

Spike Art Magazine

Campbell, Victoria: Portrait Rineke Dijkstra

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PORTRAIT RINEKE DIJKSTRA

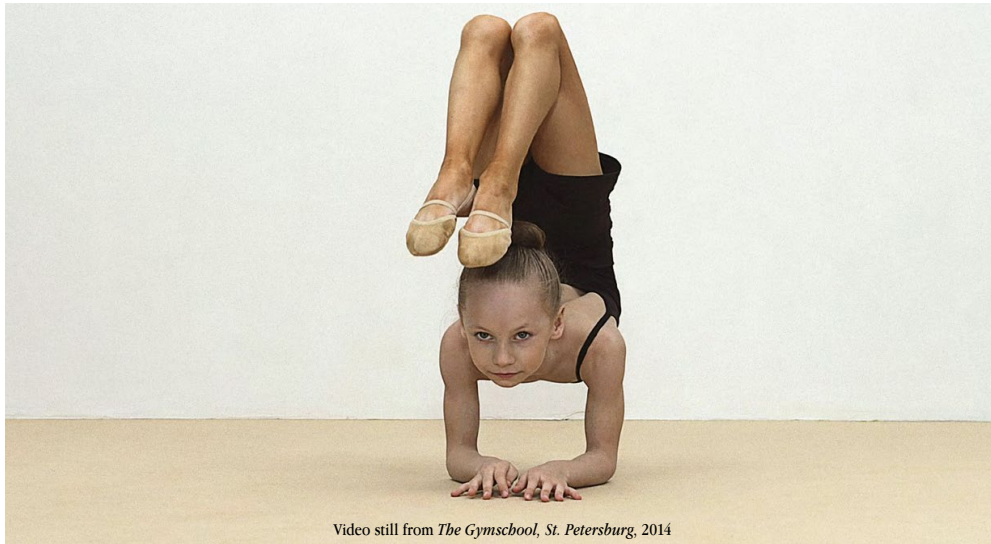
78 POINT BREAK

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Video still from *The Gymschool, St. Petersburg*, 2014

The Dutch photographer and filmmaker Rineke Dijkstra shot a video focused on young gymnasts in St. Petersburg, Russia, who work to transform their bodies into impossible ideals of inhuman perfection. The ultimate encapsulation of accelerationist figuration, writes *Victoria Campbell*



Video still from *The Gymschool, St. Petersburg, 2014*

Sheer repetition, no alternatives.



Installation view of *The Gymschool, St. Petersburg, 2014*, Three channel video installation with sound, 15 min., looped
Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris, 2015

Olga Korbut allegedly did more for democracy in fifteen minutes than two embassies could manage in five years – or at least, this is how Richard Nixon was reported to have congratulated the Soviet gymnast on her 1972 Olympic victory. The previous summer in Munich, the seventeen-year-old from Belarus entered the world arena like a national anthem. Her leotard is striking: bride white save for the varsity red cut of a polyester collar. In lieu of rhinestones, the image of a golden Soviet insignia patently printed onto her uniform boasts both an innovation in textile design and child psychology. Yet if Korbut had successfully convinced herself – as she'd convinced her spectators – that the image of a ribbon and medal printed on her uniform was, in fact, the one she'd brokered a lifetime on winning, her entrance onto the world stage would not have crumbled into such nervous error. She doesn't so much fall as she does catch the floor on the way up. Her mistake ricochets around the globe and leaves even the broadcaster stunned and disappointed. Upon having

“video portrait” dissolves the boundaries between the individual and the athlete by a similar means as the sport itself administers power: sheer repetition, no alternatives. Yet, if each of the eleven young girls together constitute the pride of Mother Russia, they do so not in the image of Olga Korbut, but in her undoing. Korbut would ultimately take home two Gold medals at the 1972 Olympics thanks to a string of individual competitions that each gave the world champion less than a minute and a half to recover her career. In doing so, she'd restore a sense of gymnastics as it was understood by the ancient Greeks (the word literally means “to train naked”).

Dijkstra's fixed mount cameras capture each gymnast from two different angles as her subjects – all between the ages of eight and twelve and in full-time residence at the school – engage in the autocatalytic repetition of a quotidian routine. Rotating on and off a neutral set in matching leotards, the students of *Gymschool* replace one another across a chronological vector that runs from age to experience, with the youngest being

An uncanny sense of both intimacy and estrangement.

betrayed her nation, the gymnast entered a state of shock. What followed was nothing short of astonishing: she walked off the stage and promptly burst into tears. No Soviet athlete had ever done anything like it.

Is fifteen minutes of fame finite or infinite? Rineke Dijkstra's film, *The Gymschool, St. Petersburg* (2014) might provide an answer to this question, or something similar, with a durational portrait of the child athlete. Dijkstra shot the film at the behest of Manifesta 10, which also commissioned a single-channel video *Marianna (The Fairy Doll)*. In contrast to the group portrait, *Marianna* features a lone ballerina in training as she performs inside of a pink-clad studio, rosy tutu and all. Manifesta stipulates that the invited artists respond to the region that plays host to the exhibition, and in 2014, that was St. Petersburg.

Depicting young girls at a prestigious training school, *The Gymschool* is not a portrait of one particular Russian gymnast, but the Russian gymnast in general. At exactly fifteen minutes long, the

most human and the oldest the most cyborgian. The advanced students contort themselves into non-humanlike formations (one gymnast's body resembles a sphynx, another, a Pierre Paulin lounge chair); the younger ones arrive at such mutations more naturally and less precisely. They train using “apparatuses” – hoops, balls, batons, ribbons, and also the floor – to chart the complex choreographies of global competition. Shot in neutral light, the only audio is that of the girls breathing.

It's either a swansong to ableism or it's accelerationist figuration. This is the sport that, in 1972, convinced the world that “human hearts beat within the bodies of robotic Soviet athletes.” To even approach Korbut's level today, a gymnast must practice six days a week, and for up to eight hours a day in advance of competition, subjecting her physical body to changes both totalising and irreversible. For the girls of the *Gymschool*, the event horizon occurs roughly at the age of four, after which no escape from the Olympic Games is possible.

If the Accelerationist proposal forwards not only a departure from “Marxist orthodoxy”, but a reorientation to the “neoliberal springboard”, Dijkstra’s post-Soviet teenage girls appear to have mastered both. Rhythmic gymnastics is an all-female competitive sport, and it comes as no surprise that the culture of athleticism leveraged by the USSR between 1952 and 1991 found its fulfilment in the body of the female gymnast. The intensity of the training routines favoured by Eastern European athletes make the Protestant work ethic look like child’s play, which some would argue is exactly what a national pastime established under the cult of Stalin is designed to do. Only the severity of her dedication can explain how the Russian gymnast so consistently manages to elude both puberty and child labour laws. What separates the child athlete from the world worker is both an early retirement and the impetus to perform labour as something other than work: “Smile! Otherwise, the spectator will see how hard you’re working, and the illusion will be lost,” Korbut’s coach was reported to have insisted. She will not accuse him of rape until 1999.

Standing just 150 centimetres, and clocking in often well under forty-five kilograms, the Russian gymnast is the spitting image of neoliberal order. During the Cold War, it was perhaps due to her youth and femininity that the female gymnast could not come to represent the working masses; yet, as a Socialist commodity, neither does she risk inheriting the decadence of bourgeois celebrity. Like little economies unto themselves, the teenage girl athlete is to be managed like a crisis and glorified in competition. What is required of her is nothing more than complete mastery. This involves: the surrender of every mistake, and with it, everything that makes her human, including her childhood. To redirect the existing vectors of the Modernist project (beginning in the last instance with the human body) towards point-break, at all costs, is nothing short of an Olympian task. Those who deign to do so are the national pride. They are also every little girl’s dream.

Watching *Gymschool*, a viewer might be tempted to distinguish the bodies on screen on the basis of their idiosyncratic behaviour that emerges when an individual gymnast errs (or succeeds) – and errs again – by revealing her awareness of it. Here, one gets the sense that her individuality will be her ruin. The resulting identification lies with an ambiguous subjectivity in whom we

feel an uncanny sense of both intimacy and estrangement, though perhaps one that’s matured alongside recent trends in speculative philosophy.

The three-channel video installation commanded a solo exhibition at Marian Goodman in Paris and New York in the year following its Russian debut. The shows occurred on the heels of Dijkstra’s major mid-career retrospective at the Guggenheim in New York. Yet despite the photographer’s acclaim, the work received little accolade. *Vogue’s* coverage, “The Gymnast’s Body is on Full Display”, was perhaps the highest profile review the one-work exhibition received; *Musée* magazine featured the work, briefly, in its Women’s History Month coverage. While the prepubescent girls depicted in the film are not, literally, naked – their uniforms cling to their underdeveloped bodies like patriotism – the work appears to be stripped of any sexual or political overtones that audiences at the time would have been eager to assign. Yet the portrait is coterminous with the theory of Accelerationism, which seeks out the vector of post-humanism in the contradictions of the present. Perhaps what made critical coverage of Dijkstra’s work difficult was the absence of any of the markers of “feminist art” at the time: a transcendental female subject and her “universal” plight against patriarchy; to say nothing of a legible position for the artist who depicts her. For even and especially in the most broadminded of American institutions, we demand that our images of the female body speak lest the viewer speak for it. (It seems here that even postmodernity has its limits.)

The Gymschool renders visible the technolinguistics of sport and their libidinal re-engineering through which the body becomes apparatus to art. This moving image document of lithesome nymphets in states of machinic rapture is far from advocating some technopolitical drive towards a posthumanist end. Instead, Dijkstra’s lens seeks out that which is immanent in what might otherwise appear transcendent. The result is an image that lends itself better to a Kubrick film than any programme espousing progressive female social empowerment. For Dijkstra, this is an approach consistent with the Dutch tradition. Recall that Rembrandt’s paintings are the first modern miracles; how they occur as an art historical fork between History and Religious painting. At the same time, that kind of work tends to be popular, bourgeois, generic.



Installation view of *The Gymschool, St. Petersburg, 2014*, Marian Goodman Gallery, Paris, 2015

One gets the sense that her individuality will be her ruin.



Video still from *The Gymschool, St. Petersburg, 2014*



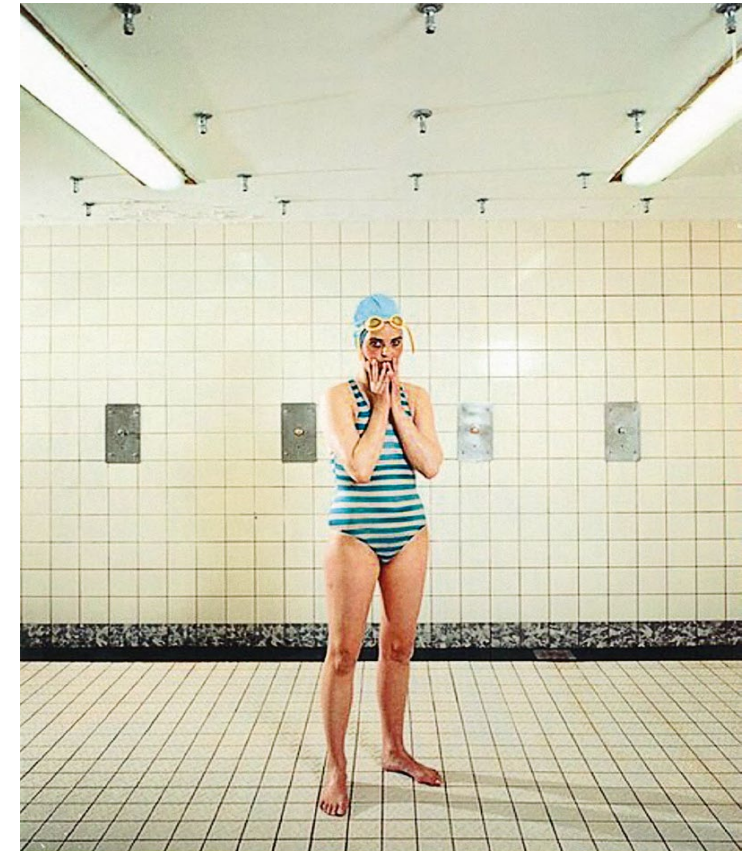
Video still from *The Gymschool, St. Petersburg, 2014*

It's possible to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house.

Since 1991, Dijkstra has sought out ordinary subjects undergoing dramatic change both irreversible and prosaic. This includes school photo days and the moments that follow giving birth, beginning with a self-portrait that depicts the artist having just pulled herself out of a swimming pool five months after getting hit by a car. *Self-Portrait, Marnixbad, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 19, 1991* (1991) shows Dijkstra standing gingerly beneath a locker room shower with her fingers just barely drawn to her mouth. Two decades later, the critic Roberta Smith will characterise the look on her face as “slightly winded” but “defiant”; meanwhile, the artist will explain exactly how she staged such an image: a painful physical therapy session, the gruelling, thirty lap swim she elected for after. By taking her body past the breaking point, Dijkstra hoped to see to their ends those conditions that make portraiture necessary – for her, the undeniable presence of entropy. The image she'd come to refer to as her “artistic awakening” exudes the kind of aura only a young artist forged from the pith of self-loathing can produce; the work stands, today, as

a demonstration of the exhaustion by which female empowerment is measured. The critics loved it.

Perhaps a more efficient definition of Accelerationism might be something like this: it's possible to use the master's tools to dismantle the master's house provided one masters those tools herself. Like Dijkstra's photographs of women in childbirth whose strength seems forged from the ability to overcome their resistance altogether, it should be noted that were there even the slightest trace of defiance on the face of the woman at the pool, she would look like she was suffering, on top of also being in a lot of pain. The portrait of *The Gymschool* bears a particular countenance: a still image of a gymnast balancing playfully in a handstand, impossibly inverted, proposing an incursion into finitude. This is a state commonly known as revelation. It is this revelation in Dijkstra's own portrait of the champion dripping with chlorine, from whose mouth emerges a “sharp, double-bladed sword” (the camera) and the words “I am the first and the last” (the portrait), the one whose victory is the precise opposite of Enlightenment.



Self-Portrait, Marnixbad, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 19, 1991, 1991
Chromogenic print, 118.5 × 92 cm

RINEKE DIJKSTRA (1959 in Sittard, NL) lives and works in Amsterdam.

Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at Marian Goodman Gallery, London (2020); Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (2019); The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Sprengel Museum, Hannover (both 2018); Museu Picasso, Barcelona (2017); and the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC (2016). Among other group shows, she has participated in “I’m Yours: Encounters with Art in Our Times”, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; “Masculinities: Liberation through Photography”, Barbican Centre, London (both 2020); “Momentum 10”, Moss (2019); “Tidalectics”, TBA 21, Vienna (2018); “Terrains of the Body: Photograph from the National Museum of Women in the Arts”, Whitechapel Gallery, London (2017); and Manifesta 10, St. Petersburg (2014). She is represented by Marian Goodman Gallery (New York/Paris/London), Jan Mot (Brussels), and Galerie Max Hetzler (Berlin).

VICTORIA CAMPBELL is an artist and Contributing Editor of *Spike*. She lives in New York.