

## Academic Discourse

# Feminism, Nudity and Performance Art 女性・裸像・行為藝術

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### Abstract 摘要

This research focuses on Italian-American performance artist Vanessa Beecroft's work series, whereas each work is titled with a sequential number after her initials VB in time order. First, an investigation of the development of female performance artists in the west after World War II is conducted, providing context for the analysis of the intrinsic role female nudity plays under the hegemony of middle class Caucasian male discourse of art history and visual culture. It continues to review the environment of production under contemporary Capitalism society for female artists, how they strike to tackle Bourgeois ideology whilst female bodies are microscopically gazed.

Then, it chronicles the changes in VB series by inspecting three works – VB11 (1995), VB46 (2001), and VB70 (2011), respectively – that are representative of changes in Beecroft's personal production notes and method. By examining the secularization and commercialization of cultural production, this research discovers that Beecroft is taking advantages of her versatile status in art, fashion and entertainment business to ensure claim on the autonomy of female body while exploiting its beauty and vulnerabilities, which continually help establish Beecroft's name as an internationally prominent artist.

本研究關注的焦點是義大利籍美國行為藝術家 Vanessa Beecroft 的系列展演作品。文章首先略述二次戰後西方女性藝術家的發展，並藉此脈絡淺談女體在現代主義以降中產階級白人男性論述下，視覺文化及藝術史中的表徵。此外，本文也隨著 VB 系列的演變，及其中幾篇針對當代事件的在現處理，探究當代資本主義典範下菁英文化生產的世俗化及商業化。

**Keywords 關鍵字 :** Feminism, Visual Culture, Performance Art, Art Production, Nudity, Vanessa Beecroft

女性主義、視覺文化、行為藝術、藝術生產、裸像

## I Introduction

*Needed: 20–30 nude models, eighteen plus, skinny, tall androgynous body, very small breasts, available to pose nude. Preferably with short hair, boyish cut, blond, and fair. Will be covered in body makeup. Will wear Manolo Blahnik shoes.*

This intricately specific call for models is the primal phase of the Italian performance/conceptual artist, Vanessa Beecroft's art works, commonly known as the VB series. Since her debut VB01 in 1993, the chosen 'girls' in her visual art performances have gone from dressed to stripped, moving to poised, poignantly clothed to mono-hued (fig. 1). Earlier performances featured girls wearing cheap costumes, some making allusions to European films (like Jean-Luc Godard's) while others were reminiscent of classical paintings (like Rembrandt's). After mid 1990s', models started wearing outfits by fashion houses from Prada, Tom Ford, and were more commonly naked. Nowadays, Beecroft is an internationally prominent figure vacillating between the worlds of art, fashion, and show business. The quiet yet apparent convert of her early plastic, colorful pieces to the more recent sophisticated and designer-showered ones is evident, when examined alongside the unstoppable increase in her sponsors, and her status in the circles she decides to land on.



[1] Left: A vibrant VB01 (1993); right: a mono-hued VB62 (2008)

That Beecroft's artworks flourished through the years is an interesting phenomenon in terms of social context and how the upper society has grown to define art as something more than a craftsmanship. The fact that Beecroft has, more or less, become a sensation in contemporary culture (she was the center image of the documentary *Art Star* which premiered at Sundance Film Festival in 2008)



and society intrigues me as how a female artist acquired fame through hundreds of nude bodies that reflect her own slim, over-exercised, slightly anorexia-struck one.

Beecroft has gone a long way since Yves Klein, declaring back the control over female bodies whether dressed or nude. Beecroft's employment of life models instead of paint and strokes, according to her, brings direct and intimidating confrontation to the audience. When Klein sprayed and poured paint over a nude female model and painted with their colored limbs and bodies like how Pollock knelt down and scattered out *Autumn Rhythm (Number 30)*, Beecroft merely gave her models shrewd instructions:

*do not talk, do not interact with others, do not whisper, do not laugh, do not move theatrically, do not move too quickly, do not move too slowly, be simple, 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.*

– Vanessa Beecroft (*Beccaria* 2003:18)

Another unusual quality of Beecroft's works is that they sometimes they refer to representations of social incidents; for example, VB61: *Still Death! Darfur Still Deaf?* (2007) echoes the genocide in Darfur, Sudan, while VB65 (fig. 2) from 2009 reflects pertinent issues concerning immigrants.

Her debut in New York City, VB35, in 1998 at the Guggenheim Museum attracted commentaries from 'Fascist and incorrect', 'John Cage with subject matter', '[not making] me feel liberated in any way' to actor Leonardo DiCaprio's dubbing the show 'dope'. A few days after, a prominent art historian described VB35 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. (Smith, 1998)

It is fascinating how diversely the critics have commented on Beecroft's



[2] VB65 (2009)

works. It is also interesting that in a contemporary society, an artist's first and foremost responsibility is to clear his/her head in order to give the work meaning, which is now a bigger issue than aesthetic concerns. When you let text and sub-text do the justice, you are probably half way through fame. Beecroft has always managed to conquer both since her beginning in 1993, and has clarified that her art performances are a feminist approach that is rich in the visual aspect. Another interesting angle of how Beecroft's works more or less mirror reality is that patriarchy used female nudity to declare its ultra power, but almost no feminist artists are doing the exact vice versa, i.e., using nude male bodies to reclaim pillaged power.

The two above-mentioned arguments can hereby form a third, that 'art' is now defined as a form that includes text under social context, whether the artist intends to render it seen or absent. The rising role critics play in the art scene proves that aesthetic concerns no longer exclusively triumph and that art business has become an industry that nurtures a chain of different occupations from suppliers to painters to art theorists although few call themselves the latest.

In Beecroft's works, nudity can be interpreted both as an 'ideal form' as labeled by art history authority Kenneth Clark, or a significant symbol in society (fig. 3). More and more critics now tend to comment on Beecroft's works with malice since her frequent alliances with mushrooming sponsors and entertainers like Kanye West (who asked Beecroft to be the Art Director of his 30-minute music video Runaway, an integration of rap music, fantasy, ballet and visual effects). The timeline of the VB series is a witness to substantial changes of her works, from the abundant and early-mid 1990s' to late 1990s' and the 21st century during which the proficiency of her portfolio greatly declined, with each performance costing more and more.



[3] Nudity as a form in VB35 (1998) or as a vivid social symbol in VB53 (2004)

// All courtesy Vanessa Beecroft Official Website1

Although Beecroft tries to deny having to do with the fashion realm, nudity in her works has somehow transformed from a means of communication to a fashion-biased appearance. The fact that her models are usually entitled with high-end outfits is a proof that in recent years, the concept might have stayed the same, but the way her performances and nudity images are presented has drastically changed. One thing that stayed the same is her standard procedure of a performance, which consists of two parts – previous videotaping, photo shoot, and the public performance that usually includes 20-30 (sometimes more) homogenous female models that either emblemize Beecroft herself or reminiscent of the so-called boyish charm.

Beecroft's works and performances is both microcosmic (figurative nude female bodies) and macrocosmic (how this form of art does or doesn't advocate concepts), and even carry grand narratives of the turbulent and fragmented early-21st century, where explanations and comprehension are paid amazingly high attention to. In what follows, I will establish semiotic argument on her performances and analyze how changes in her works are a product of current art industry.

## II Literature Review

Female performance artists carry logical privileges that both modes of thinking – feminism and visual culture – are driven by political concerns and focus primarily on cultural forms as informing subjective experience (Jones, 2003). They serve as mutual additives for that both concepts are developed under an ideological context intended to revolutionize an ossified bureaucratic system of patriarchy, which, in modern terms, is still sealed and controlled by middle-class Caucasus male at large. Through specific probing into cultural studies, which is a discursive formation (rather than a discipline) and a set of ideas articulating new models of analysis in response to the forms of culture it seeks to address (Hall, 1992), it is possible to negotiate the role of Vanessa Beecroft and her works by taking this democratizing impulse, meanwhile appealing to an elusive jurisdiction (of being 'feminine') in order to avoid decisive call concerning whether or not Beecroft conforms to the multiple discourses of feminism. To appropriately dissect Beecroft's works over time, one would realize meaning not only takes place in the revision of its visual relation, as Mirzoeff suggests in terms of the prominent offering of visual culture (Mirzoeff, 1999), but also travels through the politics underneath her careful agenda setting and reciprocal endorsement with showbiz and fashion industry.

With the prerequisite of performance art as a fragment of an industrial production, one would find Beecroft's portfolio eloquent only when put under social context (if more precisely, a contemporary one). Although to some, sociology

and art do not make good bedfellows (Bourdieu, 1993), both art and history were cultural discourses or genres of writing constructed and ‘institutionalized’ – or given a social basis in sets of routinized social relationships and patterns of action (Tanner, 2003). With this rationalized premise, Vanessa Beecroft, her prolific VB performance series, and other ‘special projects’ can be put under an analytical framework that discretely inspects her position and other constituents in an art industry under the restless cycle of Capitalist market, and a critical scope that condignly examines her identity as a female performance artist.

### **Post-war Development of Performance Art by Female Artists**

Performance art is rooted in the radical and experimental anti-art gestures of the avant-garde in the early twentieth century (Goldberg, 1988), and is, as curator Lois Keiden suggests, a practice that disrupts and disturbs boundaries and ‘an ever evolving and shifting area of live cultural practice’ (1997)<sup>2</sup>. It is deemed as an asset for women artists because it is an anti-root, anti-adherence, anti-rules act, and it is only through deliberate ignorance of the patriarchal infrastructure can a new value be congregated. In the 1970s, many women artists rejected traditional art practices in favor of forms less burdened with history, such as installation and performance art, forms which seemed to offer potential for experiment and subversion (Potkin, 2001). But before performance art became all the rage, the development of several art forms in different time periods from early 20th century on has been instrumental in familiarizing with the context of works by female artists.

During the first half of 20th century, as innovation was the theme of the times, and with such advances as the automobile, Einstein’s theory of relativity and Freud’s psychological discoveries, came a questioning of all traditional values and norms of society (NMWA, 1998). Lured by economic freedom, artistic challenge, mobility, and public exposure of the profession, Weimar women photographers in Germany turned photography into an ‘instrument for individual flexibility and personal exploration of their environment’ (Eskilsden, 1995). Yva (born Else Neuländer-Simon, 1900-1942) was amongst them who established herself as an independent working woman. While modern woman, especially when appearing under public gaze, is always perceived in a fragmented fashion and recognized separately from the body (the body itself disintegrating into parts, some of which highly valued as sexual symbols or instruments of artistic perfection), Yva’s still-life representations of body fragments instead of organic wholeness seem to invite female spectatorship to reflect critically upon a prevalent fetishization (Ganeva, 2010) significantly defends the dignity of the female body in actuality that women became the efficient cause behind cameras rather than mere objectified aesthetical structure.

During the chaotic WWI and WWII, the art world simultaneously experienced



a drastic overhaul, women artists took the niche of out-dated traditions and abandoned the limited images of home and family, and, for the first time, used the image of the nude in their art (Shubitz, 2001)<sup>3</sup>. Examples are seen in Lotte Laserstein's *Taute Washing* (fig. 5) and Suzanne Valadon's *The Abandoned Doll* (fig. 6). The closure of WWII saw the return of male artists taking center stage, obscuring women once again. Luckily, they found a way out.

Judy Chicago's change from fine arts painter to visual artist and her most talked-about, groundbreaking piece *The Dinner Party* (1979) proved to be in the right direction for other aspiring women artists.

That same year witnessed the lavish premiere of Catherine Elwes' three-day performance *Menstruation II*, which coincided with her menstrual period, in which the artist could be seen bleeding and writing in a white, glass-fronted box (Potkin, 2001). In the next decade, more performances blossomed – works from Rose Garrard, Sandy Narine, Sylvia Ziraneck, Bobby Baker, Roberta Graham, Rozsika Parker, etc. harvested a proliferation of festivals. During the second half of the 1980s', the publication of the pamphlet, *Live Art Now*, circumstantially detailed performances supported by the British Arts Council. Ziraneck, O'Shea and Rose English were included in the Tate Gallery's performance art season in 1985 (Potkin, 2001), marking some of the initial breakouts of women entering mainstream art circle. Female (performance) artists become individuals who create art in the context of their identities, which include 'ethnicity, personality, life stage, religion, class, and politics' (Norwood, 1987); they demand their inner voice be heard, and exterior appearance to be confronted. The blooming of more and more performance artists drew out a rejection of modernist forms of practice and systems of power perceived as masculine and a resistance to established hierarchies and the notion of art as commodity (MacRitchie, 1980).



[5] (Left) *Morning Toilette*, Taute Washing (1930), oil on panel artists.

[6] (Right) Suzanne Valadon, *The Abandoned Doll* (1921), oil on canvas

Nowadays, as Mullin (2000) observes, feminist artworks can be a resource in our attempt to understand individual identities as neither singular nor fixed, and in



our related attempts both to theorize and to practice forms of connection to others that do not depend on shared identities.

## **The Production of Art/Culture**

To Marxists, art production is only concrete during the formation of artistic activities; it is otherwise abstract and separated from matters such as consumption and distribution. The practical subordination of all human activities (with a saving clause for certain activities which were called ‘personal’ or ‘aesthetic’) to the modes and norms of Capitalist institutions became more and more effective (Williams, 2003), as ‘art industry’ becomes the combination of two contradicting concepts. During the course of history, the implication of ‘industry’ has segued from individual assiduous labor into the production force capable of the constituent of a self-subsistent world; while art remains as a patronage-required occupation that only merits when purchased for a high price (hitherto) or critically praised (nowadays).

Works of art being inexplicably adored is not a rare phenomenon – Leonardo da Vinci’s *Virgin of the Rocks* (fig. 7) could be an instance according to Berger (1972), who states that it has been elevated to be treated as beautiful and some kinds of holy relics because it is genuine and its market value is high. Berger further argues that art, ‘with its unique undiminished authority, justifies most other forms of authority ... art make inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling’. Put aside the distinction between traditional fine art paintings, modern works that might include multi-media presentations, for example Picasso’s *Glass and a Bottle of Suze* and Duchamp’s *Fountain* (fig. 8 and 9). to contemporary art ‘productions’, like Beecroft’s, all artistic works are deemed artistic and innovative because of their self-setting as the pioneer that, in the perspective of evolution, is eminently lauded.

Alongside the concept of ‘artistic volition’ one might also talk of an ‘economic volition’, a ‘social volition’ and ultimately a ‘will to the world’ (Mannheim, 1925), which, when dedicating oneself to the advancement of society, one must go through the process that composes the function of the world, in order to better one’s volition and the world that subsumes individuals’ wills. As part of the entity that facilely devours replaceable parts, one’s survival against substitution becomes putative and ostensible, paradoxically ensuring a more fortified structure. Marcia Bystryn (1978) has analyzed the postwar New York avant-garde art market as an ‘industry system’. The focal organization of this system is the gallery, with artists as the ‘input sector’ and gatekeepers, such as critics and museum curators, as the ‘output sector’, filtering the products which reach the consumer or collector (Tanner, 2003). When we look at the formation of an industry that dates all the way back to Greek and Roman times, we discover it is the source of patronage that changed (from Royals,



[7] (Left) Leonardo da Vinci, *Virgin of the Rocks*, 1483-46; [8] (Middle) Pablo Picasso, *Glass and a Bottle of Suze*, 1912, multi-media collage; [9] (Right) Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, ready-made

aristocrats, feudal lords, to the bourgeoisie, and to specific art collectors/sponsors), not the way artists lived, worked, or thought. What has also changed is how a single piece is now interpreted and associated with text, statement from the artist and its political causes.

For example, Jackson Pollock's success, according to Mulkey and Chaplin (1982), is largely based on absence of critical consensus concerning his artistic/aesthetic achievement, and the agenda of New York critics' circle that used Pollock's exhibitions as promoting propaganda for its own reputation. A hint is made at this phase, that art 'industry' is an entity that necessitates the participation of production and feedback from consumption, which brings forth revenue that propels further productions. Critics are thus indispensable due to their authoritative stand on knowledge of the art that presides over (possibly biased for or against) judgmental calls which are strongly influential to the audience; and are aware of this privilege that can be taken (or avoided should there be conflicts of interest).

Although it is a commonplace of the history of ideas that the modern concept of the Fine Arts emerged only during the course of the eighteenth century (Kristeller, 1990), the practice of the production circle dates way back. It employs more than a maestro and an apprentice to fulfill art making, as all the arts we know about involve elaborate networks of cooperation and a division of the labor required take place (Becker, 1974). When the providing force is composed by women, the creation of illusion for viewers result in deranged reactions from the audience for their old notation of a realistic depiction that reflects the world no longer exists. Within this context, that is inclined to have its own further context (Bryson, 1992), meaning is reconstructed.

In Vanessa Beecroft's early cases, although the gears are still functioned and made to rotate as they used to, the material, the posture of its spinning angles have been renovated. However, from VB30-ish on, the metal got rusty, and Beecroft

chose to rinse them with tinges of entertainment business, commercial success guarantee and regular exposure in the media, no matter it's purely discussions on her works, her adopting Sudanese babies (the procedure of which made into a documentary film called *Art Star*), or representations of international conflicts that instigate her personal interests.

## Visual Culture Theories

Visual culture, from the beginning, has been aimed at breaking down disciplinary limitations defining what and how visual imagery is to be analyzed within a critical visual practice (Jones, 2003). It inherits some parts of cultural studies that deal carefully with differences. For analyzing the female body, visual culture adopts little rigid paragon lest restrictions for a limited source be placed. The important offering of visual studies is its revision of the conception of how meaning takes place in the visual relation (Mirzoeff, 1999), with meanings and subtext thoughtfully and cautiously interpreted. Take 'mirrors' in paintings for example, the mirror is traditionally seen as a symbol of the vanity of women. The moralizing, Berger argues (1972), however, was mostly hypocritical. The male artist painted a naked woman because he enjoyed looking at her, he put a mirror in her hand and called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness he had depicted for his own pleasure. Besides mirrors, other metaphors are also either stereotyped or rooted in association with the female body. For instance, masquerade is a way to avoid the negative choice between narcissistic identification and destructively masochistic identification with the image (Doane, 1982). With possible concealing and voluntary exposures, the face behind the mask now has a choice as of whether it wants to be seen or not.

Another reason visual culture is germane to the analysis of female nudes is the connotation of defiance challenge it posts to nudity as 'an ideal form' (Clark, 1956), leaving behind the idea that the female body is only materialistic in terms of the creation and agenda setting of art. In the dialectical discrimination of nudity, Berger (1972) distinguishes nudity from nakedness in contrasting account, objectifying the nude to be a seen naked body. He draws to a conclusion that 'Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display ... Nudity is a form of dress'. In Vanessa Beecroft's works, where she casts a group of life models for performances, nudity possesses the power of confrontation and proof of a revolving reality that is never absent in her concept of performance art. Both her live performance and its documentation, interwoven with themes of presence and absence, visibility and marginality (Potkin, 2001), are strikingly realistic, with usage nylon fabrics, primary and secondary colors, and materials from daily life that intertwiningly weave into a slow-motioned movement which involves some integral elements of performance art – live, documenting, on-going performances, and a link (no matter

how vague) to society.

The disparagement of culture industry from Frankfurt school academics has clearly demarcated high art against popular and mainstream society. Performance art, positioned as tonal music nowadays, is few of the paths that are inherited from a fine arts tradition. However, performance art has to be highly pertinent to society, as social relationships interests shape opportunities for doing innovative work (Marx & Engels, 1845). Therefore, performance artists hover around over the line between being popular or being elite; they diligently attempt to ‘revolutionize the sign systems of the past that are now invested with meaning by those of the present’ (Bryson et al., 1994).

### Analytical Framework

Although it is a commonplace of the history of ideas that the modern concept of Fine Arts emerged only during the course of the eighteenth century (Kristeller, 1990), the patronage system in fine arts existed long before any discourses on the modern production cycle of arts were articulated. During the course of time, the overall sponsoring tradition in the business has differed drastically, the occurrence of these discursive changes resemble political and scientific changes (Kuhn, 1962), which predominantly frames a cooperative network that constitutes an art world that creates value by the agreement of its members as to what is valuable (Levine, 1972; Christopherson, 1974). Given this, the production of art has come to a world of organizations and activities where everyone is at risk of losing something in the collective production of art (Becker, 1976) for a greater and more sustainable art scene.

Other than that, studies in the production of culture add a further level of analysis to the social history of art by showing how organizational contexts within which art is produced (Berezin, 1991), and under which ideologies are instilled among the subjective showcase of iconographic contents. While the incentives of modern visual culture theories endeavors to stress the importance of social context over individual aesthetics, a new paragon strives to toss novel problematics into the surveillance in art and culture, attempting to subvert the traditional concept of what a culture brings to artistic works with the idea of finding traces of cultural ingredients in a work itself.

### *Female/feminist creation vs. patriarchal system*

The hierarchies of art in the 20th century and hitherto comprises of social class and gender, which is a taught and allotted notion rather than congenial gesture. In the world of art, women artists are mentioned in order to be categorized, set apart and marginalized [within the] masculine discourses of art history. This

marginalization functioned to support the centrality and hegemony of men in cultural practice (Parker & Pollock, 1981). It wasn't until Manet's Olympia that were women first shifted to a 'thinking being' (as thinking helps establish existence, according to Descartes' 'I think therefore I am') and were permitted the existence of more than a model, who could now survey the viewer, resisting centuries of admonition to ingratiate herself (Lipton, 1999).

Feminist art history has developed into a transgressive and anti-establishment practice, meant to call many of the major precepts of the discipline into question (Nochlin, 1989), rather than just another supplemental perspective of the existing notion and practice of art history. Feminist performers must continue to negotiate issues of visibility and marginality (Pollock, 1996) in order to maintain a reasonable place for feminist art history in the 21st century.

However, the actual creation of art is not that simple and could not depend on the strengthening of feminist discourse or text when giving birth to artworks. In the past European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be a man (Berger, 1972), and performance by women is open to accusations of narcissism (Lippard, 1976). Models and performers in contemporary performance art events volunteer to be under surveillance and gaze, believing that they, being female, are the carriers of cultural and social garment, sending a message that sex/gender may come to be the loose end that undoes external appearances in the long term (Mirzoeff, 2009). In 1989, a political art group called the Guerilla Girls attacked the New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art's curatorial policies by circulating a tract which read in part,

*Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art section are women, but 85% of the nudes are female.*

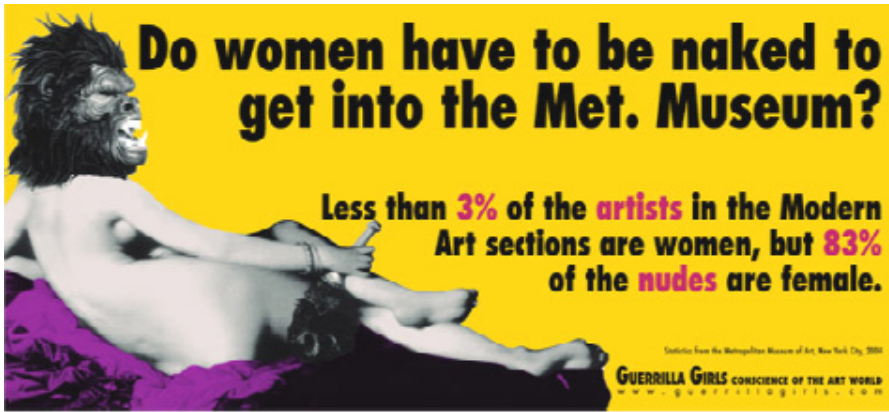
*(NSW Department of Education and Training)*

The Guerrilla Girls looked into database at the Metropolitan Museum again in 2004, and found the percentage of female artist has fallen down to 3, with 83% of women images being naked (fig. 10). As long as the female body is regarded as a 'colonized territory' that must be reclaimed from masculine fantasy (Tickner, 1978), and as long as the daily narratives of women stay low-key, feminist performance art is hard to meet the demand of an independent and unique feminist art history.

### **Vanessa Beecroft, fema ale nudity, and performance art**

Since the threat of male a artists regaining dominance after WWII, fem male artists





[10] Campaign poster advocating gender inequality in the Metropolitan Museum in 2004 // Courtesy Guerrilla Girls

have consorted to an array of art form, performance art being one of them, too break through patriarchal hegemony and the class, political, sexual struggles it has cast on art history. In Vanessa Beecroft's work, the tradition of tackling male gaze on female obedience is honored; however, the way her work series are produced cannot live outside the circle within which bears witness of the existence of a cycled production world of art as a modern industry. In the next chapter, I will critically analyze three works from Beecroft's VB series from three different eras (1995, 2001, and 2011, respectively), to prove how Beecroft benefitted from her initial success on discourse of female nudity in 1990s', how that nature slipped away in 2000s', and how she managed to reclaim innovative stands on feminism by tactically adapting to a greater commercial scale of art production rather than coming up with groundbreaking feminist ideas.

### III Case Analysis

Vanessa Beecroft's initial success as a conceptual/performance artist came when she was invited to participate in a group exhibition as an art student at Fine Arts Academy of Brera in Milan. She had been sitting in a figure drawing class, staring at the models when an instinct came – she thought the models themselves were more interesting as art rather than a subject put into a painting, and went with her hunch for her first show, before which she brought a bag of her own clothes and asked the models to just sit or walk in them during the exhibition. That was VB01 (1993), and that was certainly different than what people have seen or are used to, thus drawing attention and anticipation for more of her. The duration for these performances lasted until 1997.

From late 1990s' through the most of 2000s', Beecroft's girls had gone nearly all naked, casted in a more and more homogenous way, and wore an array of

designer brand clothes or shoes. Numbers of girls gradually increased (VB55 from 2005 at Neue Nationalgalerie in Germany staged 100 models), with almost all of them wearing the same costumes. During this course of time, her footsteps have expanded to Asian cities (1999 in Japan and 2007 in Korea); she did quite a lot of special projects and commercials in alliance with the fashion industry; artistically directed Kanye West's 30-minute music video; started focus on representations of live events (for example VB61 at the Venice Biennale reflects the massive genocide in Sudan) and even agreed on a documentary (Art Star) dealing with her adopting Sudanese twins which was premiered at Sundance Film Festival in 2008. She has also shown virtuosity and experimental spirits since late 1990s' in her works in terms of her list of collaborators and performing venues which include Miu Miu store in New York (1996), terminal 5 in John F. Kennedy airport (2004), Louis Vuitton store on Champs-Élysées (2005), Rialto fish market in Venice (2006) and many more.

Since 2008, she became fascinated with carrara marble, and initiated performances partially involving the stone. The sense of aliveness came back to her models (although not in every VB-numbered work). She continues to work on representational themes (VB65 on legal/illegal African immigrants), meanwhile forting emphasis and interest on a line of performances involving marble and women. Two things that haven't changed from the previous period is her firm association with other fashion-and entertainment-driven industries, and her preferences on female bodies as the content of her exhibition.

In the following cases study, I will choose one work (confined to a VB title) from each of the three periods – VB11 (1995), VB46 (2001) and VB70 (2011).

### **VB11 (Play)**

VB11, sub-titled 'Play', is Beecroft's Switzerland debut at Galerie Analix in 1995. The composition involves 3 dressed female models, two wearing black wig, barefooted, sitting, and one wearing strawberry red wig, standing, occasionally walking. The performers were allowed subtle movements including crossing legs, repositioning arms and slightly bending their heads, but were strictly denied eye contact with the audience.

The mid-1990s' marked Beecroft's most prolific years and successful outreach to museums and art galleries in different cities, where she directed and launched twenty-six VB shows among other special projects. The scale of these shows usually include less than 20 models, not always dressed in the same clothes or wigs are, on a material level, Beecroft's readymade.

Specific cultural influences are rarely found in Beecroft's performances; however, the use of women's bodies, compositional harmony stemmed from calculated spatial tableaux between each model, and her never-ceasing focus on

visual balance are all proof of the classical art training she received. She has said that

*Provocation, pushing forward the limits of society, or seeing what happens if certain taboos are touched upon, is one of the things that stimulate my artistic creativity. But the primary reason for my work remains poetic, introspective, psychoanalytical, social, formal, chromatic, compositional.*

— Article by Olena Chervonik on Korydor<sup>5</sup>

Beecroft herself is a carrier of a male-dominated tradition. When she sets out a work for questioning the education and nurturing herself, the irony and contradictions are doomed to come out, in her case, on the girls who were dressed and given instructions by the artist. Jeffrey Deitch (of the Deitch Project) has said that the models are often deliberately kept confused about what they are expected to do; and it is usually after the performances that Beecroft feels most willing to have a conversation with them<sup>6</sup>. When whether the audiences are supposed to think harder or feel harder on live performances is not suggested, the visual effect of a performance falls prey to the audience asking themselves whether they are emotionally stunned by the haunting presence of life models, or dwelling on the implications of such sight.

The development of how the model will move depend on the idea of chance, overruling possibilities of intervention from the artist of the audience, resisting criticism on women (whether in a painting or in a live performance) being over-conscious or being narcissism, since all occurrence are unexpected and unintended. Although dressed, the coat that the two girls in the front wear is at the edge of exploiting a private spot, leaving wonders to the audience while they decode the binary question of ‘are they attempting sexual hint or do they honestly do not care being gazed at’. The delicately processing mind of the audience, mingled with confrontation (and tiredness from wearing high heels) from the models are a part of the whole picture that keeps Beecroft’s work series rolling.

You attend Beecroft’s performances not only to watch it, but also to make contributions and spread out provocation of how you feel and what you think. Not to mention the critics who might or might not truly understand Beecroft’s mind to comment and write about the exhibition. An organization lined up with different roles in the art circle is hence formed. This invisible structure will continue to have great impact on Beecroft’s career.

While some of her early shows include parallel paintings and other visual works by Beecroft, VB11 remains a pure space for Play, in the naming of which, Beecroft plays with timing and confusion as to uncertain the models and the audience when art ends and real life begins. To this point, even Beecroft herself gets torn apart between the feminine improvising movements made possible by models, and the iconic, geometrical, asexual structure with references to classical paintings that she has preserved for the live performance.



[11] Above and below: Live photo footage taken from VB11 performance in Galerie Analix, Geneva  
// Courtesy Vanessa Beecroft

## VB46

### *Credits*

Vanessa Beecroft has had a stable collaborative relationship with Deitch project New York (its studio room and gallery located in SoHo) since VB16, and has continued their close-knit partnership throughout the years. This time in 2001 though, Beecroft was determined to expand her territories and conquer the west coast. The work VB46, exhibited a week before the Oscars at Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles, involves 20+ nude models and 20+ pairs of stilettos by Alessandro Dell'Aqua, considered one of the most creative fashion designers of his generation, who also custom-made Beecroft and her groom's wedding gowns. Beecroft depends primarily on selling prints of the performances to fund her shows (an authentic VB16 print on Sotheby's Auction site was sold at 13,200 USD; another VB48 at 120,000 USD). Documenting VB46 is internationally-renowned celebrity fashion photographer Dusan Reljin; the late great Austrian-German Vogue-associated photographer Helmut Newton also has released drawings inspired by VB46 – a ruthless portrait of a bikini-clad Beecroft providing desublimating comparison to her own work. To some, those performances, and the slightly plastic, alien, disaffected looks of the photos, 'entered into public consciousness very quickly and in quite a profound way', says Jeffrey Deitch, who opened his downtown gallery space with her first U.S. solo performance in 1996. While to others, all that remains now is a bad fashion show so stingy there is



no clothing at all. The photographer shows a body theatricalizing only to its own failure, interrogating nothing.<sup>7</sup>

During the making of VB46, *Toxic Titties*, a group formed by three female graduate students from California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, CA (Heather Cassils, Clover Leary and Julia Steinmetz), attempted to participate in and intervene Beecroft's plan. By showing up in the casting call and actually being in the performances, Cassils and Leary joined the 20+ girls, while Steinmetz wrote about their experiences from never fully being aware about what Beecroft expects of them to being over-worked and under-paid. They objected to the discourse of 'live paintings' in Beecroft's works and the enormous representation effect brought about through live recording and photo shooting sessions in hope for an alternative reading on framing the performances.

Although VB46 received generally harsh critics (one review notably slamming Beecroft and contributing her gain of fame to the never-overnight performances by saying that the only reason the performances aren't universally criticized is because only a few people have seen it live), there is no denying that the painting-like aura those live shows create is muse to many other fields, including the spring 2004 Prada campaign, in which men and women with artificially smooth skin stare into the camera, devoid of affection. A Prada store in SoHo New York also has a view bearing resemblance to Beecroft's works of the period of time (only the mannequins were fully dressed, which makes perfect sense since Prada sells clothes).

### *Visual Culture Analysis*

The models in hegemony standing opposite show-goers in Gasosian Gallery are with two exceptions – one Asian girl wearing identical stilettos but in lavender, and one girl with red pony moving amongst all the others, bringing meager drama to the room (not pictured). The models may be standing straight, resisting any posture that have the tiniest tinge of Venus-like appearances, but during photo shoot, they form a radiating circle, facing out, some lying on the ground and some sitting with legs crossed (fig. 14), producing more soft curves rather than boyish lines when they are standing (fig. 15).

'Beauty creates shame', Beecroft claimed '... I want women on heels because that's powerful, that's not natural nudity or pureness', she explains. 'When men see this woman standing on heels as if she were dressed, and facing the audience, well, if that's what they like to see, then here it is, so what. I don't know if that will create more respect or go somewhere beyond that. Maybe after they see it twenty times they'll start not to think of it the same way, I'm not sure. It's an experiment'.<sup>8</sup> However Beecroft denies her work presentation diminishing of women identity by degrading the girls into a sign opposing past perspectives on female body exposure rather than a powerful weapon themselves.





[12] Prada 2004 Campaign and their store in SoHo, New York

// Courtesy Prada

Nudity is a form of dress that you wear. But when you wear a pair of designer shoes, the rest of your body, uncovered, revealed, exposed, become naked. And that's what happens in VB46 – the girls' bodies painted and depilated, skin calcimined, eyebrows breached, hair dyed, lips shaded with tiny tinges of pale pink, their private spots open to anyone defenselessly. Although Beecroft is bringing women into galleries and museums, they are naked (consisting to the 83%), unlike her other projects that employ men who are fully dressed in uniforms or suits.

Heather Cassils of the Toxic Titties was casted in the middle of the front row. The masculinity of her body and upside-down V shaped legs positions pervade an atmosphere of superiority within the slim and motionless crowd. The sexually compromising naked bodies in Beecroft's works are proved to be in its own cynicism a survivor in the age of capitalism and consumer culture – by feeding the audience with unconventional conflicting images via installation so stereotypical of the tradition Bourgeois notion that anything in the museum or art gallery is intellectually luxurious and socially impressive.

The experience of attending or acting in a show like Beecroft's can be a personal emotional ride or grand narratives of a generation that the changing society could decide what constituents are embedded, and what an art piece or show could speak out to the society and changes it. When identities are marginalized, performance art niches it back, which is absent in Beecroft's work of this time period.

## VB70 x VBMARMI

As an Event Vanessa Beecroft's latest work, VB70 (in conjunction with VBMARMI, Italian translation for marble), staged and exhibited in the privately owned Lia Rumma Gallery from June 7 to September, 2011, is an extension of Beecroft's experiment with carrara marble, a metamorphic rock quarried from



[13] [14] [15] Photos of VB46 taken by Dusan Reljin //Courtesy Vanessa Beecroft

Carrara (a city in northern Italy) that is usually used for sculptures. The exhibition features nude female models surrounding and surrounded by marble sculptures, symbolizing the stone and vice versa. Models may pose or move slowly during the performance. The event, on the whole, is a carefully-sketched map of collaboration and consolidation of details, from poster design to marble inquiry, fashion house sponsorship to dinner celebration.

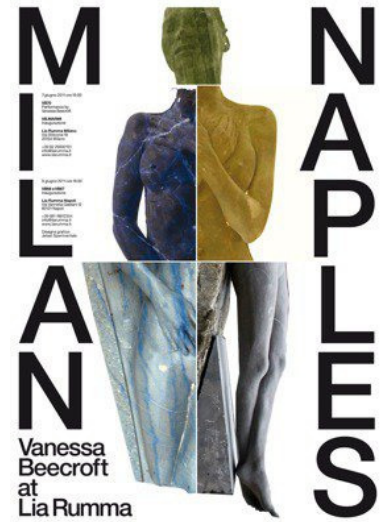
VB70's propaganda includes beforehand advertisement (fig. 16) by Experimental Jetset, who had been in touch with Beecroft previously to publish personal notes on her daily dietary plans titled *The Food Book* (which didn't work out, but initiated collaborations between the Dutch firm and the Italian artist). Besides paper announcements, VB70 is also publicized through the use of online and social media, with art-, design-, gallery-, and museum-relevant websites promoting the event and providing further information.

During the show at the Lia Rumma Gallery in Milan, journalists and critics are invited as guests (among them was Vittoria Sgarbi, commissioner of the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2011), in order to help scrutinize the event. Live photos (in this case taken by Beecroft herself) and video footages are updated to various websites, ranging from Italian art circles to international Contemporary communities. In the case of VB70, even its sponsor Versace Group has posted pictures of chief designer Donatella Versace posing against Beecroft (fig. 17) and a brief introduction on the event<sup>9</sup>.



[17] Beecroft (front left) with Donatella Versace (front right) at VB70 (2011)

// Courtesy the online version of *la Repubblica*, second largest newspaper in Italy



[16] VB70 poster by Experimental, a Dutch graphic design company based in Amsterdam // Courtesy Experimental Jetset

To the Italian-based fashion house, reaching out to a fashion-inclined industry could be a smart move, creating a publicity win-win for both parties.

After the performance, there is a dinner hosted by the gallery and catered by popular celebrity chef Francesco Tramontano inside Lia Rumma Gallery (fig. 18). Photos and brief journals can be seen on Tramontano's official website<sup>10</sup> and some of his other social media



pages.

By peripheral promotions and the use of social media (whether intentional or accidental, actively voluntary or passively obligating under contract), the operation of VB70 expands from being an art ‘show’ to a well-rounded ‘event’ that concerns commercial interest from horizontal alliances. That is, no matter how raved or booed the show manages to bring to the gallery-goers, a certain amount of information is meant to get to people who are in touch with the art scene on the internet, through magazines, via newspapers or simply passing by. To this extent, the production and labor included in VB70 is no longer sole effort from the artist and models, but attributed to a wider group of people and work process that center around the show that takes place.



[18] Dinner gathering after the show. Attendees include Beecroft and the models

// Courtesy Francesco Tramontano

### *Creating and Performing*

Since 2008, Vanessa Beecroft’s focus on performances has drifted to the duet of still marble with life models. Her first attempt began at the Church of the Spasimo in Palermo, where 27 models covered in white clothing stood in the apse, portraying a swiftly yet vivand tableau. A moveable feast containing subtle changes in chromes and human motion, VB70 challenges the relationship between artificial art craft and the often so-called greatest art piece – women’s bodies. As the linear floating of time and space around those models occur (fig. 19), the intransitive reflection penetrating outwards from performing objects – alive or dead – prompts pathos and estrangement from the audience.

VB70 features multiplicity in material and hues – Sodalite blue, Macaubas sky, lapis lazuli, Rosa Portogallo, Belgian black, Statuary white, green onyx and French red ochre embody the intensity of chromatic choices with which the artist tinges all her refined backdrops, according to Italian magazine *Modalità Demodè* 11 (fig. 20).

Contrary to her late 1990s’ to early 2000s’ performances where Beecroft almost exclusively applied black and white in color coordination, VB70 is bestrewn with a harmonious palette, reflecting its refined atmosphere between the liveliness of the models and the stillness of the marble; on the audio side, however, VB70 is remarkably more muted than her past performances. The swinging contract between the warmth of life and stillness of stone, the



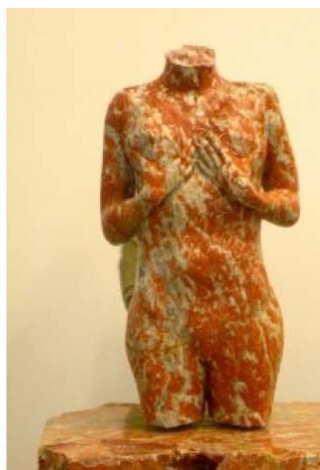
[19] Models move on as audience look on during the exhibition/performance of VB70 x VBMARMI

Beecroft's standard for casting (which she conducted openly with Franca Sozzani, long time editor-in-chief of Vogue magazine) this time was specific as usual, choosing girls who looked remote like sculptures or mystical figures. 'They (referring to models Kristen McMenamy, Alek Wek and Karen Elson in particular) look unreal, as if belonging to another world', Beecroft expresses. <sup>12</sup> This has contributed to ambiguity of the subject in terms of which is a reflection of which, and of whether Beecroft intends to use life models as counterparts or merely ornaments, emphasizing the silkiness and cleanness of the marble.

Models are wearing their own hair in original colors, and not put into killer heels to constraint their moving activities. The different yet similar colors in the room create a sanctuary and attractive air, as audience is let in only up to 150 people at a time. This goes on for three hours with the girls standing besides, sitting and lying on the marble sculptures, acting on will as of either concealing their private parts, or voluntarily showing them to the lookers. The mobility and human aliveness that have been abandoned by Beecroft from the models are back. Other than that, although she is sponsored by Versace, and has invited a bunch of fashionable celebrities and prominent figures to her show, the girls do not have any sponsored item on the. All that they are wearing is the body paint and their own sense of being an artwork in the midst of others.

They aren't representations of contemporary events, nor are they advocates of female rights to end equality or violence; instead, they are purely artistic approach to manifest the structure, lines, texture and colors of carrara marble. VB70 is not feminist or anti-feminist, not political, not socially-connected; it is pretty, it is visionary, it is also illusional. And people liked it.





[20] Carrara marble sculptures (top 3) and models (above four) showcased in VB70 //  
All courtesy the artist and Lia Rumma Gallery

## IV Conclusion

Vanessa Beecroft first came to success with her apprenticeship with Giacinto Di Pietrantonio (her course instructor at Fine Arts Academy of Brera) and debuted their collaborative work at the Venice Biennale in early 1990s', where she was introduced to the mechanism of how the art business runs – managers, venue planners, site contractors, performers, critics, media, audience, and the artist herself. Her initial experiments on transforming drawing objects into real and live art works won her acclaims and notice. When she ran out of picture formation and colors, she hunted for something outside the picture frame, and went on to extend her performances into events that would further involve collaborative works with other chains in the art production circle. To mention just a few, her relationship with Deitch project which has helped her launch her career in the USA; the Vogue Italia online session entirely dedicated to her entitled 'Vogue.it for Vanessa Beecroft' (and even a banner on which her name with a defining introduction 'the iconic artist' can be seen), which includes her open casting call updates, project photographs and videos; her close relations with almost any major fashion houses; and her group work with curators, photographers on every performances.

In the second decade of her performances, works with more models and more of them going stripped and naked are seen. Some argue that her shows have become something of a fashion-inclined performance, but they are more than just clothes and trends. They employ fashion to do the publicity and to meet aesthetic standards; they might result in consonance at some level of the definition of prettiness and beauty, but they are more of a comprising art form and production code that Beecroft has sought to ensure her status as a female conceptual and performance artist. As New York Time Arts Review critic Roberta Smith says, 'It's art; it's fashion. It's good; it's bad. It's sexist; it's not'.<sup>13</sup> This time period is dominated by performances by tens of look-alike models standing in a boring posture, occasionally embellished by colorful works on her personal obsession with food (VB54) or representational themes that deal with social matter (VB61).

Starting from 2000s', the focus of Beecroft's works has been back to the questioning and exploration on the female body. New experiments have been conducted in her recent works, applying identical production notes and method she has established from the previous decade. However, along with the continuous changes in the conditions of production in the trajectory of Beecroft's creation, even though the same question concerning her position and stand on feminism will be thrown, the way to answer may have been altered for the sake of longevity of her career as a female artist, as she introduced herself to the world when she first started.

## Notes

- 1 Vanessa Beecroft official website at <http://www.vanessabeecroft.com/>
- 2 Keiden, Lois. 1997. "Showtime: Curating Live Art in the 90s." *Art & Design*, 12 (Jan/Feb): 38-42.
- 3 Shubitz, Jeanie. 2001. "Women, Art and Gender: A History" (courtesy University of Arizona) at <http://www.ic.arizona.edu/ic/mcbride/ws200/womenandgender.html>
- 4 Guerilla Girls official website at <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/>
- 5 A Russian online magazine on contemporary culture
- 6 'Performance that Makes Itself', article by Jeffrey Deitch on Deitch Project official website at [http://www.deitch.com/artists/press\\_text.php?pressId=12](http://www.deitch.com/artists/press_text.php?pressId=12)
- 7 Bruce Hainley's 'Gagosian Gallery: Vanessa Beecroft – Reviews – Brief Article' in *ArtForum*. Copyright 2001 Artforum International Magazine, Inc. Online at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_10\\_39/ai\\_80485061/pg\\_2/?tag=content;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_10_39/ai_80485061/pg_2/?tag=content;coll)
- 8 Vanessa Beecroft Does Tykyo, article on Assembly Language (website dedicated to avant-garde culture and contemporary art in Tokyo and Toronto) by Monty DiPietro at <http://www.assemblylanguage.com/reviews/Beecroft.html>
- 9 Official Versace page on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/versace>
- 10 Francesco Tramontano official page's coverage on VB70 after dinner at [http://www.francescotramontano.com/cibo-semplicemente/galleria-foto/vanessa %20beecroft%20VB70/2](http://www.francescotramontano.com/cibo-semplicemente/galleria-foto/vanessa_%20beecroft%20VB70/2)
- 11 Modalità Demodè (Italian magazine and art blog)'s coverage on VB70 at <http://www.modalitademode.com/places/vanessa-beecroft-sculpture-shapes-in-milan/>
- 12 Interview from Nowness, a blogging website dedicated to contemporary culture at <http://www.nowness.com/day/2011/8/7/1572/vanessa-beecroft-living-sculpture>
- 13 New York Times Arts Review by Roberta Smith in 1998. Archive available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/05/06/arts/critic-s-notebook-standing-and-staring-yet-aiming-for-empowerment.html?src=pm>

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