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Brice Dellsperger: MULTIPLICITY OF MASKS

by Elisabeth Kley

With his multiple piercings, metallic teeth and tattooed body enhanced by prosthetic breasts, thick makeup and a variety of wigs, the performer Jean-Luc Verna resembles a post-sex-change Sophia Loren who's decided to cross-dress as a woman. His persona couldn't be farther from the airbrushed images of Nicole Kidman or Tom Cruise, but he enacts both their roles, and everyone else's, in the Swiss artist Brice Dellsperger's remake of Stanley Kubrick's 1999 *Eyes Wide Shut*. Dellsperger's riveting, 37-minute-long *Body Double 22 (After Eyes Wide Shut)* (2007-2010) is currently on view at Team Gallery.

"Body Double" is also the title of Dellsperger's overall project, begun in 1995 and now numbering 28 films. In them, he reshoots portions of the iconic movies that are part of our common cultural language, from Brian de Palma's *Dressed to Kill* to David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* and Ken Russell's *Women in Love*. But while Dellsperger faithfully follows the original scripts line by line and gesture by gesture, he substitutes the original cast for replacement performers -- who are often dressed in drag. These actors play both male and female characters, populating the tales with artificial constructs who hover between the two genders. The results are exquisitely skewed reflections of their sources, as if distorted by gender-scrambling mirrors.

Dellsperger's masquerade version of *Eyes Wide Shut* is also an aggressive rejoinder to the real lives of the movie's stars. Their storybook marriage, widely suspected of being some kind of Scientology plot to conceal Cruise's alleged homosexuality, ended soon after the completion of Kubrick's film -- which itself echoed the theme of bourgeois stability beset by untamable desire.

Cruise's character is wealthy Manhattan doctor whose self-satisfied world is turned upside down when the beautiful wife he takes for granted shocks him by revealing her unconsummated attraction to another man. He sets out to explore infidelity's possibilities for himself, through encounters with the daughter of a dead patient and a prostitute, and participates in a private black mass/orgy at a palatial Long Island estate. But he never actually completes the sexual act, thereby escaping AIDS and murder by a hair.

Kubrick's rather antiseptic coming-of-age saga has been interpreted as an extended fantasy that never actually takes place, a play between reality and dream -- and it is this quality that is emphasized and exaggerated in Dellsperger's lurid remake. Verna performs every gendered character, including the nearly interchangeable blond females who are the objects of Cruise's desire.

In Dellsperger's version, visual identities are differentiated only by variations in makeup, wigs and costumes. As Verna becomes both



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a man attempting to be a woman and a woman attempting to be a man, the soundtrack's voices are distinctly recognizable as either male or female, a disconnect that renders his surprisingly poignant emotional mime even more disturbing and fascinating.

In contrast to the multitude of opulent locations featured in Kubrick's film, Dellsperger's carnival of self interacting with self takes place in one small 18th-century-style theater, in which the black mass orgy is celebrated on the orchestra level. Dressed in a red robe and wig, Verna presides, surrounded by doppelgangers wearing black thongs that enclose conspicuous genital bulges. With bare chests that have been augmented by huge prosthetic breasts, they kneel and rise at his command before a black-robed audience. Spectacular glitter make-up takes the place of Kubrick's Venetian masks, replacing anonymity with flamboyance.

Dellsperger's recreation turns Kubrick's linear narrative into a series of tangentially related, theatrical scenes that unfold between fades to black, as if performed like films within the film to entertain orgy participants. The swooping, flirtatious dance between Kidman and an aristocratic suitor that opens Kubrick's film is transformed at Dellsperger's hand into a bizarre romance between a pair of simpering divas. In a later scene, when two men attempt to revive a call girl from a drug-induced coma, Verna -- or versions of him -- plays all three roles, sprawled nude on an armchair, or standing in formal evening wear.

Acknowledging the theory that homophobes are sometimes closet homosexuals themselves, Dellsperger replaces the gang of rowdy toughs shouting gay slurs at the elegant Cruise in Kubrick's film with a group of identical transvestite Vernas in thigh-high boots and short, fur jackets. In another chilling scene, Verna looks down at a dead twin Verna dressed as a prostitute, performing Cruise's visit to a hospital morgue to identify the now-deceased call-girl. Even Verna's singular and insistently bizarre identity, however, is itself an illusion, as digital doubles or others in facial molds and painted tattoos often take his place. Dellsperger thus exposes cinema's fakery, making contrivance apparent while blasting Kubrick's gender distinctions to smithereens.

Drag becomes uncanny when relationships between faces and costumes don't conform to our expectations, and Verna's extreme physical transformations defy the societal restrictions at the heart of Kubrick's film. By diverging as far as possible from constructions of "normalcy," Dellsperger exposes how ridiculous gendered behavior can be, turning the idea into a riotous carnival of errors. At the same time, he conjures up a sense of endless isolation, plunging us into a psychoanalytical nightmare where every participant represents the dreamer and the mirror cannot be escaped. The work is for sale at €20,000.

Brice Dellsperger, "Refreshing Fassbinder. . . and others," on view Jan. 13-Feb. 12, 2011 at Team Gallery, 83 Grand Street, New York N.Y. 10013

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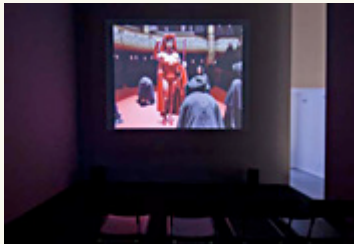
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Brice Dellsperger
Body Double 22 (After Eyes Wide Shut)
Installation view
2007-2010
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