's performances in a gallery environment. Explain why you think Beecroft doesn't exhibit her work on theatre stages, even though she calls them 'performances'. Other mediums, such as painting, photography, film or the internet, could also frame and render Beecroft's works effectively. Why is the performance the artwork and all other renderings simply documentation? Consider the artist's intentions and the experience of the audience in your answer. Is there a difference between performance art and drama? Explain the inclusion of performance spaces in art galleries in the context of current gallery practices.

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