

For a recent project, conceptual artist Kerri Scharlin invited magazine feature writers and art directors to turn her into a celebrity.

SHAMELESS DAME

By Katherine Nelson



"RAW, EMBARRASSING DESIRE"

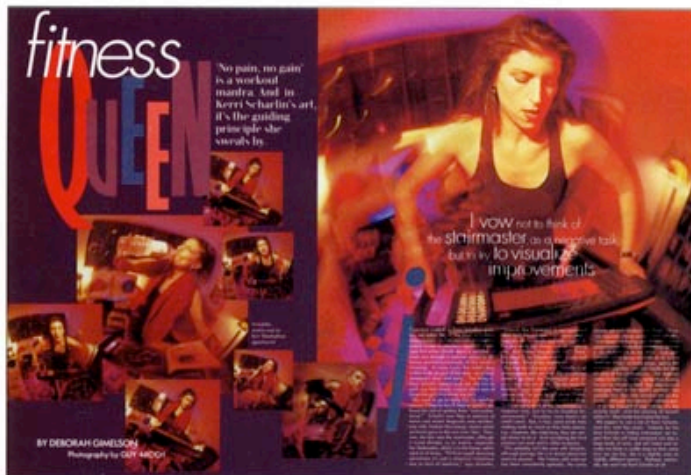
Kerri Scharlin's latest work fearlessly exposes the roots of her own artistic ambition. And forced her to take on an even more terrifying task: getting writers to meet deadlines. Ron Rosenbaum explains to Larry King how a dog ate his homework. Photographed by Annie Leibovitz



Approximately four
million copies of
this book are available in
book stores and libraries.
In Kerri Scharlin's, only
one copy is left. A copy
of this book is being
sent to the
author's home.



Kerri's at work in her studio.



4.

- 1, 2. Two views of conceptual artist Kerri Scharlin's "Interview" installation. She commissioned mock editorial layouts from some of the magazine industry's most respected art directors, writers, and photographers. Layouts were enlarged many times their actual newsstand size. Photographs courtesy Wooster Gardens.
3. Spread in the style of *Vogue* magazine, 79.5" x 98". Designer: Eric Pryor; photographer: Annie Leibovitz; writer: Ron Rosenbaum; stylist: Camilla Nickerson.
4. Spread in the style of *Self* magazine, 80" x 98". Designer: Russell Labosky; photographer: Guy Aroch; writer: Deborah Gimelson.
5. Page in the style of *Harper's Bazaar*, 79" x 49.5". Designer: Paul Eustace; photographer: Michel Arnaud; writer: Anya Sacharow; hair and makeup: Todd Skog.

CLAIMS FAME

Kerri Scharlin can't get enough of herself. The conceptual artist has arranged for students to draw and sculpt her and police artists to sketch her (via friends' descriptions), and displayed the work in galleries. She has commissioned a Barbie-doll-style coloring book based on her New York art-world experiences. For her most recent project, she commissioned several high-profile art directors and designers to assemble mock editorial layouts with—who else?—Scharlin as their subject. Participants included major names in the magazine industry: photographers Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, Annie Leibovitz, and Wayne Maser; creative director and writer Glenn O'Brien; writer/editors Ron Rosenbaum and George Wayne. Final layouts resembled those in such magazines as *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Interview*—publications that interested the artist because their main focus is portraiture. The layouts were exhibited at galleries in New York City and Stockholm, Sweden. Titled "Interview," the show explored ego, ambition, and the cult of celebrity, in which success is validated through media exposure. Above all, "Interview" was about the artist herself.

Scharlin began the project by contacting writers, then art directors, designers, and photographers. She skimmed mastheads, made cold calls to publications, and followed up by sending examples of her artwork. "Eventually people were receptive to it," she says. In addition to those mentioned above, Scharlin successfully solicited a broad cross-section of magazines that included *Vanity Fair*, *Psychology Today*, and even the tabloid journal *The Star*. In all, 14 features were displayed from as many publications.

Scharlin's commissions followed standard editorial procedure from assignment to final product. "I was going for authenticity as much as possible, both in what the writers and artists did, and also in the way they worked. Therefore, I tried to stay out of their way creatively as much as possible." Each art director selected a photographer he was familiar with, or ventured to Scharlin's studio to sort through photographs of herself and her projects. Contributors generally met suggested deadlines. Specifics of the agreement Scharlin had with each writer varied. Some worked free of charge.

Paul Eustace, art director at *Harper's Bazaar*, says the project intrigued him because of the "absolute total free-



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I had just finished the day's work and was in the middle of a long article on Haiti in *The New York Review of Books* when the phone rang. Would I write an article about her? The voice on the end identified herself as Kerri Scharlin, a conceptual artist. By way of background, the caller was telling me how her recent show consisted of coaxing various police artists to do sketches of herself, based on friends' descriptions of her. The new piece would entail writing hypothetical magazine profiles of her, blow-ups of which would then be displayed on gallery walls and possibly in a catalogue. It sounded like a scam. Tom Sawyer getting others to paint the fence, it will without present art practice. Ms. Scharlin added that she was a fan of my work and wanted very much to include me in the project. Such flattery has a way of neutralizing my skepticism. By nature obliging, I also liked being seen as hip enough for a Downtown art project, and I wanted to get back to my reading, so I said yes. A bad habit: sometimes I'll agree to a gig just to terminate a phone call.

The day of our interview, walking to Ms. Scharlin's Soho address from my nearby Village apartment, I began to fume. How did I get suckered into promoting some out-of-control artist? Alongside this budding unit was an excitement, a "blind date" feeling, left over from my bachelor days. Suppose Kerri Scharlin was a knockout. No, if she was that beautiful, she'd already have all the attention she needed, although narcissistic self-exposure and beauty often go hand-in-hand. Being a good married man, I had nothing to gain either way: but a pretty subject would simply make the interview more... Chances are she'd be lovely, and I began amusing myself preparing for the variety of ugliness she might embody, until I turned her into a scorching dwarf.

A tall, slender, very attractive woman with straight black hair had opened the door. She wore a green and black striped jersey and black pants, a classic SoHo/Tribeca look, and had on dark red lipstick. We shook hands. Her long, narrow smile, I saw at a glance, was well-plastered and had good light, with a spectacular river view. I took off my coat and looked around for somewhere to sit.

Kerri Scharlin seemed shyly nervous suddenly, as though she had forgotten the purpose of the meeting, and would have to invent one. I chose a lumpy chair against the wall. She faced me on a stool.

She remarked that she once saw me give a reading at St. Mark's Church, had liked what she'd read of mine so far, and "my boyfriend is a really big fan of yours." A complex moment. I was pleased. I experienced a virginal bachelor's disappointment, as when any pretty woman offers for the first time to her boyfriend, and I wondered if she were trying to throw off some responsibility for including me in the project onto him, or if my participation was intended somehow to reinforce their relationship.

We began talking about her various projects, surrounded by the object of an environment one might call KerriLand. The police sketches of Kerri faced me on the wall opposite. There were clay statues of Kerri on pedestals in the middle of the room. Against a far wall were blow-ups from her Kerri coloring book project, written by her but drawn by a professional coloring book illustrator, and colored by school children. The coloring book self-mockingly depicted the fantasy ambitions of a Barbie-like young artist named Kerri: the successful opening, the chic party afterwards, the glowing *Time* review.

"I work in different genres, with myself as a central," she said. "But I hope that, ultimately, it has resonance beyond me." It was the first of her disclaimers against narcissism. And indeed, she seemed far from the flamboyantly self-aggrandizing type. "If I made art about myself, I would be limited by my taste, ability, and capacity to see myself. Besides, artists have been trying to trick themselves out of their biases for a long time. The police sketch project was a metaphor for being different things to different people."

I was dubious. "You seem to project a very definite image of yourself. I would say the variations have more to do with the problem of distortions in second- or third-hand information, like that old game 'Telephone.'"

She shrugged.

"How do you think your being a woman here on this shifting ground?" I said.

"It could have something to do with my sometimes being widely misread or misinterpreted," she said. Her frankness caught me by surprise. I had expected a more ideological response, and began liking her.

"I just meant the way women are represented in our society," I said, "and therefore have to be skilled at varying presentations of self. Sort of 'As You Desire Me.'"

"Mimicking the person you're talking to," she crosses her legs. We have scarcely met, and an already caught in a rife conversation. "Well, it's true, women have to be very aware of their visual presentation. I don't try to deny that fact."

She shows me some slides. The first part of our encounter is turning into a Studio Visit, a solemn ritual which has its own protocol. In this case, however, it was difficult to know what to say because the artist hadn't herself executed any of the visual work. If one moment, "that's lovely" about some rendering of her, it might be beside the point, given the artist's intention to demonstrate only the various self-projections involved in witnessing anything. The media of her, done in academic, life-style style by art students, confirm my suspicion that she had a lovely body but the piece, of course, does not have that intention-panic thought.

The phone rings. I have a chance to look over the second draft of write-ups and reviews Kerri had given me, including the following press release:

For Immediate Release
Kerri Scharlin is currently exhibiting two projects which deal with the depiction of herself. Throughout, she performs the role of subject matter for the artworks of others. In a sense, she is using other people as her canvas, with different conceptions of representation as their focus. Multitasking...

Where such a document put in a time capsule, what would our descendants make of this mix of flat assertions and protective allusions to theory, of the sounding of reverends and subversions? I begin to feel sorry for myself, living in an era when so much art seems to be her moratorium about stereotyping and media distortion. Although I find Kerri to be intelligent, likeable, direct, I feel sorry for her having to speak this language to get ahead. Even if her work never meant to, I can't help missing the sensual jolt of inevitability that I get from a satisfying composition by Agnes Martin or Rothko.

I wonder whether this "depiction by others" which is just a gimmick, her call-in-card to get in the door of the art world, or had deeper obsessional meaning for her. That is the question.

"How did you come to this approach?" I studied art at Barnard and the



"Just because I make myself the subject of my work doesn't mean that I have a particularly smooth self-presentation."

OPERATION
"The fundamental test of today's artist is not the paintbrush but the Fiblex. Here is it that Oshiberg has gotten around to a Rubik's sculpture project."

Photograph by CHRISTIAN WITKIN

George Wayne's

NEW YORK

R.O.M.E.

\$6.00

Is this woman the next MADONNA?

Kerri Scharlin on life, lust, and losing her cherry

George Wayne: Is this really art or is this really self-promotion?
Kerri Scharlin: I think it's really art, because I think that the idea of laying out my desire in a way that is obvious and laughable perhaps and embarrassing perhaps is not necessarily going to work in my favor in terms of self-promotion.

GW: Have you always wanted to be famous?

K.S.: I think that it's really hard to be in our culture and not feel that way.

GW: Okay. As a twelve-year-old girl in grade school, what were your dreams, what did you want to be?

K.S.: Well I liked being a poet, I got some attention for writing some poetry, you know, the principal put my poem up on his door and stuff, and I really liked that feeling. I liked the magicalness of being able to enchant people through something that you do.

GW: When did you lose your virginity?

K.S.: I was late. I was nineteen.

GW: What? Oh that's great. Nineteen. Really? Were you in college?

K.S.: Yes, I was a freshman and all of a sudden I realized 'what have I been waiting for?'

Because, I don't know, I got this lecture from a friend of mine in high school who realized that I was sort of hanging out with boys a lot older and the kind of like gave me this "don't be a slut" lecture and I really took it to heart even though she went on to great heights. I somehow really took her lecture to heart, and then all of a sudden, when I got to college, I realized that the moral whatever that she was kind of giving me somehow wasn't appropriate or necessary.

GW: Who was the guy?

K.S.: Max Phelps.

GW: Was he a freshman too?

K.S.: No, he was a sophomore. He was my college boyfriend.

GW: Oh really. So you went on

to date him after that.

K.S.: Yes I did.
GW: Great. So what's the one sexual fantasy you have yet to achieve?

K.S.: The idea of a sustained relationship that's very very passionate. You know the kind of fantasy passionate kind of relationship is, as far as I know, an unreality.

GW: Do you remember the first time you ever heard the word cummingus?

K.S.: No, I don't remember that (laughs).

GW: You mean it's such a strange word, and you can't remember the first time you ever heard it?

K.S.: Let me think. You know, it sounds like something that would be in Buddhism or something like that, you know.

GW: It's like some Buddhist chant, cummingus, cummingus

K.S.: So I probably heard it several times and just assumed that it was some Buddhist thing.

GW: When did you move to New York?

K.S.: I transferred here after my sophomore year of college. I transferred to Barnard to be in New York and didn't think I was going to stay, I thought I was doing it for a semester, then I thought I was doing it for a year and I basically just stayed.

GW: So you've lived here how many years?

K.S.: About ten. It's a long time.

GW: Who is your favorite actor and actress?

K.S.: I would say that my favorite actress, well one of my favorite actresses, is Jennifer Jason Leigh.

GW: Really?

K.S.: Why? You don't think she's that great. I mean just in terms of thinking that she's got all this potential.

GW: I'd rather Bridget Fonda.

K.S.: Yeah, I like Bridget Fonda too. I was trying to be a little quirky by saying Jennifer Jason Leigh. It obviously didn't work

with you.

GW: No, it didn't work. Try again. Don't you like Sharon Stone?

K.S.: I do. I do. I like Sharon Stone a lot. And, well she's probably not an actress but um Sandra Bernhard, I really liked her in "King of Comedy."

GW: Yeah, Sandra is good. I love her because she is so novel and completely original. Actors?

K.S.: Hum...

GW: Brad Pitt?

K.S.: I've hardly ever seen him in anything, truthfully. I like Johnny Depp.

GW: You do? (laughs) Oh God.

K.S.: Do I have bad taste?

GW: Yeah, abhorrent. Johnny Depp never did anything for me.

K.S.: Oh, I like him. Um, who else? Well Liam Neeson.

GW: Oh, Liam Neeson?

K.S.: Yeah.

GW: I love his hands, my God, and his feet.

K.S.: He's great looking.

GW: Yeah, he's hot. What about Hugh Grant, Overrated. Sorry.

K.S.: Yeah, I think he's overrated too.

K.S.: What about Gabriel Byrne?

GW: Interesting. I hate his ex-wife.

K.S.: Who's that?

GW: That hag, what's her name? Ellen Barkin.

K.S.: Oh really?

GW: Yeah, I can't stand her. Do you have like a favorite fashion designer?

K.S.: Uh, let me see, let me see... Prada.

GW: Prada? Yeah, that's a four star one darling. You get kudos for that one.

GW: Are you narcissistic?

K.S.: Yes (laughs). I think that being an artist, and convincing yourself to continue, and that what you're doing is important and necessary and all that is almost inherently narcissistic.

GW: Good point. Have you ever had a marmogram?

K.S.: No, but that's a good one!



8.

dom I had to do what I wanted. I was interested to see her interpretation of the work, in turning it into an art piece. I didn't do it in a literal *Bazaar* style. I did it as if I were doing it for my own magazine, but it was obviously related to *Bazaar* because I work here."

Daniel Stark, associate art director at *GQ* (who now works for *US* magazine), also participated in the project. "I had never been able to do something to that large a scale before, in a gallery with a very limited audience, not merely small-scale on a newsstand. I did the design keeping in mind the direction of *GQ* at that time: using the same fonts, thinking about space a certain way, and using the same color palette. Overall, I think it was good for *GQ* to see the magazine represented in that kind of context."

The creative process behind each spread was as important to Scharlin's concept as the final product. A story done in the style of the profile magazine *Interview*, titled "A Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman," was designed by Tony Moxham, the magazine's senior designer, and photographed by Steven Klein. Toying with one of Scharlin's themes, Klein attempted to "erase" her identity. The stylist dressed Scharlin in white, and Klein requested that the makeup artist use white tones to wash out her features. "Portraiture is about emphasizing identity and these photographs are about completely the opposite," Scharlin explains.

The spreads for *Vogue*, titled "Raw, Embarrassing Desire," were actually slated to run in the publication. "I had to keep calling up to find out whether the story was running. When I finally found out it wasn't, I was totally devastated," Scharlin says. Here, the artist was photographed by Annie Leibovitz in a uniform-like Prada suit. She stands on a linoleum floor against a police station wall under fluorescent lighting. Her shoelaces are untied and her hands clenched; a nameplate hangs around her neck. The concept for the shoot evolved from a project in which Scharlin's friends described her features to 17 different police artists. "The idea was that I had been dragged down to the police station in the middle of the night," Scharlin explains.

Scharlin organized her final exhibition to emphasize the visual impact of the spreads. Some were blow nup to approximately 5 1/2' x 7'; others were left approximately newsstand size. Scharlin's point in enlarging the spreads

6. The second spread in a feature done in the style of *Vanity Fair*, 79.5" x 21.75". Photographer: Michael O'Brien; writer: Phillip Lopate.

7. Cover and page in the style of George Wayne's *R.O.M.E.*, 84" x 98". (This was the only cover in the exhibition.) Designer: Shawn Young; photographer: Wayne Maser; writer: George Wayne. About this cover concept Scharlin says, "[Wayne] Maser had talked about doing something like the film *Tokyo Decadence*, which is an S&M film." He used a ring flash, the effect being similar to the way he shot Madonna for the cover of *Esquire*.

8. Page from *Artforum*, January 1994. Designer: Kristen Johnson; writer: Glenn O'Brien. This feature actually ran in *Artforum*, and was not included in the final exhibition of "Interview."

By organizing a group of subjective and even contradictory statements about herself, Scharlin challenges viewers to find the "real" Kerri.

Screaming me-me's!

KERRI COMES CLEAN ON CAREER

By Roger Hitts

Kerri Scharlin could run for mayor of New York City, and probably win, too. If the whole of the Big Apple was contained beneath 10th Street Manhattan, Credit: [unreadable], pleasant looks and an un-
happily stream of self-promotion for making the facts and
up as much printer's ink as for Kerri or John Galt.

But the 30ish brunette isn't content to be a Right Coast toast—she has her eyes set on Los Angeles, where her name is already on the lips of producers, directors, seven-figure actors and a loyal legion of hangers-on hoping to bank in Kerri's reflective glow.

The world is Kerri's oyster, and she's eating well, turning heads in NYC's trendy art community with her novel and extensive art exhibitions that focus solely on herself during the concept of art exhibit on Van Gogh's self-portrait.

And it's Kerri Scharlin, whose self-portraits belie her media ap-
pear, into what Kerri of the South.
"Kerri has about as much trou-
per as any artist since War-
hol," a source tells STAG. "She knows
99 how to get her name in front of people

and make it stay there.
"Her New York exhibit turned so many heads that mass whitelash re-
sulted. And after the Matt Gilmour of the world got to talking to their friends 2,500 miles west, there's a
burn about bringing her show to Tin-
selwood."
"And there's a lot of people out there
prepared to throw a lot of money her
way. It doesn't matter whether she's a
genius or just the world's most charis-
matic self-promoter. Love Kerri and I see
dollar signs off her eyebrows."

Why the hoopla? It's all there in her
exhibit, which features, well, Kerri,
Kerri and more Kerri.
The concept is popular: create a
body of work defining into the nature
of celebrity. Fame as art to prove a
point was her mission, and that she
accomplished, the limited insurance
features with the likes of Henry Fox
Hopper's *Rainbow*, *Figure*, *People* and
Portrait.
But a la O.J., John Reddick and Jerry
B. Kerri set the table for a feeding
frenzy that left everyone craving

more and spurred the media to clam-
or for a piece of her time. These days
only top photos such as Anne Lebo-
witz and Wayne Miller get a shot at her
with their cameras, and only top writ-
ers get to take pen to paper with Ker-
ri's thoughts.
Word on Kerri's show at Manhat-
tan's chic Joe Prosser Fine Art
signed like wildfire, creating gag-
gles of agiles who started forming
lines up to a work beforehand and
left other gallery owners carrying
their luck in not landing the self-re-

present exhibit. Kerri will feature
Kerri's work at L.A.'s Chateau Mar-
mont in December, and then there's
talk of a Paris opening.
"As Kerri's career goes, it looks like
today Italia, tomorrow the world,"
says a STAG insider. "God only knows
where it will all lead. She used to be
able to walk anonymously to the mar-
ket or have a quick drink undisturb-
ed. These days are gone, though.
Now she's a certified pop culture
whorehead."
"By the end of 1985 I predict you're

going to see a movie on her life com-
pleted, say rather table looks of her
work, a TV special and several hun-
dred tabloid articles. She's single,
you know."
For Kerri's part, she's trying to take
the bracing of attention in stride.
But Lord, it's hard to be humble.
"By doing a show of and about my-
self, it's only natural that it attract
attention," Kerri tells STAG. "But I
never expected this much!"
A clear threat confided to STAG
that Kerri may have bitten off more
than she can chew.

"She was really just trying to shed
some light on the art of celebrity," the
insider says. "It was to illustrate a phe-
nomenon, but here she's proved
everything out by becoming a celebrity
by herself."
"She's a simple woman, actually
kind of shy. This show and all the sur-
rounding attention is going to change
her life immensely. She's either going
to become the most notorious artist on
the planet or the biggest prima donna
we've seen yet!"



**Kerri
Scharlin's
unique
brand of
boosterism
has made
her the
toast of
Manhattan**



9.



Scharlin

A self-portrait of the artist as a young woman

Interview by Mark Marvel Photographs by Steven Klein

November 1985

10.

to the dimensions of large paintings was to turn everyday objects into works of art. She left them unmounted, however, drawing attention to the plain paper on which magazines are reproduced. The spreads were devoid of context, without the advertising or animation of page-turning one encounters in actual magazines. "I wanted to take magazine articles, which function in everyday life as pages in a disposable book, and give them a different purpose. The image functions differently when it's at large in the culture versus when it's corralled into an art gallery," Scharlin says.

One of the most important themes in Scharlin's project is the role the media plays in the creation of the public personas of stars. The idea of celebrity in today's culture entails giving away one's identity, to have it reinvented as larger than life. On the surface, Scharlin allows herself to be victim to this process. She, too, is giving away her image to be filtered through the art directors, designers, and writers who participated in her project. However, certain aspects of "Interview" reveal Scharlin to have much tighter control over this process than does an average celebrity, and to possess the freedom to deliberately undermine the authority of the magazines represented. One of the fundamental aspects of her control is her power as artist to approach and to feature the magazines of her choice in her exhibition. Also, Scharlin chooses to display the spreads together. Although a popular celebrity may be featured in more than one magazine, in Scharlin's "Interview," spreads are hung together, side by side, underlining discrepancies, and even contradictions, between articles. The project becomes a grouping of relative perspectives, rather than a documentary of Scharlin's persona. And then Scharlin has taken symbols of popular culture and displayed them in a gallery, adding distinct tones of irony to their presentation.

Scharlin challenges the viewers of "Interview" to find the "real" Kerri. By organizing a group of subjective and even contradictory statements about herself, she has fulfilled the celebrity fantasy, and yet continues to remain elusive. Scharlin, in a sense, has a fantasy about having a fantasy, and uses it to expose the machinery of the contemporary myth-making process.

Ideas of ego, vanity, promotion, and ambition run through Scharlin's project. (She was reported to have commented to a reporter from *New York* magazine at her opening, "Do you think my work succeeds because people identify with my narcissism?") However, the most important component of Scharlin's work is perhaps the one that surfaces most slowly—its humor. Scharlin has the very modern ability to embrace popular culture while poking fun at it. For all her self-avowed narcissism, she allows herself to look silly. There is something ridiculous about Kerri on a treadmill with a bottle of Evian, and Kerri in her underwear talking on a cellular phone, and Kerri in a shiny pink mini with a tight butterfly T. In the end, it makes the woman who occupies the spotlight a fairly accessible citizen, after all.

9. Spread in the style of *The Star*, 17.75" x 26". Designer: John McCuen; photographers: Philippe Chenge, Mick Elgar, Ed Quinn; writer: Roger Hitts.

10. Spread in the style of *Interview*, 55.5" x 26.5". Designer: Tony Moxham; photographer: Steven Klein; writer: Mark Marvel.