

identity crisis ELKE KRYSTUFEK



The Viennese artist Elke Krystufek (b. 1970) creates a seemingly endless stream of self-portraits and autobiographical narratives using a collage of photographs, drawing, painting, and sculptural installation. In the frenetic process of self representation Krystufek breaks visual conventions regarding the representation of the female body. The aggression evident in her work not only reflects Cindy Sherman's grotesque period but is also a critical reflection upon the radical performance art of the Viennese Aktionismus group (Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl und Adolf Frohner). Against the machismo of Aktionismus Krystufek presents feminine action.

Indeed her work can be understood as a transposition of aktionismus into graphic, photographic and installation practice. The force of her work is significant from a gender political point of view because she presents female sexuality in a manner that is diametrically opposed to most representations of women in the mass media. She superimposes the visual language of dirt, aggression and possibly mental instability on top of otherwise conventional modes of female representation such as the nude and the fashion photograph.

In performance terms Krystufek submits herself self-confi-



Elke Krystufek, Installation, Portikus, Frankfurt-am-Main. In this work Krystufek intersperses images of herself with members of the Californian band Spain.



dently and aggressively to the voyeuristic gaze of her audience. Moisdon-Trembley reports that: 'in 1993, just after entering the fine arts academy of vienna, Elke Krystufek began a violent work involving the deconstruction of archetypes and artistic formalism.' {Moisdon-Trembley 2000}. A fundamental feature of Krystufek's work lies in its radical open-endedness, there is no specific feminist ideology informing her work and in this sense her work is closer to Sherman than to Barbara Kruger. But unlike Sherman Krystufek shows her own face and her body: which lends a performative dimension to her work.

Although there is no specific ideology informing her work it is intimately intertwined in the apparatus of mass media. This is of course an enduring theme in postmodern female art. But the new generation of artists do not have a straightforward relationship with mass media. There is no doubt that a great deal of her energy is directed at the ongoing attempts to colonise the world with Hollywoodesque idealisations of the female figure. Yet at the same time she is deeply involved in popular culture and music which is inescapably entwined in the global apparatus of mass media. For example, in her installation at the Portikus gallery Frankfurt she referenced the Californian band Spain. She interspersed large 'walk-in' box paintings of herself with similar structures portrying the band members.

Krystufek's fundamental goal, therefore, appears to be to use the media agaisn the media and action which acknowledges one's inelecutable mediatization. Weininger was a brilliant Austrian intellectual whose ideas can be read both as proto-Fascist, profoundly misogynist and extremely creative. He



TOP LEFT Detail from Krystufek's *Hitler's Children* compared with TOP RIGHT a fellow Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch (from a 1960s performance) and BOTTOM Egon Schiele's *Self-Portrait as Seated Nude*, 1910.

argued that all people are composed of a mixture of the male and the female substance. The male aspect is active, productive, conscious and moral/logical, while the female aspect is passive, unproductive, unconscious and amoral/allogical.

In a 1997 exhibition at the Secession, Vienna, 'Elke Krystufek reads Otto Weininger', Krystufek tackled the short-lived, proto-Fascist Austrian intellectual Otto Weininger's (1880–1903) misogynistic statements about 'the inferiority of the female that springs from of her seeming inability to curb or sublimate her sexual appetites' (Secession 1997). One might say that Weininger was a perfect target for Krystufek because his misogyny was matched by his madness (he committed a histrionic suicide in Beethoven's house when he was only 23 years old possibly to promote his book *Sex and Character*, if that was his intention he was remarkably successful. One can see this in the fact that although Krystufek attacks Weininger's ideas she also cannot escape memorializing him as a 'significant' fellow-Austrian.

Krystufek could be said to be continuing the tradition of Viennese exhibitionism evident not only in Weinberger but also Egon Schiele and the male dominated Aktionismus performance artists. But perhaps she is more reflective in her work about making her body a screen for the projection of predominantly male fantasies concerning female sexuality.