

Frieze

Prince, Mark: Rineke Dijkstra

17 March 2010

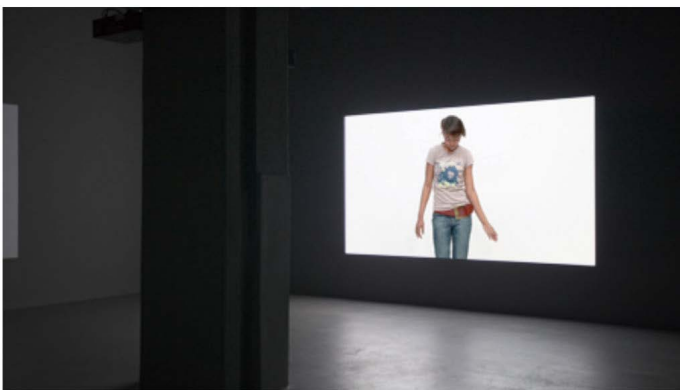
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Rineke Dijkstra

Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin, Germany

'Self-conscious' is an implicitly contradictory description. It can mean to be positively self-aware and also the opposite, to be painfully unsure of oneself. Pivoting between these poles has always been central to Rineke Dijkstra's portraiture. Her recurring subject is the bumpy ride from adolescence to late teens, when we first become self-conscious in both senses of the term.

In 2008, Dijkstra visited a nightclub in Liverpool in the northwest of England, and asked some of the teenagers to come to a studio to film them dancing to their favourite tracks. Each clip from *The Crazyhouse, Liverpool, UK* (Megan, Simon, Nicky, Philip, Dee) (2009) shows one of the dancers against a stark white background. The clips, which last as long as the songs, follow each other, end to end, on the four walls of a purpose-built space. If this recalls the multi-channel video installations of the 1990s by artists such as Doug Aitken and Pipilotti Rist, with their funky soundtracks, the difference is that Dijkstra's videos dispense with all effects. Entirely undecorated, they make us more aware of their subjects, and of how they decorate themselves. The single dancer performing for the camera is a scenario both resistant to generalization and symbolically suggestive of the solipsism of youth. It is an ideal template from which to study the drama between self-assertion and self-doubt.

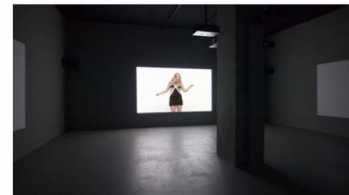


Dijkstra makes her medium appear to disown itself. This is the opposite of Postmodern, self-reflexive art, which declares its own artifice and wears that declaration like a seal of authenticity. The moving image is so transparent that we forget how mediated this experience is; how the way we move our bodies is as much a culturally inherited construction as the way we dress, and how these clips are as much about how

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By *Mark Prince*



Rineke Dijkstra, "The Crazyhouse, Liverpool, UK" Installation view

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the dancers mimic the images they have absorbed from the media as how the format of a figure isolated against a white background is itself a recollection of art and advertising conventions, from Richard Avedon's photographic series 'In the American West' to the current H&M ad campaign featuring the curve of Daria Werbowy's slim frame silhouetted, like a perfect parabola, against a white backdrop. We move as others have moved before us. A Goth head-banger plays air guitar; a techno boy preens himself on his slick moves; a shy soul girl lip-syncs lyrics, clutching at her heart. All this is, of course, very embarrassing, but it is also shameless and even tender. Dijkstra does not miss how the Goth boy ends his histrionic mime by grinning sheepishly at the camera, shy at having just exposed his deepest self to its cool gaze.



The series of four photographs of teen girls, in all their weekend finery, gets down to the essence of Dijkstra's art. They are records of youth with all the temerity of its aspiration frozen intact, but they are also deliberately engineered encounters. The flat grey backgrounds are not just formal devices to frame the figures, but means of seeing them more clearly, like butterflies pinned to plain cardboard to accentuate their glorious colours. Nicky, Liverpool, England, January 19, 2009 (2009) shows a girl in a symmetrically panelled dress with the streaming blond hair of a Botticelli Venus. Dijkstra makes her resemblance to an art historical heroine seem purely coincidental. The full date in the title emphasizes the presentness of this enterprise: tomorrow, or the day after, she will look different. The girls stand in front of us, a little larger than life-size, so we can scrutinize every hair and pore for much longer than we would be able to study the appearance of a stranger. As voyeurs, the tables are then turned on us, at least in spirit, in *The Weeping Woman*, Tate Liverpool (2009). Three projections, side by side, show a panorama of schoolchildren responding to a Picasso painting. They are looking directly at us; we are where the art is, which is of course the case given that we are standing in a gallery. It is a conceptual tautology all the more elegant for not advertising itself. The school uniform of grey V-neck sweater, white shirt and red tie is a formalistic foil for the human variety of faces, each straining to find the confidence to articulate itself. Confidence is another key word, both for the children's burgeoning self-awareness and for Dijkstra's belief that she can take a scruffy Liverpool girl in a Topshop dress, place her in front of a camera with no recourse to tricks and filters, and trust in producing an image which can double as a classical portrait, as well as a social document.

Mark Prince