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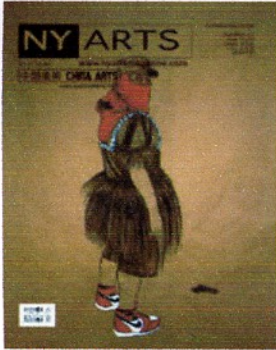
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## Il Castrato: Katarzyna Kozyra and the Open Wounds of Society - Stefano Pasquini



Katarzyna Kozyra, *Il Castrato*, 2006. Performance. Produced by Gender Bender. Photo Credit: M. Oliva Soto.

Katarzyna Kozyra has made strong and provocative works that question the rules of our society: she forced the concept of privacy when she dressed up like a man and attended a men-only spa (Men's Bathhouse); then, she participated in fake war actions, with a group of violent warlords and real weapons (Punishment and Crime). But, in the last few years, Katarzyna Kozyra has begun her most recent project, and one in which art and life are even more entangled. "Only In Art, Dreams Come True," begun by Kozyra in 2003, is a series of performances (which also became videos) in which the artist experiments with personal transformation, a true metamorphosis, just like the caterpillar that becomes a butterfly, or the ugly duckling that becomes a beautiful swan.

Do you remember when you were a kid and thought of yourself as a hero of fairytales, or as the princess waiting for the blue prince? Well, Katarzyna Kozyra still has these dreams, and she thinks that they can become reality through art. Of course, she'll need the help of some magical beings capable of helping her, as our heroine, in this difficult transformation, just like the little mice in Cinderella or the dwarfs in Snow White. So, thanks to two "spiritual" guides—Gloria Viagra, a Berlin drag queen at six-foot-five tall who taught Kozyra the secrets of posture and feminine make-up, and the Maestro, a singing teacher who taught her the most famous arias—the artist began to walk through the scenes in order to become a star of the stage. From Teatro Sociale of Trento to Pittsburgh's Carnegie International, from Vienna's Kunsthalle to the Barbican of London, the artist is now staging actions in which she dances and sings, changing dresses and persona each time.

In Bologna last October, during the festival Gender Bender—dedicated to transgender cultures—Katarzyna realized the performance *Il Castrato*, and the homonymous video, shown in worldwide premiere during Arte Fiera last January. If the relationship between masculine and feminine has been one of the favorite themes of Kozyra (and one of the recurring themes of metamorphic culture, from the prophet Tiresias, to the androgyne in alchemy), the issue is still on the front line in a country such as Italy, where catholic culture is strongly defensive of traditionalist views about family and sexuality. This, however, wasn't always the case. One of the major symbols of "white voice" in lyric music, Farinelli, who died and was buried in Bologna, was the last and most famous representative of this cruel practice (in which young boys were castrated in order to keep their soprano voice timbre)—an operation that, today, could be compared to still-practiced infibulation (the removal of female genitalia). Prior to Farinelli's time, however, the "white voice" procedure was a conventional one without any particular moral implication.

In *Il Castrato*, Kozyra addresses this issue, recreating its full drama at the crucial moment of castration yet simultaneously rendering it in a comic light by surrounding it with transgender figures which move about the scene in a rhythmical coordination. The assisting public (in the video, projected in the back of the actual performance) was made up of sauna-boys, a male-only group citing Men's Bathhouse, filmed in Budapest's Gellért. Next, a catwalk of drag queens, wearing extravagant dresses and high wigs, parodying baroque style, slowly fills the stage. Gloria Viagra, taller than anyone else, enters, accompanied by the Maestro. The public is



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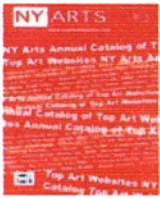
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attentive, some applaud, some react with signs of disapproval. The inspection begins; the Maestro lifts up, one by one, each skirt for the verification.

Behind them all, trying to hide, is Katarzyna, slightly rigid and embarrassed, powdered and meek, like Marie-Antoinette on the scaffold. The undressing begins, out goes the corset and we see a breastless torso. There goes the skirt and, to everyone's dismay, we are in front of a penis. Kozyra is a fake woman; measures need to be taken immediately! Two drag queens enter, bringing operating tools. The Maestro and Gloria begin a long and difficult operation of castration, and at the end, penis and testicles drop on a metal plate, together with a few drops of blood. At this stage, the Castrato starts to sing Schubert's Ave Maria, while his poor attributes ascend to the sky accompanied by two drag queens. The androgynous being, with mechanical movements provoked by the flash-colored armor that flattens her torso, leaves on a white horse from the stage of the performance (changed to a stretcher in the video).

This would be the end if it wasn't that, as in every fairy-tale, a moral is obligatory. The Maestro, Gloria Viagra and the Castrato return to the scene and intone one last Vivaldi aria, In cimento verità (who knows why it's in Polish). The subtitles in the video elucidate: "Towards victory marches steadily he who turns his gaze towards the eyes of the truth, only thus will he discover if it is good or evil." So, with this call to stare into the eye of truth, not hiding behind fake morals, the performance ends.

If someone thinks this is part of a "soft" phase for the Polish artist, who, in the past, used to be much more provocative (during her degree show in 1993, she shocked the Polish art world by displaying a pyramid of Taxidermic animals), in reality, it is just that the artist has found a lighter vein within which to work. Here, she uses the weapon of irony in an effort to turn the knife in some of the most open wounds of our society, the unresolved issues, the questions that—for modesty or morality—we prefer to leave unanswered.

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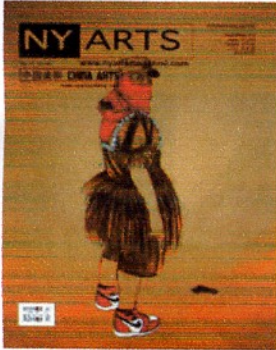


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**Katarzyna Kozyra’s Punishment and Crime - Paulina Pobocho**



Katarzyna Kozyra, Punishment and Crime, 2002. Still from Video Installation. Courtesy of Postmasters Gallery.

Since Katarzyna Kozyra’s 1993 diploma work, Pyramid of Animals, her name has been synonymous with controversy. Here, as in every subsequent project, she mines society’s social fabric and selects some of the most unsavory themes for dissection and presentation. Often her own body is her subject, as, for example, in its cancer-ravaged state in Olympia or, more recently, in the guise of Lou Salomé accompanied by the dog-like personages of Friedrich Nietzsche and Rainer Maria Rilke (Appearance as Lou Salomé). Just as often, she relies on the bodies of others, like the unknowing male and female nudes she clandestinely filmed for Men’s Bathhouse and The Bathhouse, respectively, or the geriatric models that become dancers in The Rite of Spring. In all her work, she forces us into direct confrontation with the pulp of a less than pleasant reality.



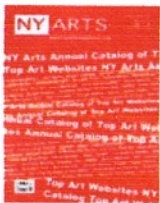
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Punishment and Crime is no exception.

The video installation, presented on one large screen and seven additional video monitors, documents Kozyra and a group of men as they engage in paramilitary activities on a shooting range just outside of Warsaw. Using enormous quantities of homemade explosives as well as a wide range of weaponry (MG42s, flame throwers, rocket propelled grenades, bazookas, etc.), the actors blow up and destroy objects that they have either constructed themselves, such as a rickety wooden shack, or brought to the site, like rusty cars that had already been slated for demolition. A peculiar pastime, the only goals for these war and weapons enthusiasts are the explosions and destructions themselves. And, their actions are entirely illegal. To protect their identities, Kozyra asks them to wear cheap masks with pin-up features and wigs of long, bountiful hair. The end product, the video installation, is a dizzying and seductive montage of explosion upon explosion perpetrated by cartoonish, puppet-like players whose gender is confused, if not concealed. And, whereas the crime is copiously illustrated, the punishment is eclipsed.

The title of the video, Punishment and Crime, is an inversion of the title of Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s famous novel Crime and Punishment. Dostoyevsky tells the tale of a man who commits murder and is then haunted by its memory and his own growing sense of guilt. Viewing Kozyra’s video, we can be certain that a similar fate is not in store for her protagonists. They are, of course, not hurting anyone and putting only their own lives and safety in jeopardy. Absent of any ideological motivation, the gratuitous violence is a nonsensical end in itself that speaks to a particular primal obsession, which begins in youth. But, unlike innocent war games that children, most often boys, play, the dangers here are very real. In fact, in an interview, Kozyra mentions a friend of hers who had to be “scraped from the wall with a spatula” after he was blown apart by an errant explosive. This very real threat of bodily harm can, of course, be interpreted as the punishment. But, Kozyra is rarely this literal and narrow in her address. Moreover, the punishment, as her title suggests, is not a consequence of the crime, as in Dostoyevsky’s novel. Here, the punishment precedes the crime.

And so, we must imagine that these war enthusiasts have already been punished. Like in so many of Kozyra’s works, the subject of Punishment and Crime is only partially that which we see projected on the screen. Outside of our field of vision, but integral to the piece is the context that gave birth to this strange (or not so strange) behavior: the society that cultivates this insatiable need for violence. The crime, which follows, is a possible, and perhaps inevitable, outcome, one which these men are consumed by and destined to enact over and over again.

*Paulina Pobocho is an art historian and writer based in New York. She is currently a PhD candidate at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU, writing her dissertation on the Polish painter and theater director Tadeusz Kantor, and a teaching fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art.*

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