



Eleanor Antin The New York Times September 2013

ART REVIEW

She Creates Herself in Multitudes

Eleanor Antin's Selves at Columbia University



Private collection

"The Two Eleanors" (1973), a work in which Eleanor Antin plays with identity.

By KAREN ROSENBERG

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As we cycle through avatars in our online lives, we are discovering a new appreciation for the artist of many identities: a figure like Cindy Sherman, with her parade of photographic personae, or the younger contemporary artists Kalup Linzy and Tamy Ben-Tor, who inhabit multiple characters in their satirical videos. "Multiple Occupancy: Eleanor Antin's 'Selves,'" a riveting show at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery, suggests that we should also be celebrating Ms. Antin.

A difficult-to-categorize figure whose career veered from art into theater and back again, she is best known for her 1972 performance/photography piece "Carving: A Traditional Sculpture," a visual diary of her naked body as it was diminished by a 37-day diet. That somber, almost classical work is such a staple of early feminist art that it's strange to discover, in this exhibition, that it was just one of her many theatrical and provocative self-transformations.

For three weeks in 1980, for instance, she went out in public dressed as a fictional historical figure of her invention: Eleanora Antinova, a black ballerina in Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. (Ms. Antin, who is white, darkened her skin with makeup; she could not



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do much about her short-limbed, un-dancerlike build.) She recorded her experiences in a “memoir,” “Being Antinova,” adding to an already substantial archive of photographs and drawings made in character.

A few years earlier she pasted a beard onto her face, donned a cape and wide-brimmed hat and made the rounds of San Diego as the King of Solana Beach, a figure with a distinct resemblance to the 17th-century monarch in portraits by Van Dyck. Trailed by bemused locals, the King shops for groceries, goes to the post office and perches regally on an old sofa that’s been left at the curb.

With an assortment of photographs, videos and set pieces, “Multiple Occupancy” examines Ms. Antin’s major selves — some of them female (ballerinas, nurses) and some male (the King and an exiled Russian film director). These characters may not seem to have much in common with one another, or for that matter with Ms. Antin, but they are all, in their way, frustrated outsiders. The King struggles to govern a Vietnam-era populace that’s deeply suspicious of authority; Antinova aspires to play Giselle, but keeps getting cast as Pocahontas.

“I deliberately gave Antinova a traditional art form because I was already at odds with one, traditional Conceptual Art,” Ms. Antin tells the show’s curator, Emily Liebert, in an illuminating catalog interview. (Ms. Liebert, a Ph.D. candidate in the art history department at Columbia, is working on a dissertation about the selves.) Conceptual Art, as Ms. Antin saw it in the 1970s, was a boys’ club; it was also intellectually rigid, with little room for narrative, biography or fantasy.

The first stirrings of the selves have the narcissistic sensibility of other early video and performance art (by, say, Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci). In two videos that open the exhibition, Ms. Antin can be seen sitting before a mirror applying makeup (in “Representational Painting”) and a beard (in “The King”). But by the time the first ballerina appears, in serial photographs and a video from 1973, it’s clear that Ms. Antin is bringing feminism and some element of personal experience into the mix.

This stumblebum of a dancer — a precursor to Antinova — struggles to hold various ballet positions, shouting at a photographer to take the picture before she loses her footing. Like an even more cruelly realistic version of Degas’s dancers at the barre, she reminds us that not every little girl in a tutu can become a real ballerina (and makes us wonder why so many still want to).

Not all of the selves are equally compelling. Sometimes they become a kind of shtick: Little Nurse Eleanor, for instance, suffers a repetitive series of indignities that highlight



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stereotypes of the “scapegoat, nurturer, servant, sex object and fantasy”; Ms. Antin represents this hapless figure with a paper doll, turning her into a sort of female Mr. Bill. (Fortunately, the nurse “self” evolves into a more complex character, Nurse Eleanor Nightingale, whose Crimean War back story allows Ms. Antin to comment, elliptically, on the carnage of Vietnam.)

But in at least one case they come across as sincere homage, like the film Ms. Antin made as Yevgeny Antinov, a film director exiled from Russia for supposed Trotskyite sympathies. Released as a feature-length independent movie, “The Man Without a World” chronicles life in a Polish shtetl and is closely modeled on silent films of the 1920s. Ms. Antin has called it a tribute to her mother, who had been an actress in Poland’s Yiddish theater.

Even the weaker selves, however, exist in a fascinating and mysterious realm between mediums. They bridge photography and performance, film and literature, paper dolls and live humans. Often one type of representation will sabotage another; the ballerina is convincing enough in stills, but on video she falls apart.

The way Ms. Antin develops her selves, over years and sometimes decades, is just as interesting. She will add chapters or “discover” lost works — for instance, “archival” footage of Antinova’s late, desperate years on the vaudeville stage. She will also revisit performances, as she did this year when she reinterpreted her 1979 play “Before the Revolution,” casting an African-American actress in the role of Antinova.

“Multiple Occupancy” should endear Ms. Antin to an art world fixated on aliases, alter egos and falsified archives. (See the Atlas Group, Otabenga Jones & Associates, Henry Codax and the painter who may or may not be Bob Dylan.) Her “selves” may have been invented in the 1970s, taking their identities from the distant past, but they are undisputably a part of the present.

“Multiple Occupancy: Eleanor Antin’s ‘Selves’ ” runs through Dec. 7 at the Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, 1190 Amsterdam Avenue, near 119th Street; (212) 854-7288, columbia.edu/cu/wallach.

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