

# SHOCK TACTICIAN

**Nudity, death, illness, and opera are just some of the subjects that Katarzyna Kozyra addresses in her provocative performances and videos**



**M**Y IDOL is a big woman with a big existence, a big voice," proclaims the rail-thin, pixie-faced Polish artist Katarzyna Kozyra. In preparation for her latest (in-progress) video-and-performance project, she has been taking regular voice lessons, learning to sing scales in operatic style while knowing, as she puts it, "I am not able to do it well, I will never get good enough." For this multimonitor work, in which she is also tutored by a Berlin drag queen in the art of "femme-ing" it up, Kozyra learned Cherubino's pants-role aria "Non so più cosa son" ("I No Longer Know Who I Am," which the work takes as its title), from Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*.

This piece appeared at the Galeria Civica di Arte Contemporaneo, in Trento, Italy, and at Postmasters gallery in New York.

Kozyra envisions incorporating a gala performance of the aria on a boat, and it will be videotaped—a nightmarelike segment in which she is, inevitably, unprepared for the spotlight. The aria had a dry run this fall in Pittsburgh, where her work is included in the Carnegie International.

The most visible and inspired of a group of Polish artists to come to international prominence in the 1990s, Kozyra cut her teeth—like compatriots Pawel Althamer and Artur Zmijewski—in the groundbreaking classes of Grzegorz Kowalski, aka "Kowalski's Workshop," at Warsaw's Academy of Fine Arts. Kowalski encouraged his students to use their own and other bodies in the making of visceral performance and video art. Jerzy Grotowski's famed "poor theater," in which the body is the ultimate artist's tool, seems a significant precedent.

For Kozyra, attention outside Poland came with her contribution to the Polish pavilion at the 1999 Venice Biennale, where she won an honorable mention for



**Women's Bathhouse, 1997, captures nude women in a Turkish-style bathhouse in Budapest.**

ages and sizes in a blue-tiled Turkish-style bathhouse in Budapest. The male version upped the ante: Kozyra posed as a man, complete with a prosthetic penis and fake chest and facial hair, and was videotaped alongside the seemingly unsuspecting male bathers. There is an air of danger to this enterprise, the fear that she will be unmasked at any moment.

Says Hanna Wróblewska, who curated the 1999 pavilion and is deputy director of Warsaw's Zachęta Gallery (a contemporary-art museum), "It's not about changing the world. It's more like, 'Let's see how the world works, how the world is.'" She gives the artist credit for waking up the Polish public to contemporary art. Kozyra's 1993 *Pyramid of Animals* was the first—and most controversial—of her visually and conceptually arresting works. In that piece, a stuffed horse, dog, cat, and rooster were placed one atop the other in order of size. The catch was that they had been chosen and killed specifically for that work. Although the animals were des-



**Portraits of the artist as diva (2004, top left) and as Manet's Olympia, 1996.**

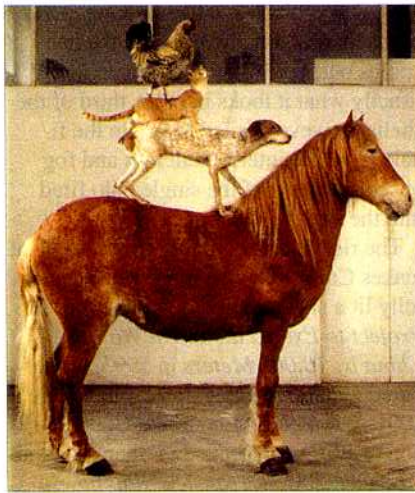
*Men's Bathhouse*, the follow-up to her *Women's Bathhouse* (1997), in which she videotaped nude women of various

aged and sized people—and gained Kozyra instant noto-

riety. During the fallout, the artist, who by then was being treated for Hodgkin's disease, embarked on a new piece, *Olympia* (1996)—in which she posed, hairless and nude and with an intravenous chemotherapy drip, as Manet's *Olympia*.

"Katarzyna always sticks her finger in the wound," says Laura Hoptman, curator of the Carnegie International exhibition on view through March 20. Hoptman chose the artist's *The Rite of Spring* (2001), a video installation for which Kozyra took still photographs of elderly people executing the moves from the Stravinsky/Diaghilev ballet of that name while lying on the floor. The stills were then stop-animated to create what Hoptman calls "robotic movement to this ecstatic, pagan music."

Kozyra, 41, grew up feeling like an outsider in Vienna and Munich, where her father worked as a businessman. She moved back to Warsaw at 17, studying German philology at Warsaw University. She says, "The first time I felt good was at the art academy," where she transferred after a few years at university. Things German



**The controversial *Pyramid of Animals*, 1993, involved killing animals already headed for slaughter.**

have, nevertheless, influenced her; she cites filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Thomas Mann, and even Wagner. "Polish people hate Wagner, but I think he's great. I like everything that's heavy," she says.

Though she now spends almost half the year in Berlin, Kozyra says, "it's convenient to be in Warsaw. It's flexible here, people have more imagination." Poland's contemporary-art market, especially for video, is practically nil, yet Kozyra has sold pieces, which she usually produces in editions of three, to such collections as Stockholm's Moderna Museet and Vienna's Museum Moderner Kunst. According to her New York gallery, Postmasters, prices for her single-channel works begin at \$8,000, and multichannel installations are \$50,000 to \$150,000.

Referring to *The Rite of Spring* and to another piece—this one about paramilitary groups who blow things up for sport (*Punishment and Crime*, 2002)—Wróblewska remarks, "First she learned ballet, then bullets. She wants to know everything, wants to experience it, to try it herself." For her part, Kozyra says: "It's about educating myself. I want the work to involve me and my emotions; it's not about skills. That's the only way to get feedback." —**Cynthia Nadelman**