

# ARTFORUM

APRIL 2011

## WARSAW

### Katarzyna Kozyra

ZACHĘTA NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Comprising many of Katarzyna Kozyra's major works in various mediums, this exhibition offered a unique opportunity for a close look at the artist's oeuvre, while inviting its critical reassessment in the context of present-day Poland. "Casting," the title selected by the show's curator, Hanna Wróblewska (the new director of the Zachęta National Gallery of Art), was taken from a new work, dated 2010, in which a gallery space was transformed into a temporary acting studio where



Katarzyna Kozyra, *Cheerleader*, 2006, still from a color video, 4 minutes 30 seconds.

viewers were invited to try out for the role of the artist in her forthcoming autobiographical feature film.

In Poland, Kozyra has been a divisive figure for nearly two decades. The well-documented debate around her highly controversial diploma piece, *Pyramid of Animals*, 1993—a sculpture made of stuffed animals, featuring a horse mounted by a dog, a cat, and a rooster, with an accompanying video showing the horse being flayed and butchered—became a cause célèbre for advocates of the Polish branch of "critical art," a tendency of thought and expression current in the 1990s that focused on the body and brought political issues to the forefront. This new outlook generated an intense public debate about the responsibility of artists in post-Communist society. Undeniably, the media attention paid to Kozyra's work encouraged other local artists to address controversial and sensitive issues, such as the place of various minorities—be they ethnic or sexual—and the hierarchy of gender in Polish society.

Kozyra's well-known photographic installation *Olympia*, 1996, and the video installations *The Bathhouse*, 1997, and *Men's Bathhouse*, 1999, which deal with nudity and aging in a provocative and highly voyeuristic manner, acquired significance in her homeland a few years later, not just because they questioned the limits of what separates public from private, but also because for some they illustrated the moral decline of Poland as the country embraced capitalism and the free-market economy—even as for others they conveyed the promise of a new freedom. Kozyra responded to these ambiguous feelings by endowing masterpieces from the past with a growing strangeness, using role-playing and cross-dressing as means of personal and public introspection. For example, in her video installation *The Rite of Spring*, 1999–2002, she recast the famous ballet by Nijinsky and Stravinsky as an animated, marionette-like dance performed by naked aging men and women wearing rubber penis or vagina contraptions. The artist has also continued to feature unorthodox characters in later pieces; the film *Summertale*, 2008, is a delightful yet highly morbid psychodrama, in which a group of eccentrics (including Kozyra herself, who plays a sexy little girl) are brutally assassinated by five female dwarfs when they visit an enchanted country house. Interestingly enough, although artistically and technically more sophisticated than her earlier works, these recent pieces did not cause any particular controversy when presented in Poland, because provocation has now become a common strategy for many younger artists seeking to attract attention to their work.

With the focus on the artist herself in the majority of her pieces, Kozyra might appear at times lacking the self-criticality that she expects from the viewer. This seems to be a problem for much "critical art," which seems to have lost its polemical edge in recent years. What sets Kozyra apart from many of her (predominantly male) colleagues who defined Polish art of the 1990s, and thus guarantees her a pivotal place in its history, is her continuing willingness to find "strangeness" in herself and to appear extremely vulnerable as she stubbornly mines her own psyche.

—Marek Bartelik