

# The Secret of Female Intimacy

**There are deep abysses in art. One looks out over the sea from a tall cliff.**

**At the bottom of the sea is a floor.** Moving about between the mud, rocks, grains of sand and sometimes debris on the sea floor are tiny, invisible animals. The sun bathes the scene in its light, the sea mirrors it, night cloaks the problem in darkness.

Vanessa Beecroft says she is not a woman. An inexplicable feeling has led her to avoid making herself look beautiful. She is glad when others do so, but personally she chooses to simplify herself. She says that she has cast off woman's role as doll. Yet as an artist she has done nothing other than place women with whom she identifies, and on several occasions men, in beautiful accessories before an audience. Uniformly dressed, made-up, hair elegantly styled, but generally almost naked, the models are presented as if at a fashion fitting. They are photographed and filmed from the front, in profile, from above and from the distance. The documents, photographs and films that are subsequently selected stand for the artistic work. But for the artist they sadly lack the emotionality and uncertainty she felt during the performances. She doesn't "belong there any more", has "already gone". As soon as she has had the idea for a performance she is "out of it", as she states.

The male models were recruited from the U.S. Navy or from her own circles, the women from her family, with the help of model agencies and assistants. Casting for a performance is done according to her specific requirements. Her main concern has always been with a particular image. Perhaps she has seen the faces and bodies of young soldiers while surfing on the Internet. Or she hands the casters celebrity portraits of famous actresses: Vanessa Redgrave, Catherine Deneuve, Hanna Schygulla and Twiggy. It could even be Elizabeth I. with her pale complexion and red hair, the model for VB 43. The front row of her live female portraits has included her half-sister Jennifer, the young aristocrat Serena Cattaneo Adorno, or the towering, boyish Lucilete from Brazil. In earlier times the heroic stature of Dane Line Rosenvinge-Nissen stood out at the front. Others were and continue to be included as contrasts. Her mother, for example, exemplifies the character of the Mediterranean tragedienne. The rest, an anonymous looking group, serves as amplification. The forms and colours, the use of makeup, hair-dos and the smallest modicum of clothing, accords with a number of choreographic decisions. The ideal image of the central figure who is being themed is almost always revealed by multiplication, much as with Warhol. This multiplication serves Beecroft in her search for a concept of femininity.

She says she is cool with the women, sometimes coarse. In actual fact she doesn't want to talk with them. She orders them about: "Shut up, don't talk to me, get naked, get out, stand there, good-bye!" She leaves it to her assistants to give personal explanations of what the performances are about. Already in the performance VB 35, staged 1998 at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, she entrusted the casting to a third person. Questions about the directions were discussed on the phone while she remained at home.

In VB 51, staged 2002 in a Régence hall at Schloss Vinsebeck, the seat of the former Principality of Lippe, she explained to the thirty participants that the performance would have three acts. In the first they should stand as if rooted to the spot, in the second they were allowed to move about, in the third they could do as they wished. Each new act would be announced by her ringing a bell. The women waited, the artist disappeared. Asked why she hadn't kept to her word, she replied that there was no helping the models if they couldn't tell when it was time to change. So they stood still as if in a trance for several hours, dressed and made up like ailing aristocrats. Slowly, one by one, they ventured from their places: participants young and old tentatively moved about the room, a few of them even sat or laid down. At the end of the performance, which was also not announced, the models had to be led out, some almost carried.

At the start of her work on a performance Beecroft is basically "away", as she says. Ideally she would like simply to deliver the idea and not return until it was time to watch the performance. Between the choreographic idea in her mind and the actual performance come discussions with assistants, weeks of casting, the choice of makeup, hairdos, clothes and shoes, negotiations with producers; promoters, models, photographers, film crews, and on occasion tiresome experiences with the public, the inquisitive press, and art dealers, who she cannot afford to neglect. For these very cost-intensive events have to be financed by the sale of signed, limited documents.

Beecroft refers to the process from mental image to performance as "reality". Time and again this reality has alienated her from her artistic production, for it is chiefly the idea that fascinates her. As she recalls, this reality consists of failures to which she had no way of responding, and disappointments – almost like when one is in love. VB 46, for example, which featured women made up in powdery white with white painted hair and shaven pudendas, staged 2001 on a white floor before a white wall in the Gagosian Gallery, Los Angeles, was conceived by her as a white in white piece along the lines of an invisible masterwork. She wanted to eradicate the sexuality of these beautiful women. Her aim was an antiseptic image. But then the women's arms rubbed against their sides to reveal their pinkish flesh and other physical details. And Beecroft felt that a lot of the models who had been selected were not as androgynous as expected. For her, their personal needs and their differences in socialisation taint her choreographic picture with an at times unbearable vulgarity. She allowed a famous actress, who was interested only in her own presentation and not in the artistic work, to sing and wear a black gown in place of a white one. In that way Beecroft sometimes loses all personal identification with her performances, even while they are taking place. With a shrug, she adds: "It's my fault, because it's my work."

The earlier pictures of her models, which her audience are especially fond of, were to her mind not even vaguely abstract. More central for her had been the undefined, the incalculable elements. At the first performance staged 1993 in Milan, which was in fact her finals exhibition at the Accademia di Brera, she invited fellow students who tortured themselves with diets and bouts of anorexia to try out

her wardrobe. She was unable to develop any friendship towards the girls. Prior to this, she had kept a diary that served as the plot: over the years she took her own person to investigate an unnatural relationship to eating. Virtually, by means of the paper, she vomited, felt repelled by bread and brown food, highlighted her binges on orange-coloured fruit and vegetables, regarded herself as sick and piggish, as unworthy of living. She wanted a doctor to collate her states of agitation and depression with her drawings and analyse the temporal sequences and structures. "I am fake", as Beecroft said of herself, because the illnesses she noted down were not hers. She had never vomited, never in her life, never gone on a strict diet or had serious weight problems; basically her eating habits were normal, as she says. "I was always in my mind." But she was obsessed, and for a very long time she held back her diary-like writings and drawings.

Back in 1993 the girls from the Brera were asked to go over to Inga Pinn's gallery in Milan. They entered a second storey room in a building, and after being called in by the artist they agreed on the spot to undress and put on Beecroft's clothes and nightdresses for a performance. There was a red summer costume with white dots worn with yellow nylons, or a pair of white and yellow slacks, white sandals with broad straps and stack heels, a blue and yellow top with narrow shoulder straps and white chains around the neck. One model wore a short dress in red and white diamond checks with white flounces at the seam. Standing beside was another in a garish lime green cotton frock. The students gathered together at the window sill and smoked, or stared at the floor. The directions were simply: "Hang out".

Beecroft knew most of the participants. A photographer was commissioned and a video camera set up. But the video wouldn't work, the photographer failed to appear, and after a while the girls were visited by other student friends who wanted to interrupt the event. They chucked magazines onto the floor and brought, as Beecroft tells, all manner of junk into the room. The aim was to disrupt. The atmosphere grew tense. All at once the audience, and the girls themselves, became unpredictable. The latter, who had arranged themselves in poses like prostitutes, smoking and standing about in skimpy garments, bright fabrics, nightgowns, underwear and high heels, began to scream. The audience started to feel afraid by their presence and leave the room. After that, she never wanted to work with girls again. But she changed her mind after a teacher who had been particularly important to her at the Brera met her and said she must bring back the girls. "The girls are my material" or "the girls are my plain material", as she now sees it.

The girls are white or pink, pale brown or black. In Brazil, for VB 50, she systematically divided up the three skin tones of the mulattos she used and emphasized them by means of white yellow, olive brown and dark brown makeup applied to their entire bodies. Prior to this, each of the woman was photo-scanned – first the face, then from the front and in profile – their vital statistics were taken down, and they were individually assessed. By the end of the performance it was the faces that dominated: astonished, questioning, slightly tired, containing a hint of silent protest at the humiliation that had already accompanied the hour-long makeup procedure.

The nudity was necessary in order to produce a certain unease, a feeling of defencelessness, an unpleasant feeling of being exposed to the mercy of the audience, especially the male audience. That experience occurred here, as on previous occasions, in a group, so that the women, the material, functioned both as object and subject. The girls, who in this case are all the same age, did not simply tolerate the way their fellow women are bared and dressed up as their momentary fate, but accepted it as an experience. Since almost every performance draws on a small stock of women who have already taken on the task at least once before, Vanessa Beecroft's choreographic picture never gets to be discussed, not least because there is a ban on talking about it. The artist interrupts the life of alien women.

The people who take part, whether male or female, are pressed into a uniform. They have to enlist as if for military service, and stand up straight. Physical and moral discipline is demanded. The task they have been set entails hours of endless waiting. Not in order to achieve something. Waiting as a public line up and waiting for time to pass. A peremptory tone, a hierarchy between artist and models, a drill aimed at physical immaculacy holds sway, comparable to that among soldiers or on the catwalks of *haute couture*. The uniformed human beings are only to rest and relax when the severity of it all is too much to endure. Slender, ethereal women who simultaneously maintain an anaemic, faceless mien exert a particular fascination on Beecroft. Over the hours their souls work their way imperceptibly out of their bodies. The idea is that the group should be like one single girl – in reality, as time drags on, the group falls apart and disappears before the patient viewer's eyes into a sum of bodies pushed together. At the same time the viewer begins to feel a sympathy, presumably prompted by the visible wilting of the participants. Perhaps the torture they endure will eventually bring the women to the heaven of art. Asked whether she wants to continue staging performances and one day see this culminate in a building, a special architecture with a special interior for women, Beecroft answers "Yes". She could imagine the visitors as they leave at the end of their lengthy tour with the mental image of a single solitary female in their minds.

**The lofty cliff on which Vanessa Beecroft stands is her childhood, in which she waited and suffered a long-lasting and multiple loss.** The loss lies down below, in the water, perhaps on the sea floor. Perhaps it has silted up or is covered in mud or debris. There is her searchlight that illuminates the women's situation. There is the repetition of the constantly unchanging idea of beautiful and beautifully done up women who have to stand still and wait. Their shadowless bodies are continued in the radiance and sheen of the signed images. They pin-point what was seen and experienced, and snip it out. As for the performances themselves, a darkness like a mystery descends on them after they are finished.

In São Paulo at the 25th Biennale 2002, fifty naked women appeared on the evening before the opening. The preparations had taken weeks, a film crew had been flown in from New York, the artist's numerous assistants and her gallerist had been under enormous pressure for days. Beecroft's idea was nothing less than to present a particular kind of black woman of the sort who vends peanuts outside in Ibirapuera park. Standing in the space at the centre of Oscar Niemeyer's modernist Biennale building, beneath the curved ramps that allow the public to take in art while strolling along the balustrades, was a crude notion of femininity. One particular kind of woman, a mixture of olive brown and fair-skinned mulattos was presented in five or six rows, all standing as if rooted to the spot. The fascination exerted on our enlightened times by centuries of Portuguese sexuality involving African slave girls, the fascination of venal love plied from all sides, the fascination of the Brazilian cult of the body - all this informed a choreographic picture that could be grasped as a social sculpture. Not that it has to be. Beecroft linked the single most important cultural event in Latin America with a highly salient aspect of the history of civilisation: a country that ostensibly knows no racism looked at itself with sudden insight. It gazed together with the international art audience at the beauty of the underclass. Not that this was about the fates of the girls who were presented: rather it was about their role, as heroines and graces who degenerate during the course of the performance.

Three thousand people arrived at the Biennale building early on the evening of March 24, 2002 in order to ensure they took in the spectacle from as close to the front row as possible. They waited for over an hour at guarded barriers before breaking into a run to reach the physical proximity of the white and brown and black bodies. The naked women were standing there, straight as dyes. At first sight their exquisite proportions seemed almost overwhelming. A multiplied sculpture of flesh and blood, the dream of the men, the exemplars of the women. Simultaneously an artifice, heightened by flawless makeup, gray, black and orange wigs and pink-coloured ballet pumps with high criss-cross lacings from Azzedine Alaïa with heels in different heights. The accessories had been acquired individually for the bodies.

"Girls", not women appeared. The international audience noticed nothing of their social roots from the wrong side of the tracks. But the chief sponsor was shocked when he saw the piece. A further unexpected blow came when Lucilete, the 180-centimetre-tall main figure in the front row had to be "re-immigrated" from New York where only a few days before the performance she had been snapped up by an agent

in the fashion branch. The material damage led morally and aesthetically to a victory for art. Lucilete, who had only been a model for two months, came to her new profession as a sixteen-year-old cook: as the oldest of child of a family of seven she had previously been responsible for preparing the meals. There amid the architecture of Ibirapuera she appeared as a gently smiling ethereal angel and flawlessly slender as a reed. Never during the hours she graced with her presence did she allow herself to be put off by the ogling and later prowling audience.

Fifty individuals, personally selected and won over, freshly assessed for their suitability in the group, instructed before the opening of the event and then again mobilised and brought to a standing halt the very next day for a second appearance before the cameras, had each spent six hours prior to the performance for makeup and fittings. Specialists applied the makeup to their bodies in a closed-off room. The colour was applied with brushes and then rubbed until dry and buffed to give the skin a velvety sheen. The girls' lips were either left as they were, or whitened or reddened. The wigs were attuned to their skin colour, contrasting in reddish, gray or black tones. Some of the models retained their natural frizzy locks. One model sported her normal sleek hair parted to one side.

The majority of the women seemed like tall African statues, representatives of a beauty that has evolved across many centuries, three continents and numerous peoples. Spectators stared at the naked bodies from the extreme proximity such performances allow as if looking at extraterrestrial beings. It was not about flesh or blood, nor sweat or even tears. Placed there as if to be abused, the experience was more about the shock caused by perfection. If Walter Benjamin could have lent the performance his concept of the aura – which he defined as presence at a distance, however close it may be – he may well have concluded that the aura is nothing but the mystery of a close-by yet incomprehensibly transported woman. A mystery that remains silent, a mystery that fades with the hours like a blossom.

The participants likewise became instantly aware of the situation involved in presenting naked flesh with skin and hair in the opening seconds of the event. Instructions and posing were over. A coat of makeup covered them with its opaqueness. The shoes lent the feet a uniformity and their tall heels gave the motionless bodies additional height. The wigs gave the heads a hyper-real look. It was the end of the preparations, the movements could now be frozen and a special light, neither dim nor over-bright, be turned on. The girls were scared. They hadn't become acquainted with one another, and had yet to gauge the situation. They faltered and shied of showing their fear. But then within a few short moments they decided to resist it, for there was no escaping this mass of humanity.

The international audience, familiar with pictures of such events since 1994 – from Italy, the P.S.1 Center of Contemporary Art in Long Island City, the Cologne Galerie Schipper & Krome – pushed its way through to the girls. A powerful motion set up from each of the entrances, as if it was a matter of snatching a few precious seconds. Everyone, not only the men but also the women, whether young or old, ugly or beautiful, wanted to see what was going on. Some broke into a run, others walked

over to the group in their cool running shoes, casually but at a noticeably stiff pace. The ushers slowed down the eager visitors, who then drifted off to the side of the group, searching for niches, then changing place and returning to the front line with Lucilete and five other Brazilians in order to take in the models' gentle, indifferent and anything but childish gazes. The girls did not return the looks, and seemingly nothing occurred. A grotesque irritation arose among the spectators, for their long, impatient outside seemed quite irreconcilable with the waiting of the models. People came, saw, but did not conquer. The sportiest visitors were the first to leave. Others waited to see if something else would happen, kept to their posts, grew pensive, pondered on the artistic intentions behind the work and indeed art as a whole. The relationship between autonomy and social fact in Beecroft's work was discussed with great animation. But her women remained silent.

Despite their standardisation, they appeared neither as puppets nor lifeless corpses. When one examined them closely with one's eyes, studied their physical features, large breasts, small breasts, large buttocks or small buttocks, rounded belly or flat belly, long legs or short legs, to one's taste or not, one's gaze did not become fixed, as it does with photos or paintings by old masters, then to drift off into a private sphere. Here one was confronted by a real flick of an eyelash, real breathing, and in one case on the second day a real fainting fit. Completely distant, completely tender, some models gave the feeling that part of their inner life, of their soul could be distinguished. The girls were alive. They stood still, relaxed by sitting down. They gazed into middle space somewhat bashfully, sometimes shy, sometimes despondent, rarely coquettish. Their individual psyches did not have to be part of a "piece", as on the stage. This was not a company there to play roles for the artist.

The occasional stretch of a leg, the measured raising or lowering of a head, sitting down and getting back up, turning round and lying down, may have relieved their bodies, but it didn't relieve the audience. The fact that the women had to find a bit of space for themselves in this strained, uniform situation, space they needed to fulfil their task of remaining still for hours on end, instinctively provided the action. Somehow the remaining spectators were to blame. During this time they had been able to experience, as if in a trance, the naturalness of female behaviour as art within the frame of a choreographic picture.

One or two of the girls, says Beecroft, generally stand out from the group. They create the poles around which the others gather as a kind of force field. They seem to smile more imperceptibly than the others, and to have more finesse. They fulfil their task like the servers one notices at a church because they show more fervour. So it is with every profession: experience and dedication are the work's crowning grace.

It is the models' eyes and faces that hold our attention the longest. As a result of the lighting, the makeup, the garments and the duration, other impressions progressively weaken. Slowly the faces, the physiognomies, stand out from the rest of what's happening. They are framed by a picture that seems conventional in its composition – the setting and the constellation of figures – and could almost be an Italian Renaissance perspective.



**At the beginning of her career, when working with her fellow students in 1993 in Milan, Beecroft thought of images from Jean-Luc Godard or Piero della Francesca.**

At high school she had occupied herself with the ideals of the Italian Renaissance. Alongside Piero, Raffaello remains the artist she most admires. Alongside Godard it was Visconti and Fassbinder who became her stars of the cinema. They showed socially isolated heroes, all dedicated to art, who slowly act within a clearly defined space. Long before Beecroft, formal rigour, a love of geometry, verticals and horizontals, straight and crooked lines ensured structures that assigned figures their place. She loves spaces composed with symmetries and a central axis. Her audience is placed outside, generally on the fringe. They are lookers-on, not clagues and certainly not an orchestra. Although none of her performances to date has taken place without a promoter and an audience, the audience could perhaps be left out, for no space is allotted to it. It must be content with the strict structure devised for the uniformed models.

The models do not form groups, they appear as a part of a large, fictive family. The artist's alter ego in changing guise stands at the front and forms the centre. There is the sister, the mother, the father and the grandmother, in one form or another. There are multipliers and variations, even though the pictures contain no visible parents, no visible generations. They could all be the sisters or friends of the fictive main character. The family is there without any individual members or roles being recognizable. With this, the one genuine role in the piece, the lonely waiting girl in all of her multiplications, is given great power. Through the aesthetic accentuation it receives, it comes across as somewhat tyrannical and egocentric, as precluding any alternative. A child whose parents were never present, or if so practically as good friends, notes during the course of its life that it alone has to create order and set boundaries. And finds the power for this in art.

The beginning, in 1993 in Milan, was marked by hundreds of compulsive yet compelling drawings. As with her diary, she followed a system. Every sheet bore a single figure or body part. Line figures, at the centre of a blank sheet. Thin and lonely, they teetered about the space. An astonished face with a slight squint, with torso and legs but no arms or feet. A kneeling girl with her hands on her shoulders, her head seeking protection as it leans tenderly against her own side. Knock-knees forming an X that seems to mirror the triangle of a sex still lacking pubic hair. A head retching, as if scarcely able to breathe, but also unable to vomit. A reddish skin-coloured torso with folded arms. A naked girl with no hair on her head slipping off her panties from legs on tip-toe. An arm with a hand in an empty space. Pensiveness and astonishment. A belly being felt. A leggy, naked, flat-chested young girl with long dark hair and heeled sandals. A broad stream of red vomit. A shock of hair on a tiny head, extending from the top to the bottom of the picture. A yellow body, orange hair, a blue body, a green dress, a black head. Orange tangerines being counted on a table with a head with orange hair. The legs long, extended, bent, the bodies skewed. Some bodies cut through. Yet others seem to be in motion, as if they wanted to dance. But they do not dance. The theme of observation and self-observation was always central.

In 1984, according to the entries in her unpublished "Book of Food", Beecroft began to monitor her weight. She weighed just above 56 kg and went up, according to the preface, to 68 kg over a period of two years. "I blew up like a balloon." During the subsequent year she managed to return to her former weight. But she resolved then to make exact notes of everything she ingested. Food, its seemed, made her blow up. But eating food made her sad and depressed. She lived chiefly from fruit, vegetables, milk products, pastries. She ate neither meat nor fish. She drank tea and coffee, but no alcohol. She did not smoke and took no drugs. Nevertheless, she wrote "I'm a pig!" on 21 November 1987, at a time when she weighed 62 kg. From March 1988 onwards, the word "pig" appeared time and again beside the lists of what she had eaten, along with the few other words she wrote. When at the end of May 1988 she ate an unusual dish for her, pasta with oil, garlic and chilli, she responded with "Big Fat Pig".

The key issue was and is repression, suppression, depression and aggression. "I'll show the Navy," she thought as she was getting close to the U.S. Navy after discovering the soldiers' faces on the Internet. Her strict ideas of order always give way to a game, in most cases right away. In order to first set the rules of the game and ensure they were followed, she steeled and punished herself. Before she engaged the Marines she exercised as if she herself wanted to join. Vanessa Beecroft could for a short while be a soldier, a whore, a housewife or an African. The liberty of her women, their calm relaxation, is allowed to assume the form of a Dionysian dance, an intoxication, as shown by the participants in VB 51 at Schloss Vinsebeck when they streamed out into the park. No less conceivable is an Apollonian, Raffaellitic picture. In the end the women waited once again, slow, rigid, persevering. It is from this that the feeling of an ineffable female intimacy imperceptibly arises. Unlike her male colleagues, Alex Katz or even Pablo Picasso, she has never sought a semantic field through her work, never sought a style or technical medium that allowed her to produce signs within the bounds of a delimited linguisticality. Her concern was with woman's depth and aura, with what her fellow women could be. The work is outwardly concerned with sexism, voyeurism, gender theories and body art. But over and beyond the documents emerges a search for pathos. "I cannot acknowledge that women are such a secondary thing," to name one of her political motifs. The result of her work, in each case produced over the hours by uniformity and multiplication, is like an egg. A primal form of perseverance, of edgelessness, of formal self-containment – containing the germ of new life. The face of female intimacy is the shell of this egg.

Thomas Kellein