

Maria Eichhorn *Film Lexicon of Sexual Practices* (1999/2005/2008/2014/2015)

Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin 29 April – 25 June

The least interesting thing about Maria Eichhorn's art is the point it is trying to make. We probably agree that its exposure of its context, its media – its occasion, in the broadest sense – is no bad thing, although we might feel hectored for being told so. Isn't there always something sanctimonious, even hypocritical, in claiming the role of exposé of media that one nevertheless adopts? The most interesting thing about Eichhorn's art is how she attempts to deal with this problem.

Marshall McLuhan famously said, 'The medium is the message.' Filmic structuralism sees the medium as seeking to conceal its message, and aims to out it. Film involves the consumption of images, typically in a darkened space, and is predicated on the pleasure of submitting to filmic illusion and a willingness to suspend our disbelief in it. Eichhorn's *Film Lexicon of Sexual Practices* aggressively inverts the triad of subject, film medium and viewer, in line with structuralistic practice, transferring the spotlight (and film is all about where the spotlight lies) from subject to viewer. That the medium is 16mm film, with its whirring projector in tow, is now a sign, even a cliché, for a structuralism-based take on the medium, at least within an art context.

This inversion tends to place Eichhorn in the role of killjoy, naysayer, finger-wagger; and she preempts this charge by offering us clips

of sexual acts or their fetish objects. How can she be hypocritically proscribing pleasure if she is offering us a peepshow? But this is no porn, and despite the sexually explicit images, the structuralist bugbear of filmic pleasure is being avidly policed. The clips are not presented as triggers of stimulation but as elements in a taxonomy of postures. Eichhorn is out to make viewers feel self-questioningly exposed by their response. Problematically, her effort to exempt herself from claiming the moral high-ground in this transaction tends to shift emphasis from the viewing occasion, which is her subject, to its stager, which is herself.

A neon-lit gallery contains a bespoke, grey-painted shelf/projector stand, in which 20 film canisters are laid, corresponding to the list of 20 'sexual practices' printed on the wall – each the title of the clip that features it – followed by the direction, 'The films will be screened on request'. Opposite is another wall text of credits for Eichhorn's periodic production of the films since 1999. An attendant hovers, waiting for the viewer to betray a preference. Some are embarrassed, some forthright, as if to refute any appearance of embarrassment, some silent, which causes a new pressure to exert itself, because without the viewer's cue, nothing happens.

The projections – approximately 1.5m wide – are milky because of the 16mm grain and the

gallery lights. Some involve an action ('Breast Licking', 'Fellatio', 'Needle Play'), others focus on a body part ('Ear', 'Eyes', 'Feet'). They are clinical, impersonal: we are never shown enough to identify the model. That each clip is the length of a film reel and shot in real time recalls Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964–6), with his exposure of the sitter transferred to that of the viewer. Eichhorn restages Warhol's withering scrutiny of a sitter's vanity, conforming to the standard structuralist trope of making the viewer's gaze self-reflexive. In 'Eyes', a woman's eye stares back at us, blinking as occasionally as it must, scrutinising us as much as seducing us.

The artist's owning of complicity is the moral crux. Whereas Warhol made his own curiosity congruent with that of his viewer, Eichhorn produces the film she shows being consumed. The difference is that her films are merely decoys in that circuit, pointing us to the viewer. In themselves they are boring. Her art is no more interested in the human particular than the porn movies her clips remotely recall. The only particulars in the transaction are the viewer and the viewer's response; and we are left with the sense that this art knows what it expects of us (Warhol was open to his sitters' contingencies), preempting our response as keenly as it preempts our judgement of Eichhorn as merely judgmental. If there is vanity being exposed, it is not the viewer's but Eichhorn's. *Mark Prince*



Film Lexicon of Sexual Practices, 1999/2005/2008/2014/2015 (installation view).
Photo: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin