Multiple Personalities

Kerri Scharlin probes into the conceptual maze of the magazine interview, and presents the viewer with a wide spectrum of personalities. Curious to know who the real Kerri is behind the masquerade, *Material* spent some time with her in order to find out

Beside your career as an artist, you've also done some curating. Can you tell us about that? There is to some extent a curatorial dimension present in the exhibitions we have come across, in the magazine pieces, and in the police sketch project where you let friends and colleagues describe you to forensic artists.

Well, as a matter of fact I curated a show back in 1989 at The New Museum in New York. It involved some 30 artists who took part with invisible works of art. The audience that walked into the exhibition space discovered that nothing was really there, so they had to go out on a treasure hunt at the museum and find out the actual pieces for themselves. A great deal of the impact in this show was produced by the different phenomenologically-oriented works that were on display, as well as the more discursive pieces that commented on visibility and exhibition culture as such.

Were the pieces really invisible, or were they just hard to see?

Well, both. Janine Antoni made for her part a heat piece behind the wall—a heating device that you only could find if you used your hand as a probe. But in the course of the exhibition a kind of "drawing" appeared, since the grease and dirt from people's hands generated a collective and growing imprint on the wall that covered the heater. A patina of people's hands was produced. And another piece became just more and more invisible the longer the show went on. One of the artists had 500 dollar bills stashed away in various places in the museum, bills that was discovered by visitors and gradually stolen, one after the other. Perhaps the museum staff was involved in this as well, I don't know. Well, this curating experience was nevertheless important for me, since it involved the process of letting other people fulfill my own visions, as well as the idea of tapping into different forms of other people's creativity, without worrying, as you might have done if it was a piece created by your own

hand. In a way, I worked a lot like a film director—I guess I have some talent in directing other people. And beside that, I actually like it.

It runs like a thread through all your works that you select other people who interpret you, or interpret what you say. Is that an attempt to get away from yourself or your own subjectivity as an artist?

Yes, absolutely. The basic premise behind most art is that it contains some moment of subjectivity, but I try to subvert this by saying that even if my works possesses me, that I'm completely in it, they don't possess my subjectivity. It is me as an object that is revealed through the subjectivity of other people.

Isn't that a little bit of a subterfuge? Isn't there also a will to power at play when you make other people do what you are telling them.

Yes. My works contain all kinds of wish-fulfillments. It's like the desire of being in the center of the stage. But I also want to make fun of this desire as well, for instance by letting myself appear as an object in such an obvious way as it does in my work. In the pieces I let myself appear as an object for other people to study, and I leave *them* to come up with ideas as to who I really am. But what's really up on the wall are not my subjective musings, but people's way of interpreting these facts.

You don't interfere with the way your co-workers interpret you and your directives at any stage?

No, absolutely not. I don't even discuss the choices of photographs with the designers. On this level I don't try to be ironic or subversive or anything like that. My experience is that the straighter you play the game, the greater the variety of different points of view which will come across. If I set an agenda for the projects, the only thing there would be the representation of my agenda, and nothing else.

But when you choose people you don't choose them randomly. You probably have a good idea of their particular agenda, and know that with this person I would probably have this angle, and with that person another.

Yes it's true. But I was really trying to go after a range. Take for instance the piece where I'm talking about what I have in my make-up bag—that was chosen because I realized the there was a "hole" in what I'd already collected. That there was nothing that was really just "girl magaziney," and I needed that. I mean there I have something that very much looks like a fashion picture, and the text is really about "girl issues." Then I needed a longer and more psychological exposé, so I got the *Vanity*

Kerri Scharlin, from the "Interview"-series, 1995.
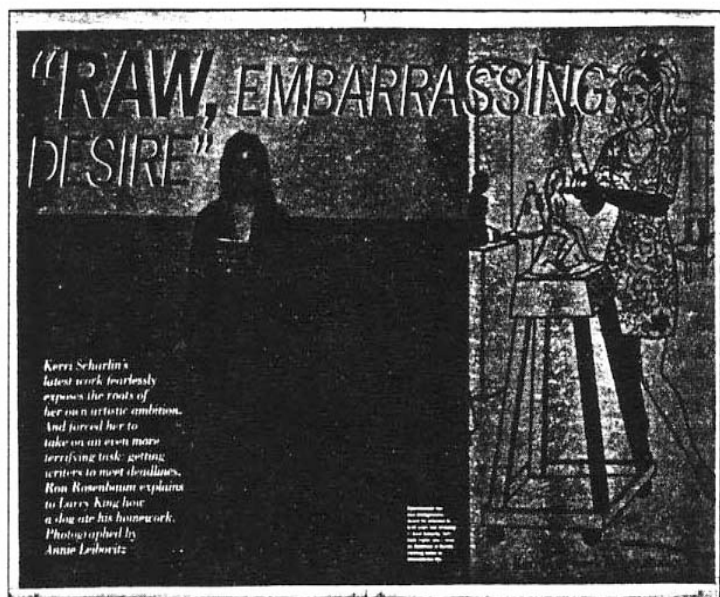
Kerri Scharlin, from the "Interview"-series, 1994.

Fair piece. I was trying to map out the spectrum of media representations, and that was the only agenda I had. But I didn't succeed completely. There is nothing from, let's say, *Wired*, and I was on purpose staying away from art magazines.

Did you select this variety of angles because they correspond to different aspects of your personality, or because they represent what the media try to make us look like?

Definitely the latter. My premises were that every type of personality could fit into the template of the media I tried to present. It was made to make an ordinary person fit in, and not necessarily a celebrity.

So much of your work, at least as you have described it here, seems to revolve around this issue of identity. Is there an ambivalence between the media construction and your own personal and psychological understanding of yourself that you obviously try to hold back from your art works? How do these two aspects add up, if at all?

Well, I think that I've made the decision that this is the kind of art that I want to do. But it doesn't necessarily always correspond to what I want to do, for instance when I have to get up early in the morning to do an interview. And especially problematic is the relation to the texts that I have to read when they come back. I often find them a little bit painful. But that has nothing to do with the fact that I've had decided what kind of project I want to do. The difference is that it is a difficult project on an intellectual level.

One of the pieces here describes you as "The New York conceptual artist Kerry Scharlin." Is that true? Do you relate to the conceptualist tradition, or was that the writer's judgment?

I used that word myself because I couldn't come up with anything better. I think i's con-ceptual art, what I am doing. I guess that high conceptual art has to do with a documentation that can be so pure that it doesn't have to have any visual impact at all. Bad conceptual art is when the documentation starts to be compelling and takes on an aesthetic value of itself, although this was not intended by the artist. But, whether you like it or not, I still think that the visual aspect is something very important and my works have a very clear visual side since visual presentation is perhaps also the most economic way of presenting ideas.

But isn't the magazine format something which makes documentation aesthetically compelling, but with the difference that it isn't you who has decided how it's going to look like when it's ready?

The main point is not that I haven't made the magazine pages myself. The fact that artists today have less control of their pieces than before is really not such a big issue. Warhol started this abdication and he was radical in that respect, when he walked around asking people what he should make. The soup can was someone else's idea, the dollar bills someone else's, etc. And later on the whole idea of appropriation has just spread. Like re-photographing and so on.

But you go one step further. Richard Prince appropriates images and then overlays them with different sentiments, but you are abdicating even from that and saying "I haven't done this. It is about me but I've nothing to do with it."

But still: I set up the game and set up the rules. I like people to play that game, but it was I who set the stage up.

Erik van der Heeg
Sven-Olov Wallenstein