Behind Enemy Lines: Toxic Titties Infiltrate
Vanessa Beecroft

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 . . . alternate resting and attentive positions, if you are tired, sit . . . interpret the rules naturally, do not break the rules, you are the essential element of the composition, your actions reflect on the group, towards the end you can lie down, just before the end stand straight up.
—Vanessa Beecroft (in Beccaria 2003, 18)

Julia Steinmetz (JS): So reads the list of instructions the artist Vanessa Beecroft has handed out to the models appearing in each of her fifty performances staged over the past ten years. Beecroft’s performances consist of groups of twenty to thirty young women, either naked or scantily clad in designer lingerie, standing on display in high heels for periods of three to four hours in museum or gallery settings and appearing in subsequently exhibited photographs. The dominant readings of Beecroft’s work claim that the “living paintings” she composes by arranging women’s bodies in the exhibition space confront viewers in the flesh with what they ordinarily see only in pictures; this in turn produces a sense of discomfort.

1 Beecroft recounts this list in an interview with Marcella Beccaria (2003, 18–19). An original instruction sheet given to models in the VB46 performance is in the Toxic Titties’ personal archive.

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and anxiety in the viewer. At this point, Beecroft is a veritable art star: her work has been exhibited in major international exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale and the São Paulo Biennial; new performances have been commissioned by the Kunsthalle Wien and the Guggenheim Museum in New York; and her work has appeared on the covers of Flash Art and Artforum. In the spring of 2001, Beecroft brought her enterprise to Los Angeles for the first time, for a performance at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills.

Toxic Titties is a collaborative group of artists founded by Heather Cassils, Clover Leary, and myself, focused on creating performative events that undermine familiar notions of gender, sexuality, and class within pop culture, feminism, and art commerce. In the first year of our Master of Fine Arts (MFA) studies in art and photography at the California Institute of the Arts, we spotted an unusual item on the walls: a call for models to audition for Beecroft’s upcoming Gagosian performance. The call stated, “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.” Our interest was sparked by the specific language of the call—was she looking for “lesbians”?—because our own art production involves working with groups of women in performance, investigating questions of queer identity and representation. We create interactive situations and environments that denaturalize familiar social models and animate questions of subjectivity and representation. Through camp and hyperperformance, we denaturalize femininity’s relationship to the female body. We play with the complex relationship between individual and collective identities in order to produce indeterminate subject positions. We have developed a nonhierarchical working dynamic invested in process and experimentation, both conceptual and formal. The practices of 1970s feminism, especially those centered in performance and body art, have been a touchstone in our work. Despite its seemingly retrograde content, Beecroft’s work has been classified critically as postfeminist, a term associated with the third-wave feminist legacy that we, as young artists, were supposed to inherit.

While Beecroft’s performances had at that point raised nothing more

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2 I refer here to Dave Hickey’s essay “Vanessa Beecroft’s Painted Ladies” (2000), which introduced the photographs in Beecroft’s first monograph, providing the authorized reading of those images.

3 A complete list of Beecroft’s exhibitions and publications can be found in her most recent monograph, Vanessa Beecroft Performances, 1993–2003 (Beecroft and Beccaria 2003).
than a vague curiosity in collaborator Leary and myself, her work put fellow Toxic Titties founder Cassils into a veritable rage. She was determined to infiltrate and sabotage Beccroft’s Los Angeles performance. Knowing that the models would be entirely naked during this performance, Cassils had a vision of hiding an egg in her vagina and releasing it at some crucial moment of the performance, a “feminine grenade” that would break on the polished cement floor of the Gagosian Gallery. With thoughts of sabotage, she made arrangements to audition for the upcoming performance, titled VB46 in reference to the artist’s name and her number of performances to date. As the model call specified a particular tall, androgynous body type, frequent Toxic Titties collaborator Cathy Davies and I didn’t bother to audition, assuming that our more voluptuous bodies wouldn’t make the cut. Leary went with Cassils to the audition for moral support. Upon discovering that models would be paid $1,500 for submitting to hair bleaching and waxing, two days of video and photo shoots, and the three-hour performance, she decided to audition as well. Two weeks later, Cassils and Leary received phone calls from the Gagosian notifying them that they were Beccroft’s number one and number two model picks, respectively. They both agreed to participate in the perfor-

4 CL: I went to the Gagosian Gallery with Heather that day for moral support and out of a certain undeniable curiosity. Heather was led into an upstairs room, and when she came back down about five minutes later she whispered in my ear “The pay is $1,500.” At the time it seemed like a lot of money, especially since we were both covertly living in our graduate studios on campus to save money on rent. After a moment’s hesitation, I filled out the questionnaire and followed the woman up the stairs. She asked me to strip naked; she took one Polaroid of my face and one frontal nude. She told me that the Polaroids would be sent to Beccroft in New York. About two weeks later Heather and I each received a call; we had been selected as the number one and two model picks for VB46. We both accepted. I was a little apprehensive to be putting myself in that position, but I thought maybe I could just be more in the back or something. . . . I had no idea what this experience would entail.

5 Given our financial situation as MFA students, the offer of $1,500 for three days of work (however objectionable) was hard to refuse. For an in-depth discussion of the history of the MFA program in America and its position as a professionalizing force in the economics of the contemporary art world, see Singerman 1999. Howard Singerman discusses the status of the MFA degree as a necessary but not sufficient condition for being considered a professional artist. He notes that, unlike the case with law or medicine, there is no qualifying examination or legal licensing requirement for becoming a certified artist; the MFA may give aspiring artists some small competitive edge in the commercial art market, but it carries no promise of being able to make a living as an artist or even as a teacher in the now-flooded academic job market. The MFA program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) currently costs $25,520 a year in tuition, plus the expense of surviving and funding your projects while in school. Graduate assistantships at CalArts pay the California minimum wage for six hours of classroom time per week.
mance, marking the beginning of a series of experiences and effects beyond the boundaries of what any of us had anticipated or imagined.

While Cassils’s proposed feminine grenade action did not take place, with this text we hope to enact an intervention of another kind: using the primary research gathered through Toxic Titties’ infiltration of Bec- croft’s Los Angeles performance, we propose here to hijack VB46 in order to suggest a set of readings inaccessible to the uninformed viewer. All of us, in our responses to our encounters with VB46, expand the frame of Becroft’s artwork to include analysis of the material conditions of its production, the subjectivity of her live models, the photographic and video representations of her performances, and the status of Becroft’s work in the contemporary art market. Through the combination of our different personal narratives and critical perspectives, we assess and reject the dominant claims surrounding Becroft’s performance work: namely, the assertion that her work should be read within the discourse of painting and the suggestion that her work employs tactics of “bad girl feminism,” performing a critique of the fetishization and objectification of women prevalent in the fashion industry. This essay, while it depends on and is woven together with the experiences of my collaborators, Cassils and Leary, represents my own particular critical response to Becroft’s work and to the ongoing story of our attempt to disrupt, to subvert the institutional conditions that support Becroft and artists like her. That said, while this article is technically authored by me, the story behind its authorship is one of collaboration—a collaboration that registers here in the interruption of my narrative by the voices of my comrades in arms. In an attempt to relate Becroft’s work to painting while recognizing its semiotic functions and use of the live female body, I compare her “painted ladies” (see Hickey 2000) to Yves Klein’s Anthropo- metries. In response to classifications of Becroft’s work as contemporary feminist performance practice, I compare her methodology to the tactics employed by Valie Export, Yoko Ono, and Marina Abramovic and investigate the critical shift that occurs when the artist uses the bodies of other women in the place of her own body. Finally, I read Becroft’s Los Angeles performance VB46 against the grain, asserting the active role that the Toxic Titties’ insertion of their bodies plays in revealing the troubling mechanisms of its production.

Painted ladies

Clover Leary (CL): The second and third day we met at 8:30 a.m. at Sound Stage 9 on the Sony Pictures Studio lot. A crew of about ten makeup artists was responsible for spray painting each of the thirty models...
with semitransparent body makeup. This process took about two hours per model. After painting, each model was given directions on how not to damage the body paint. We were told to eat, drink, sit, and move with extreme caution. We were told to squat over the toilet when urinating, holding our labia out of the way and blotting carefully so as not to damage the water-based makeup covering our genitals. After the painting process we were each given a thigh-length, semiopaque white silk robe to wear between shoots. The robe ties were removed so the body paint would not be damaged. We were all constantly trying to force the too short, open-fronted, transparent robes to cover our bodies adequately.

The two makeup artists in charge wanted to experiment with paint thickness on one of the front models, so I was the first model taken into the room for painting. I remember thinking: this is what a sheep must feel like when it is separated from the herd and shorn, a fitting analogy in many ways. They had me stand naked on a platform with my legs spread while they airbrushed swatches on different areas of my body, and the remainder of the makeup crew stood around to watch. My legs were shaking as they directed me to walk naked past the other twenty-nine curious models and twenty gaffers, grips, lighting technicians, photographers, and assistants into the room that had been constructed for the VB46 documentation. I just stood there, occupying myself by trying to figure out what the hell I was doing in that situation while the crew went through the lighting checks and metering.

JS: Beecroft’s work is most often written about in terms of painting. Women’s bodies are likened to brushstrokes, arranged in the gallery-as-canvas to create monochromatic compositions. In the catalog essay for Beecroft’s first monograph, Dave Hickey writes, “Painting remains the touchstone of Beecroft’s work; one may usefully regard her ephemeral tableaux vivant as standing in the same relationship to painting that painting does to drawing. . . . They are not paintings of women, in other words, but they are painted women” (2000, 6). Hickey goes on to position Beecroft’s live images in relation to the work of Italian Renaissance figurative painter Guido Reni, arguing that her performances are an attempt to regain the “innocence” and “sophistication” of oil painting, her models acting as a more present and immediate version of Reni’s Magdalenes and Madonnas (2000, 6). In his essay written for Beecroft’s most recent comprehensive catalog, gallerist Jeffrey Deitch carries on this rhetoric in his attempt to classify her work: “One could write about the work as if it were painting, analyzing the composition and the art historical references. One could describe it as a sculpture, commenting on its phenomenological quality and its use of negative space. The work connects directly to the
European Old Master tradition in painting and sculpture but extends this tradition into today’s world” (2003, 26). The language of the Gagosian Gallery’s official VB46 press release continues this narrative, emphasizing the painterly qualities of Beecroft’s performances at the expense of considering the subjectivity of the live models: “The female figure is the tool for Beecroft’s art—the skin tone, and costuming is the color; the curve of the back, the line.” The Gagosian’s specific references to painting in relation to VB46 compare the performance with nonrepresentational minimalist painting rather than aligning it with the figurative Renaissance tradition: “[The models’] bodies are painted white, and against the white cube of the gallery space, this decidedly monochromatic performance recalls the work of artists like Malevich and Ryman.”

Despite the assertions of the Gagosian, the photographs of VB46 could not be more different from a Kasimir Malevich or a Robert Ryman. The supematist paintings of Malevich are designed to strip painting down to its barest formal elements, engaging in an internal logic of pure sensation rather than in an objective relationship to the outside world; Ryman’s abstractions seek to reduce painting to the surface that is produced when paint is applied to canvas. Both painters reject the representational capacity of their medium. The idea of the monochrome is at best applied to Beecroft’s work as a style or unifying element holding the image together and at worst as a troublingly reductive deployment of racial categorization.

If we are to relate Beecroft’s work to painting, the best analogue is certainly not midcentury abstraction or even Italian figuration; the painter that comes most readily to my mind is, rather, the 1960s mystic conceptualist Yves Klein. In its use of branding, performance with live models, direct application of paint to women’s bodies in the interest of producing an indexical mark, and interest in distancing the artist from the art object, the work of Klein bears an uncanny structural resemblance to that of Beecroft. In 1960, Klein began to pay nude models to hang out in his studio while he produced his abstract blue monochromes, not out of any

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7 VB46 consists of “white” models painted white installed in a white gallery; VB48 presents “black” models painted black photographed in a “tableau inspired by seventeenth-century Caravaggesque lighting: a black monochrome with very little light, black on black” (Beecroft and Beccaria 2003, 362). Photographs of these two performances are presented back to back in foldout poster format as opposing alternate covers for Beecroft’s monograph.
interest in “the shape of the body, its curves, its colors between life and death” but rather for “the pure affective atmosphere” the presence of the models produced (Descargues 1960, 8). This situation evolved into Klein’s Anthropometry paintings and performances. In his 1960 performance Monotone Symphony, Klein literally used the bodies of women as brushes. Beautiful young models (not unlike those used in Beccroft’s performance works) painted their own bodies with International Klein Blue paint and then pressed their bodies against canvases to produce paintings Klein called “Anthropometries.” This act served the double function of removing the mark-making function of the artist and of extending the usual role of the nude model in painting, producing an indexical mark of the model’s body. Instead of the mark of the artist’s hand, we have the mark of the model’s breasts. Beccroft employs a structurally similar process, having the models’ bodies painted with body makeup and then recorded on film and video as photographic index.

The working processes of both Klein and Beccroft serve to distance the artist from the art object, eliminating the direct contact between artist and surface typically found in painting. Klein reveals this desire for distance in his 1961 “Chelsea Hotel Manifesto”: “Due to the fact that I have painted with living brushes—in other words, the nude body of live models covered with paint: these living brushes were under the constant direction of my commands, such as ‘a little to the right; over to the left now; to the right again, etc. . . . ’ By maintaining myself at a specific and obligatory distance from the surface to be painted, I am able to resolve the problem of detachment” (Klein [1961] 1989). Beccroft expresses a similar sentiment in an interview with Marcella Beccaria: “First there is the idea, which occurs spontaneously, without a precise methodology—although sometimes it does not come at all. I summarize the idea in a proposal and pass it on to the production manager, who turns it into a plan. The plan includes the involvement of various parties—photographer, cameraman, make-up artist, wardrobe person, casting—which I then follow from a distance” (Beccaria 2003, 18).

It is this distance and detachment that allow for a particular power dynamic to develop between artist and model. As Bruce Hainley so aptly notes in his Artforum review of VB46, “[Beccroft] seems never to have wondered about the fact that power/authority seems to go primarily to those who have the freedom to be removed and absent” (2001, 189–90). Klein’s relation to his models is actually more direct than Beccroft’s; he would either give them personal verbal instruction or, in some instances,
literally drag their bodies across the canvas.\textsuperscript{8} By contrast, during the photography and video shoots preceding the \textit{VB46} performance, Beecroft would whisper instructions into the ear of a male production manager, who would then relay instructions to the models, putting herself in the position of male authority and power only by means of a surrogate.\textsuperscript{9} Again describing the process of working with “living brushes,” Klein states, “I was able to remain constantly at the exact distance ‘x’ from my canvas and thus I could dominate my creation continuously throughout the entire execution. In this way I stayed clean, I no longer dirtied myself with color, not even the tips of my fingers. The work finished itself there in front of me, under my direction, in absolute collaboration with the model. And I could salute its birth into the tangible world in a dignified manner, dressed in a tuxedo” (quoted in Sitch 1994, 177). Beecroft also uses this technique of distance in order to “stay clean.” By delegating the more ethically troubling aspects of “dominating [her] creation” to a team of stylists (charged with the unseemly task of waxing the models’ pubic hair), makeup artists, photographers, and production managers (who would relay “bad news” to the models, including extension of the shooting day or restriction of access to the bathroom during shooting), Beecroft can arrive at her opening dressed in couture, unruffled by guilt.

\textbf{A kiss imagined, stolen}

\textit{Vanessa}: I have never come in contact with the models before.
\textit{Heather}: Why not?
\textit{Vanessa}: It makes me feel guilty.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Heather Cassils (HC)}: We have been shooting for hours. Tectering in my heels. The distant tick of an assistant’s wristwatch. I am zoning out. Focused on nothing, the edges of the room erased and rounded to give the impression of an endless vacuum of whiteness. On this sound stage present is the pulse of my heartbeat in the coils of my expanded blue veins, heavy from standing. Other than the slight breath of the girl behind me that

\textsuperscript{8} Klein was trained in judo and welcomed the opportunity to incorporate this training into his artwork.

\textsuperscript{9} Cassils and Leary provided all the details of Beecroft’s production process in interviews and conversations following the performances.

\textsuperscript{10} Conversation during a break between photo and video shoots at the Sony sound stage, Culver City, CA, October 2003.
makes the little hairs on the back of my neck stand up, all is still. How long have I been here? [figs. 1 and 2].

Suddenly there is a rupture in the canvas, and I notice something penetrating the void. A black object pokes through the walls. Its presence followed by the whirling click of a trigger being pulled. I am being shot. Someone is sneakily documenting. Her lens pokes through more obtrusively as she becomes less shy, snapping away. But the lenses can only reach so far and so after shooting she disappears only to return in the flesh next to my feet. I am gigantic in my heels and solid as marble. My eyes flicker down to meet her gaze. We are so close we could be slow dancing at a prom. It is this moment that the artist breaks her distance to me, her subject. Her Polaroids flirt, slowly revealing her framing of my naked body. I can smell her expensive perfume, her warm skin, and it seems a game where she is stealing kisses and I cannot move.

**Full frontal**

JS: In the days preceding the performance, the Toxic Titties continued to discuss possibilities for intervention in *VB46*. We entertained various suggestions and subsequently rejected them: Should Cassils carry out her initial fantasy and lay an egg on the Gagosian floor? This had promise as an absurd gesture and as a way to refer to one of the only spaces of the female body not immediately visible to the audience, but ultimately it seemed too ambiguous in its significations. Should Davies and I show up naked at the performance and stand outside the circle of models, facing Cassils and Leary, making visible the body types excluded from Beecroft’s selection? While I sometimes wish we had carried out this concept, fear of arrest stopped us at the time.

CL: We were initially told the pay was $1,500 for the one day of hair bleaching, three days of shooting, and the four-hour performance. The first day all the models met at the Fredric Fekkai salon near the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills. Our hair and eyebrows were bleached to white through three to five bleaching processes. After bleaching, the models were led one by one into the waxing room.

A model was walking out as I was walking in; she looked appalled; the rest of her face was now as bright red as the skin beneath her bleached scalp and eyebrows. Short white fluffy hair was sticking up from her head in disarray. She touched my arm as I walked by and hissed, “They are going to wax everything, I mean everything!” I didn’t quite know how to respond. The woman doing the waxing was angry and troubled. She
kept repeating, “They should have told you, I am so sorry, this isn’t right!” She started with my arms then waxed my legs. She just kept apologizing as she started to rip off my pubic hair. “They told me to remove it all, every bit, I am so sorry . . . They should have told you!” The sides weren’t that bad, so by the time I realized how painful the full pubic waxing would be it was much too late to stop as my pubic hair was already covered in the sticky wax, so I just clenched my jaw and nodded to her to finish. I concentrated on steadying myself, keeping my expression neutral each time she would tear off a new strip of hair with an audible rip that brought tiny drops of blood to the surface of the raw skin.

None of the models was informed that this would be required until we were in the waxing room. We already had white fried hair and eyebrows, and we also knew that we would likely not receive any of the money if we didn’t go through with it. At this point no one walked away.

The ties that bind

JS: Not unlike sorority hazing rituals or military training, the production process of VB46 seemed designed to strip these women of their individuality, break down their defenses, and instill a disciplined group ethic.11

11 Beecroft’s fascination with military uniformity and discipline is apparent in her work. Her 1999 performance U.S. NAVY put a corps of Navy SEALs on display at the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego in their formal white uniforms. A number of documentary photos of Navy SEALs’ “Hell Week” training were also produced, emphasizing the pain and physical exhaustion of their exercises. In the catalog text of her monograph, Beecroft high-
The further Cassils and Leary went along in the process of VB46 production, the less possible a direct intervention in the live performance seemed. The trauma and exhaustion of the days of shooting, the discipline imposed on the group, the sense of solidarity with the other models, and the undeniable financial imperative (fees for each model being raised to $2,900 with the addition of overtime by the end of the second shooting day) forced consideration of less direct but possibly more complex responses to Beecroft’s work in the form of writing and artistic production. They would act as spies, collecting information and documenting their experiences, hoping to make it through the live performance unscathed.

CL: We had all been assigned spaces in a circular formation, which were designated by our Polaroids on the floor. All of the models were given a pair of white, strappy, Alesandro Dell’Acqua four-inch-heeled shoes. Although they had asked for our shoe sizes in the initial application, all of the shoes were size 10. During the following grueling days our ankles and feet became swollen, blistered, and bruised as a result of continuous standing in the dramatically ill-fitting shoes. Due to the extreme

lights the military men’s total lack of agency in participating in her performance: “For the U.S. Navy SEALs this was an official operation to which they had to submit as a military exercise” (Beecroft and Beccaria 2003, 289).
swelling of our ankles, almost all of the elastic straps eventually had to be cut when they dug into our swollen skin and cut off circulation. The straps were later altered in Photoshop to look unbroken.

HC: As 7:00 p.m. (the time when we had been told the shooting day would be over) approached, Zach, Beecroft’s primary assistant, entered the room: “Okay ladies, it seems we have some more work to do.” We were informed that if any of us left production would cease and no one would be paid. “Bullshit,” I said, “If any of us leave, you don’t have an image.” At this point I negotiated the fee of $50 for every thirty minutes we were kept past 7:00 p.m., almost doubling the initial fee we were quoted. All of the models agreed to stay. Despite the tactics of Beecroft and Co., they needed our labor.

CL: We stayed a total of fifteen hours, until 1:30 in the morning, on the first day. We were only able to sleep for a few hours before we found ourselves driving back to stage 9 the next morning. That day we worked sixteen hours. By the end of the second night we were swaying as we collected our clothes. When I put on my sneakers my feet felt crippled; I stumbled disoriented while my body relearned how to walk in something flat. We knew that neither of us could safely drive the thirty miles back to Valencia, so Heather demanded that the producer get us a room nearby, in the same Beverly Hills hotel where they were staying. We showered together, both too exhausted to wait, and tried to help wash the paint off of each other’s bodies. The white makeup covered the bathroom, the walls, the doors, everywhere we touched. I wonder what the maid must have thought.

On the fourth day of VB46 we did the actual performance in the Gagosian Gallery. Although less physically arduous than the previous days of shooting, the actual performance had its own set of challenges, which were compounded by our collective exhaustion.

Due to the fact that we were all locked into the same surreal, homogenizing, and objectifying set of circumstances, we found ourselves bonded to each other during the four days of VB46. We all underwent the same difficult, exhausting, often degrading set of procedures; we were treated as a unit, homogenized aesthetically; and we were all of course completely naked and hairless while the crew and audience were clothed. Several of the models told me that they had never been pushed anywhere near this hard in a modeling job before. One woman told me that since this was for art, which she believed to be more socially worthy and noble than fashion or advertising, she was willing to put up with a lot; by the end of the performance she told me that she did not feel that way anymore.
The limits of institution critique

JS: If we can assign any critical function to the work of Vanessa Beecroft, it is that of taking a preexisting cultural formation and placing it in the gallery for our analysis and consideration, a practice generally described as institution critique. Beecroft exaggerates and multiplies the practices and effects of the fashion industry. In the end, however, we are presented with only an image, either the tableau vivant of the live performance or the still photograph, almost indistinguishable from its fashion and advertising referent. The mechanics of the production of the image are as invisible to the viewer as they are in the pages of Vogue. Christine Ross notes, “There is nothing in the performances which enables the viewer to say for sure if Beecroft is critical or not of the standards she stages and re-stages in her work” (2005, 5). Opposing Beecroft’s performances to the feminist performance works produced by Carolee Schneeman and Lynda Benglis in the 1970s and 1980s, Ross states, “These works not only openly elaborated a feminist criticism of ideologies of femininity but also disclosed and acted out the female body as a battleground for power positions. In contrast, the work of Beecroft displays women with different ‘looks,’ seeking to embrace femininity instead of deconstructing it” (2005, 5).

There is a crucial difference between Beecroft’s work and feminist performance actions in which the artist places herself in a sexualized or objectified position in order to assert her sexuality or investigate voyeurism, fetishism, and the power dynamics of viewing: unlike Schneeman, Hannah Wilke, Export, Ono, Yayoi Kusama, Abramovic, or even the pop-culture feminist Ginger Spice, Beecroft places the bodies of other women in positions potentially exploitative and demeaning rather than using her own body as a ground for experimentation. Much of the power of 1970s body art and contemporary female artists’ construction and presentation of their bodies as already sexualized resides in the simultaneous presence of the artist as subject and object.12 Even as we are viewing the artist’s body as sexual object, we are conscious of her status as the author of her own image, her control and authority over her own body, and her embodied subjectivity.

Let us consider several performances in which female artists use their bodies in a simultaneous, contradictory position as subject and object,

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12 I am indebted to Amelia Jones for her articulation of the “oscillatory exchange between subject- and objectivity” in the work of Carolee Schneeman and for her discussion of Kusama’s quite literal “posing” of the questions “Am I an object? Am I a subject?” in the artist’s 1960 self-portrait photographs (1997, 11–19).
performing successful critiques of the position of women’s bodies in culture. In Export’s 1968 performance *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, she confronted the audience at an art cinema in Munich with this contradiction by walking through the rows of the theater wearing “action pants,” which had the crotch cut out to reveal her genitals: “Offering the film-viewing public visual contact with a real female body, Export confronted the pornographic reduction of women to static representations, thereby posing a direct, political challenge to the abstract objectification of the female body as fetish” (Stiles 2000). In the 1969 poster representing this performance, Export poses with a shotgun, counteracting the objectifying force of the photograph with the symbolic power of the gun, “shooting back” at the viewer’s gaze. In a 1991 interview, Export describes her efforts in her body performances “to create or produce what I would consider an ‘inhabitable’ body” (quoted in June 1991, 187). This stands in stark contrast to Beecroft’s fundamentally uninhabitable bodies, bodies women are willing to live in only for a number of hours, for a high fee.

In Ono’s *Cut Piece* and Abramovic’s *Rhythm O*, both artists position themselves as passive objects in order to literalize the symbolic violence performed in the situation of an audience viewing the female body. In *Cut Piece*, audience members were invited to come up to the stage and cut off pieces of Ono’s clothing with scissors; the performance ended when her shirt was cut open, falling to expose her breasts. Ono caught the shirt, covered herself, and walked quietly offstage. For Abramovic’s 1974 performance *Rhythm O*, the artist stood in a gallery for six hours; in the gallery space there was a table covered with objects including razor blades, feathers, a rose, a loaded pistol, and a card with the following instructions: “There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. / I am the object. / During this period I take full responsibility.”12 David Joselit describes the results of Abramovic’s self-presentation as an object: “The escalating violations suffered by Abramovic in the course of *Rhythm O*, in which she was fondled, cut with razors and ultimately made to hold a gun to her throat, gave vivid form to the ethical consequences of regarding a person as a thing. This self-objectification dramatized a vulnerability which is distinctly gendered: the specificity of the female body was demonstrated not by the artist herself but rather by the responses her presence generated within the microscopic community of the audience” (1998, 87).

The critical function of these works depends on an absolute transparency of process. The artwork is the set of relations between audience and

performer that evolve in the duration of the performance. The terms of the interaction are defined at the outset of the performance. No aspect of the interaction between performer and audience is concealed from view or placed outside the symbolic domain of the performance, a domain defined by the dual framing devices of the gallery space and the specified duration of the action. Because Beecroft’s performances conceal the literal and symbolic violence her models endure in their transformation into objects to be viewed, because members of the audience are not implicated in their desire to objectify and fetishize the models’ bodies, and because the interactions between artist and models exceed the boundaries of the representational space of the gallery and the duration of the performance available to the audience, her work fails to produce the type of critique enacted in Cut Piece and Rhythm O.

Unlike these classic works of feminist performance art, Beecroft’s performances do not use the female body as a way to stand outside the economy of the gallery system or to interrogate the traffic in images of women. Rather than using her own body as an ethical ground for experimentation, exploring its power and vulnerability, Beecroft uses her status in the art world in order to wield power over other women. The “what’s wrong” in Beecroft’s work is the actual set of conditions present in the process of the work itself, conditions that are not revealed or presented in the performance or its photographic representations. This lack of transparency elides any potential for critique of these conditions either within the space of the artwork or in relation to the work’s real-world referents. I would like to contrast Beecroft’s practice with that of another contemporary artist working with performance: Santiago Sierra.14 Sierra similarly “installs” other people in galleries in order to enact a critique. Unlike Beecroft, however, Sierra explicitly draws attention to the power dynamics present in the production of his artworks, the financial exchange between artist and model-performer, and the social and economic conditions he exploits as both the subject matter of his work and the condition that makes it possible. For example, in his 2000 piece 160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People, Sierra hired four prostitutes addicted to heroin to give their consent to have a 160-centimeter line tattooed on their backs. Each woman was paid the price of a shot of heroin, approximately $67. Rather than concealing the exchange of funds between artist and subject in the service of producing a conceptual drawing, Sierra is explicit about the terms of the work’s creation. In a formally arresting, viscerally memorable

14 Thanks to Jennifer Doyle for suggesting this fruitful comparison in the endnotes of Doyle 2003.
visual format, Sierra calls attention to the degradation of addiction and the devalued status of these women’s bodies and labor. A work Sierra produced for his solo exhibition at IKON Gallery in Birmingham, England, in 2002 points even more directly to the practice of financial exploitation between artist and subject. Sierra paid a homeless Irish man he found on Birmingham’s New Street to say “My participation in this piece could generate a profit of 72,000 dollars. I am being paid five pounds.” This short videotape was then projected in the IKON Gallery and constituted the entire show.

Sierra’s work is always as ethically troubling as it is compelling: much like Beecroft’s, his mode of production participates in the very systems it seeks to critique. Unlike most economic systems, however—including Beecroft’s particular mode of participation in the commercial art market—the explicitly stated terms of Sierra’s engagement with his laborers and his gallery forces viewers into a critical stance in relation to the exchanges of power, money, and labor they are witnessing. For VB46 to have the same critical effect as a Santiago Sierra installation, the wall label would have to read “Twenty-eight Los Angeles women were paid $3,000 each to have all their body hair removed and their hair bleached blonde, to be photographed and videotaped naked standing in high heels for fifteen hours per day for three days, to stand naked for three hours live in a gallery in front of an audience, and for the release of all rights to the photographic and video representations created during this process. Photographs resulting from this process will be sold for between $40,000 and $80,000 dollars each.” Instead it read “VB46,” pointing only to Beecroft’s brand identity operating in the high-end consumerism of the art market.

Live nude girls
JS: The night of the VB46 performance I drove to Beverly Hills; parked my car just off Rodeo Drive; walked past the Prada, Chanel, and Louis Vuitton boutiques lining the street; and made my way to the Gagosian Gallery. I walked past the security guards and was immediately confronted with Cassils standing naked in white designer stilettos, her hair and eyebrows bleached white and her skin blanched with body paint. This in itself was a startling sight; Cassils is a bodybuilder, her body carefully sculpted into a lean, supermuscular physique that produces a set of butch readings referencing gay male body ideals and flirting with transgendered classification (fig. 3). I had seen her naked many times, so this was not a surprise; the shock was in the high heels, an item Cassils would never be seen in unless accompanied by full drag queen regalia, complete with blonde
Figure 3. Portrait of Heather Cassils. Photo: Clover Leary, 2005. Color version available as an on-line enhancement.
bombshell wig, obscenely short minidress, hot pink lipstick, and high camp attitude. I saw Leary standing just to the left of Cassils; a woman I recognize from a local lesbian band was on Cassils’s right, completing the triangle of queer bodies comprising the visual focal point of the arrangement of models as viewers entered the gallery. Behind them, twenty-five other women were arranged in concentric circles, all facing out toward the white gallery walls. As the audience filled in, the viewers lined these walls facing the models.

Beecroft’s request for “flat-chested, boyish looking girls with short hair” in her call for models invokes the physical characteristics historically associated with the congenital “mannish lesbian” (see Ellis 1942; Krafft-Ebing 1965). In contemporary lesbian culture, these same visual signs are cultivated as self-chosen identifiers of desire and disidentification with dominant gender modes assigned to the female sex. Beecroft chose Cassils as her number-one model pick for VB46 and keyed all the other model choices off her image. Cassils, Leary, and a queer rocker from the band Smelly Roses were singled out as focal points in the performance and featured heavily in related photography. In its press materials, the Gagosian relates the “boyish and athletic” women in the performance to “classical Greek kouroi” rather than directly pointing to queerness as an organizing factor.15 Was this reference chosen based on the popular conception that the kouroi is an example of meaningless beauty?16 Or is this pointing to the undeniable homoeroticism of the classical male nude as a hint for readers in the know?

Several members of the audience were part of a group of friends the Toxic Titties had dubbed “the Lesbian Mafia” who came to see Cassils and Leary perform much as you would go to see a friend’s concert or play. For this group of viewers, the well-known queer identification of Cassils, Leary, and another lesbian model created an intense dissonance with the presentation of their bodies as a living vision of heterosexual desire. Beecroft’s vision seems to be dependent on the anonymity of the models, their appearance as pure form or image. If you happen to know one or more of the models, you have the unsettling experience of seeing their bodies transformed to match as much as possible a particular (heterosexual) aesthetic that has been applied to the entire group. You see an


16 “The kouroi is basically meaningless—or rather, its significance must lie in only distinguishing characteristics, namely, its nudity, its youth, its beauty, its autonomy, and its immutability: in other words, its form” (Stewart 1990, 109).
individual you know intimately and see her presented simply as the sum of her physical characteristics, which may match or differ from those of the woman next to her to varying degrees. Here in the space of the gallery, viewers in the know witness the repetition, reenactment, and enforcement of dominant ideals of heteronormative female beauty applied to bodies ordinarily marked by queer signification. This scene calls to mind Judith Butler’s description of heterosexuality as “an incessant and panicked imitation of its own naturalized idealization” (1993b, 314). The presence of queer bodies already invested in their own representation renders VB46 a sort of demented drag performance; even naked, these bodies rupture the illusion of “direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practice, fantasy and sexuality” (Butler 1993b, 315).

The mechanics of meaning in Beecroft’s work are drawn into relief when the bodies in the photographs and performances are not anonymous but rather other women artists, fellow participants in the social rituals and economy of images in the Los Angeles art world, already invested in using their bodies as sites for interrogating the politics of representation. How does the meaning of the work change when we, as viewers, have full knowledge of the mode of its production? What if we consider the performance inclusive of recruitment, auditions, selection of models, grooming and alteration of model’s bodies, labor practices, fees paid, photography and video shoots, and the resulting documentation? During the live performance of VB46, I was watching with several friends from the graduate art program at the California Institute of the Arts. Having been given updates by Cassils and Leary over the preceding days, none of us could view the work on a purely formal or symbolic level. We were thinking of the emotional trauma the models had undergone, their exhaustion, and the awkwardness of being a young female artist and having gallerists, art critics, and your fellow graduate students view your naked body altered and employed in the service of another artist’s symbolic order.

Inside out

CL: Seeing the who’s who of the L.A. art world: dealers, collectors, critics, artists, etc., gathered for the dubious entertainment of watching thirty nude, airbrushed, well-paid models with exposed hairless genitalia stand in four-inch heels until they were forced by exhaustion to sit was a bit disheartening to say the least. Our personal stake in art and in the art world may have put Heather and me in a slightly different position from the other models, who were primarily hired from agencies. I have also
never done anything like modeling, so my reaction to this experience may have been more extreme. In the end it was damaging to be so directly viewed as more object than individual.

There was an air of scrutiny, assessment. Some people in the audience openly discussed our individual bodies, postures, and appearance with one another as if we couldn’t hear them. The gaze of the audience felt both violating and impersonal, but in an intensely objectifying way that I had never experienced. There was a profound separation between the audience and the models. The unification of the models was constituted through our sameness in appearance, through the fact that we were following a set of instructions, through the pay we would eventually receive, and through the solidarity formed by the ordeal of the previous three days. For me there was a psychological necessity in feeling part of the group, less visible in my sameness. I tried to mentally withdraw as much as possible, yet I was acutely aware of the discomfort and embarrassment of the people I knew. Heather was beside me; in my peripheral vision I could see her standing, strong, erect, trembling, cold sweat running down her face and body as it was mine. In the audience, my girlfriend stood facing me, awkward and uncomfortable. I could see my collaborators Julia and Cathy, protective and disconcerted (fig. 4). Another friend, obviously uncomfortable at seeing me presented this way, tried desperately to make me laugh. She would pretend to grope my girlfriend, grind against her, presenting me with a playful campy spectacle in a well-intentioned attempt to offset my exposure. Her instinct to break the facade was understandable, but I couldn’t imagine letting it crack, to separate from the mass of models behind me. A departure from the instructions would differentiate me, draw unwanted attention, and force me to inhabit my own subjectivity again; to do this within the context of the performance would be terrifying.

JS: Our identification and empathy with our friends, collaborators, and classmates as models precluded any possibility of engaging with the authorized readings of VB46 suggested by Beecroft’s gallerists, hired essayists, and handlers. Unfortunately, as Hainley points out in his scathing Artforum review of the performance, “the press material for VB46 mentions no manicurists or hairdressers, no cobbler or talent agency. [Beecroft’s] elision of (women’s) labor is rarely commented on” (2001, 189–90). Where does the performance begin and end? We are led to believe that the performance is self-contained, that it begins when the doors of the gallery are opened and ends when the models walk out of the room three hours later. Without insider information, I would not have known that the models had been working under extremely exhausting
and traumatic physical and emotional conditions for the three days prior to the performance. The Gagosian’s press materials suggest a narrative of endurance: “The women begin en masse, aggressive and strong, slowly melting into boredom and exhaustion from the physical trial of the performance.”17 They fail to mention that the gallery performance is just the tip of the iceberg. The exhaustion evidenced by the models’ gradual move from standing to seated or reclining positions during the course of the performance has been carefully manufactured through the conditions of their labor over the preceding days. The models are pushed to the point of total physical and emotional collapse before the stated period of the performance even begins; when given the directive to “sit when you are tired,” they are at that point all too ready to comply. As Leary notes,

“From the perspective of the models, the experience of the performance at the Gagosian was intimately tied to the trauma of the past several days of physical and emotional stress” (e-mail interview, November 2004).

**Dishonorable discharge**

*HC:* When we were placed in formation I thought I was ready. Not a hair out of place on my head; not a hair on my body. They had been careful to extract all of them. My makeup was immaculate and labored. I looked like an Aryan overgrown troll baby, a bad sci-fi porn star. I had pissed half an hour before so as to avoid any future trips to the bathroom. Beside me were others; the sound of their breath kept me breathing and informed me of our aliveness throughout the evening. When I forgot to breathe I listened for the girl beside me to make certain we were still there. Everything was white. We could have been anywhere in that decontextualized pod of a room. But we were not anywhere. We were at the Gagosian Gallery in Beverly Hills.

The air was icy, too cold to be that nude. Although it was only the very beginning of a three-hour performance, my feet were already pinched, my ankles swollen, and my feet blistered from the last three days of standing. It was only afterward that we figured out we had all been given the same size shoe to wear. I was not about to let anyone know the already present fatigue in my body. I had decided ahead of time that I would stand for the full three hours. Standing would be a protest. It would symbolize my strength and resistance, and although the instructions were explicit—sit when you are tired—relaxing into any kind of seated position allowed an already too available glimpse of my bald raw pussy.

I was in the front of a V-like formation when the first two people entered the room. Goosebumps left my ghostly flesh, and despite the bite in the air streams of sweat ran little rivers in the airbrushed makeup. It was this first physically stressed symptom of my body that made me realize that, although I had decided to go through with this, my body correctly protested. As the first viewers entered the white cube my quadriceps started to shake so hard I thought I was going to fall out of the designer heels that cost more than my rent. My fists were clenched and stomach taut. I felt like my skin was a force field against the eyes that were drinking me in. I wanted to make myself menacing and indigestible. In my mind contracted...
muscles bounced their viewership off of my body like fists in the boxing ring. My jaw was clenched and I was dripping from quiet exertion. The more I stood the more energy built up in me until I started to feel like I was going to explode in my stillness. “Wow, she’s so angry. Wherever did she find her? Really great.” And it was in this moment that I realized that I was powerless in this situation. My silent anger was easily subsumed by the artwork. No one could tell that my anger was my own and not a possible instruction of the artist. Despite my intentions, I had sold my body and my voice. (Heather Cassils, text exhibited at the California Institute of the Arts in 2003)

JS: Members of the audience and reviewers commented on the anger displayed by Cassils, Leary, and several other models. Michael Duncan, in his *Art in America* review of the performance writes, “Some of the buff, rather butch-looking women adopted fierce stances, following the lead of a model facing the entrance sporting nipple rings and standing in a kind of frozen rancor with clenched fists and pinched brow” (2001, 96). The overarching scene of Beccroft-brand “bodies for sale” (or, indeed, already sold to the artist) overrode any attempts at individual agency asserted by the models. This situation was poignantly marked when a middle-aged man wearing a dark blue double-breasted suit with gleaming brass buttons walked into the gallery during the live performance, eyed the models, and only half-jokingly asked, “Can I see a price list?”

**Forty thousand dollars, or a thousand words**

JS: Since Beccroft’s work is sold and published in photographic form, her images asserting a direct indexical relationship to the bodies of the models (if not to the actual performances), it must be placed within a discourse of photography and the politics of representation. Traditional performance-document photography asserts the absolute power of the photographic image as truth-bearing index; the grainy black-and-white photographs of Schneeman’s *Interior Scroll* or Chris Burden’s 1971 performance *Shoot* come to mind. The parallel tradition of performance for photography employed most famously by Wilke, Cindy Sherman, and Kusama still relies on the truth value of the photograph but eliminates the reference to a live event. These images are created in a studio setting, with the camera as the only audience. The photographs of Beccroft occupy an ambiguous middle ground: they are produced in the mode of performance for photography, shot in studio situations separate from the mo-
ment of the live performance, but are distributed as though they consti-
tuted a documentary image of the live event. The use of digital
manipulation is prevalent but never mentioned, placing the images at even
further remove from the actual conditions of the performance in both its
live and in-studio incarnations.

Cassils made a decision to stand for the three-hour duration of the
performance, never sitting or lying down. She intended for her choice to
ignore the directive by Beecroft that the models sit down or recline when
they were tired to be a demonstration of strength and endurance. She
also intended for the presence of her nonnormative, queer bodybuilder’s
physique to serve as a critical intervention in the work. Both attempts at
individual agency failed: the photographs sold in Beecroft’s second Ga-
osian Los Angeles exhibition were shot during the photography and
video shoots conducted at Sony Studios in the days prior to the perfor-
ances, and they all feature Cassils lying down or seated, disturbingly
displaying her genitalia. The photograph that most accurately depicts her
stance during the performance, published on the cover of Flash Art Italia
and twice in Beecroft’s recent monograph (Beecroft and Beccaria 2003,
cover, 325), has been neutered through digital manipulation, her body-
builder’s muscles smoothed out to conform to a more feminine ideal (fig.
5). The broken straps on the models’ shoes, Cassils’s muscles, the sweat
dripping down her body, these are the points of punctum that draw me
into the performance and provide relief from the dreary and depressing
studium of the image (see Barthes 1981, 27). The erasure of the “accident
that pricks me” in the photographic representations of VB46 reduces the
images to pure fashion, eliminating that which “bruises me, is poignant
to me” (Barthes 1981, 27).

When I look at the photographs from VB46, my eyes travel across a
series of points that signify identity, desire, nature, sex, culture, and gen-
der—the models’ faces, their exposed vulvas, and their designer high heels.
The narrative of Beecroft’s photography depends on a straight line of
causality being drawn between biological sex, gender, identity, and desire.
Any ruptures in this myth of uniformity must be altered, contained, or
erased. The broken straps of the designer shoes, signifying a certain failure
of compulsory femininity, are repaired in the digital image. Cassils’s de-
viat body, too far outside the norms of femininity as imagined by Beecroft
to be corrected in the salon, was instead remolded in the hands of a
Photoshop artist. It was not enough to reassign the codes of gender and

18 This cover image appeared in Flash Art Italia (34 [June/July 2001]: 228).
Figure 5  This is an appropriation of the Flash Art Italia cover executed by Cassils in 2002. It was first exhibited at the California Institute of the Arts. Again, this is a scan. Heather Cassils, “Will Work for Food,” Mixed Media, 2002. Color version available as an online enhancement.
fashion applied to her body; the flesh itself had to be altered in its representation. This reconstitution of Cassils’s body calls to mind a question raised by Butler in her argument for considering biological sex and the materiality of the body as a site of cultural construction: “Even as the category of sex is always reinscribed as gender, that sex must still be presumed as the irreducible point of departure for the various cultural constructions it has come to bear. . . . In an effort to displace the terms of this debate, I want to ask how and why ‘materiality’ has become a sign of irreducibility, that is, how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction?” (1993a, 28).

The processes of production, selection, and manipulation in Beecroft’s photographs serve to uphold dominant ideologies in the interest of brokering high-end luxury commodities. Performance art is not a medium that commercial galleries have much use for, with its traditions of political content and resistance to commodification. So why is Beecroft, ostensibly a performance artist, given so much financial and institutional support in the art world? The production costs for VB46 easily approach $200,000, including the model fees, which totaled $81,200; the salon expenses at Frederic Fekkai, conservatively estimated at $8,000; studio rental fees; and professional rates for a team of makeup artists, production managers, lighting assistants, two photographers, and a videographer over three days of shooting. The Alessandro dell’Acqua shoes, in a blatant instance of high-end cobranding, were donated by the designer; he describes his “collaboration” with Beecroft on his company’s Web site.19 To put this $200,000 sum in perspective, the expense of this one performance is equivalent to two years worth of a MacArthur fellowship, or “genius grant.” An answer to this query comes easily when Beecroft’s second Gagosian exhibition, VB46 Photographs, is taken into consideration. In December 2003 I returned to the Gagosian for the opening of this exhibition. Five individual photographs, for the most part close-ups of my Toxic Titties collaborators Cassils and Leary, were offered for sale in editions of six. A wall-sized triptych depicting a 360-degree view of the performance was available in an edition of three; Cassils’s exposed vulva, digitally reddened to enhance its status as a focal point, constituted the centerpiece of this work. I asked

19 The text in the biography section of his Web site reads “Alessandro Dell’Acqua believes that art and fashion are closely intertwined. He has collaborated repeatedly with American video artist and photographer Vanessa Beecroft. For the VB46 show at the Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles, Beecroft’s models wore nothing except Dell’Acqua shoes with angular metal toes and heels” (http://www.alessandrodellacqua.com/html_version/biography.html).
to see a price list: the smaller individual images started at $40,000, larger photographs sold for $60,000, and the giant triptychs went for $80,000. Some quick math shows that this exhibition had the potential to generate over $2 million in income for the gallery and the artist. The production costs are easily covered by the sale of even a small fraction of the photographs.

In this big-business scenario, there is no room for experimentation or criticality. Beecroft never tells us what her intentions are regarding her art; a strategic openness is maintained in order to maximize the market value of the work. By failing to take a critical position in relation to her work, she tacitly accepts and promotes dominant ideology. Beecroft fits easily into Lucy Soutter’s description of “panty photographers,” female artists working with narrative photography in the 1990s: “As far as I can tell, panty photographers like to keep their politics as ambiguous as their imagery; the potential that their stance might actually be masochistic, misogynistic, or crassly materialistic is another optional overlay, to be retained or discarded by the viewer at whim” (2000, 12). Beecroft’s identity as a young, beautiful female artist precludes any fear on the part of viewers that her work might be exploitative or demeaning to women. Biographical details that are released concerning her struggles with anorexia and bulimia provide a supposed impetus for the work. Even the oblique references to body art of the 1970s provided by her choice of performance as a medium serve to imbue the art with a vague aura of criticality, alleviating the guilt of potential buyers. One can purchase an expensive photograph of beautiful young women naked in high heels and at the same time feel that one is doing something socially redeeming or at least unproblematic.

Reframings

CI: We were in between photo shoots waiting for the film to be loaded, all lying naked on our marks on the concrete floor, the bright lights obscuring everything outside the circle we were in.

“Have you ever had sex with a woman?” The conversation was between three of the younger models lying behind me (I have always had selective hearing). I covertly looked at the woman to my left, who I knew to be a dyke, to see if she had noticed; she shot me a conspiratorial smile. We both nonchalantly shifted our positions for a better view.

20 For a discussion of the cathartic and guilt-alleviating properties of Beecroft’s art, see Jennifer Doyle’s essay “White Sex: Vaginal Davis Does Vanessa Beecroft” (2003).
“I did once. . . .”
“What was it like?”
“Wow, I don’t know how to describe it. . . . It was good though, but kind of weird after.”
“Would you do it again. . . . Are you bi?”
“I would do it again. . . but I am not bi, though.”
“You should try it.”

Not long after, alas, we were directed to stand for the next round of shots. After this moment, occasionally, I was able to flip this otherwise intolerable situation into something undeniably erotic: we were all locked together, vulnerable, stripped, bruised, objectified, lying naked next to each other for hours. I used my desire as a tool to sublimate the feelings of degradation and discomfort, to reinstate my subjectivity and regain control. What better way for us to pass the time than to imagine scenarios, seduction, all of the possible ways we could have sex with these girls?

JS: I would like to suggest a conceptual shift in viewing the documentation of VB46. What if, instead of viewing Cassils’s and Leary’s bodies as objects modeled to conform to Beccroft’s fantasy, we can invest them with subjectivity? Upon viewing their bodies, or the representation of their bodies, we might consider their action in VB46 as artists working in the mode of Ono’s Cut Piece or Abramovic’s Rhythm O, self-consciously surrendering their bodies for a period of time in order to expose and make transparent a set of viewing conditions and modes of production already present. By inserting their queer bodies into Beccroft’s heterosexualizing process, Cassils and Leary make Beccroft’s delineation of acceptable and unacceptable bodies visible. The experimentation they perform on their own bodies by allowing themselves to be subjected to the production processes of VB46 allows for the situation of the performance to become completely transparent. This makes the power dynamics and financial aspects of the production available for analysis, bringing them into the symbolic order of the work. Because their bodies are already invested with a very different set of significations in their representation within Toxic Titties’ performance and media art, Cassils’s and Leary’s bodies “mean” differently from the anonymous bodies depicted in Beccroft’s work. As such, VB46 is subject to a set of readings Beccroft never intended.

HC: I would pass the time while posing by imagining the intricacies of possible sexual encounters with my fellow models. It was not long before I was imagining pinning or being pinned down by these hard strong women on the cool cement gallery floor. As I stood still as a statue for the buyers and collectors, inside I was gripping and licking and fucking.
My eyes became a projector, and I would project for myself my own special porn onto the white gallery wall. Highly featured in these fantasies was the model two girls down to my left who resembled a beautiful Paul Newman. Sometimes I still see her out on the scene, and I am caught off guard. She continues to makes me hard/wet, and it confuses me. Paul was not my usual type. Still, I longed to lace my fingers through the thick curls of her cropped cherubic hair and run my tongue over her strong jawline. I was curious how it would feel to flex against her taut muscled body in a struggle of power and desire. In these fantasies I would submit to her, lick down her legs to the ill-fitting expensive footwear and bite at the straps. During the performance she talked to no one. She would sit apart from the group in one of the curved corners of the room. Her robe was open as she leaned back like a reclining Greek statue. She read from a book that featured a wolf that bared its white fangs on the cover. Before the final performance we approached each other. It was a strange moment because neither of us initiated it. We came together as we were supposed to be taking our places. I was stretching my limbs to prepare for the several hours of standing. She faced me, and her look summoned all my repressed homo desire. I could feel the heat from her abdomen. We stretched our quadriceps and used each other to steady ourselves in the high heels neither of us was used to wearing. Her hands were hot and
electric on my shoulders. We held the stretch for several seconds and then resumed our positions. The performance commenced. It was opening night at the Gagosian (fig. 6).

JS: By expanding the frame of analysis to include the behind-the-scenes production of Beecroft’s art, the subjective experience of her models, and the economics of its sale and distribution, we are able to finally perform the act of critique that Beecroft’s supporters claim her work enacts. We are forced to consider the process and experience concealed behind the glossy high-production-value images and to weigh that experience heavily in our consideration of her work. Placing their bodies under Beecroft’s control for the duration of VB46, Cassils and Leary acted simultaneously as subject and object, artist and model, investigator and employee, saboteur and victim. It is from this complex subject position that they were able to experience and ultimately reveal the troubling dynamics of Beecroft’s practice and, by extension, the cultural conditions that make it possible. Their experience is precisely what is made invisible in the photographs, videos, catalogs, and installations exhibited by Beecroft, and yet it is the experience of her models that constitutes the most essential, interesting, meaningful, and ultimately horrifying aspect of her work. We demand a new set of readings of Beecroft’s work, with serious consideration of the process behind the product.

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