

Art

MONTHLY

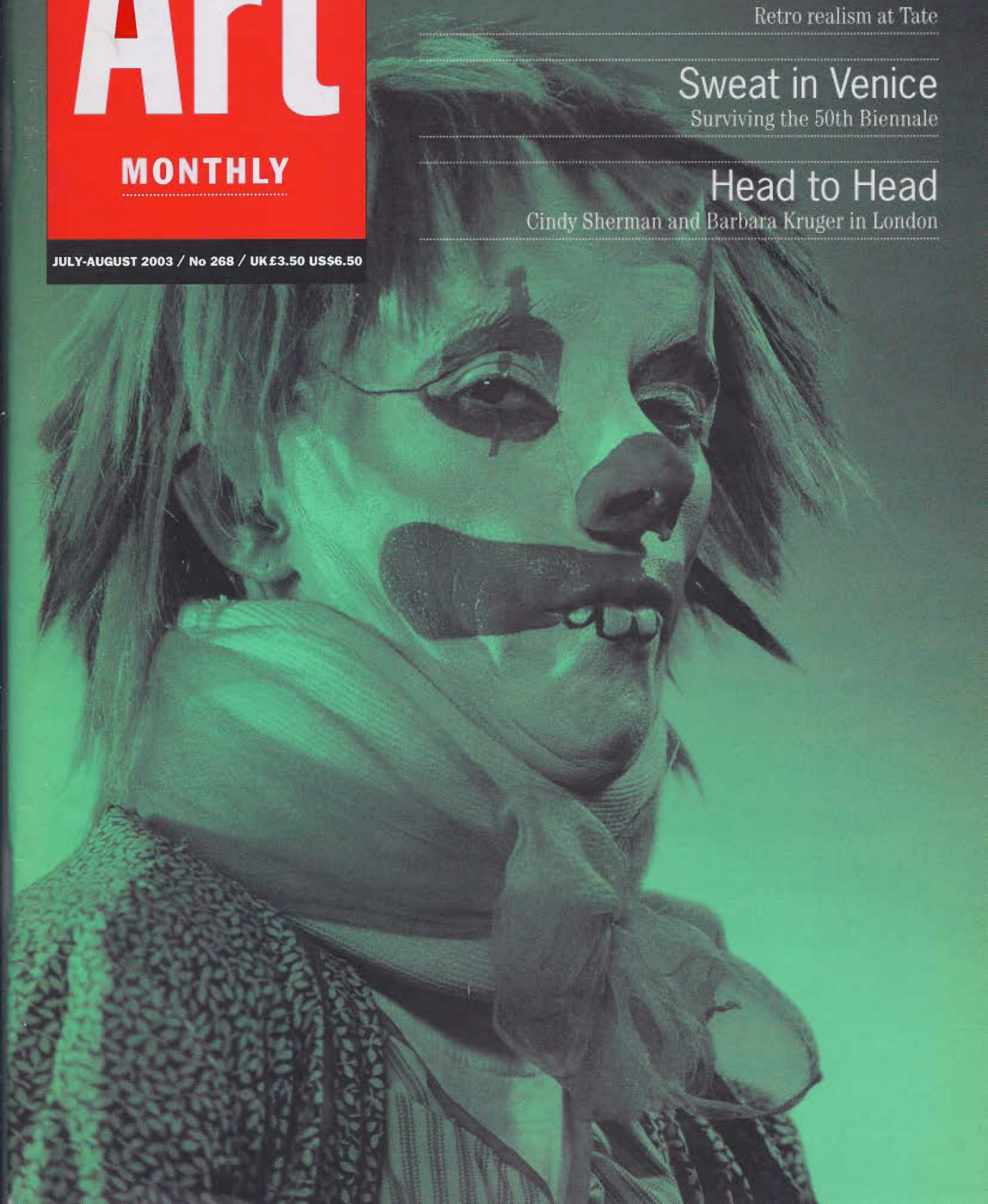
JULY-AUGUST 2003 / No 268 / UK £3.50 US\$6.50

Art and Fear
Neo-conservatism in art criticism

Cruel and Tender
Retro realism at Tate

Sweat in Venice
Surviving the 50th Biennale

Head to Head
Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger in London



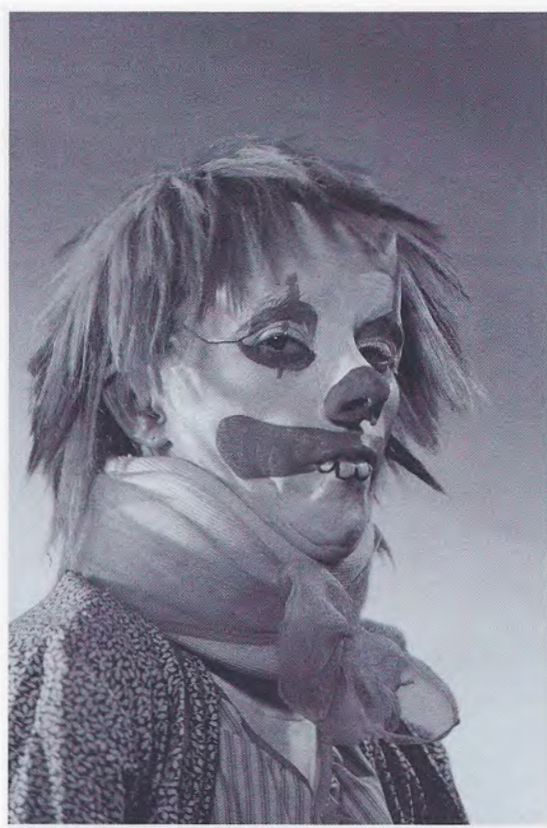
and variety of her self-presentations, and the careful utilization of gesture, expression, make-up, costume, set design, lighting, and photographic framing.

Her latest work with clown images shows no great departure from this strategy. Indeed, there is surely a sense, reinforced by seeing her earliest work, that she has been playing the clown for quite some time. These clowns, however, are no ordinary clowns. For one thing they are particularly well-dressed. The clown in *Untitled #414*, 2003, wears a made-to-order jacket by John Galiano, Paris. I know this because it says so in June's *Vogue* magazine, where this and three other works were 'specially commissioned' (with clothes and accessories by, amongst others, Cacharel, Issey Miyake, Viktor & Rolf, and Philip Treacy). Being designer-clowns Sherman's subjects are no flat-footed fools. In fact, they are remarkably self-confident and assertive. Just look at the clown in *Untitled #411*, 2003, who looks down his false nose at us with undisguised and aggressive disdain. As Sherman explained in the exhibition catalogue, her interest in clowns lies in their possession of 'an underlying sense of sadness while they're trying to cheer people up. Clowns are sad, but they're also psychotically, hysterically happy.'

Clowns also intrigue because they are licensed to behave badly and can hide their true identity behind layers of impenetrable make-up. It is a strategy that has also served Sherman well. Many commentators note how her work both invites and frustrates the search for the real Sherman, the person behind the mask. It seems ironic, though, that someone whose career began with the parodying of glamorous film stars, should end up a celebrity in her own right. Media profiles such as Gaby Wood's 'I'm Every Woman' in the *Observer Review* (May 18, 2003) work to normalise her project by injecting it with human interest values and, most damagingly, linking its many peculiarities to an uncannily familiar litany of biographical detail. Here you can read about Sherman as a 'quiet, sweet-tempered woman', about how it all started when she spent many hours of her childhood dressing up, how this helped her overcome her shyness, about her life with a drug-addicted husband, her bulimic year in the early 90s, and her close relationship with her hairdresser, 'Brad Johns, artistic director of the Avon salon in the Trump Tower'. It tells us that she started the clown pictures after September 11, 'an event that heralded the end of irony for her.' With the *Observer* as 'media partner' to the exhibition the pressure to perform such a role must have been great. The result, however, brings us now closer to the real Sherman. All it does, of course, is present another archetype, just as true and as false as the many other personas that cover the walls of the Serpentine. ■

Cindy Sherman is at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh from December 6 to March 7 2004.

Simon Ford's latest book is *Hip Priest: The Story of Mark E Smith and The Fall*, 2003.



Cindy Sherman
Untitled #411 2003

■ Mike Kelley & Tony Oursler

The Curve Barbican Centre London May 15 to July 20

If 'The Poetics Project' feels out of time this may be due to its emblematic status as 90s splurge-art, an assortment of rhetorical Grand Guignol props contextualising the activities of the Los Angeles art-band formed by Mike Kelley and Tony Oursler during the late 70s. Driven by a wayward curiosity and a disregard for musical boundaries the Poetics' influences included UK punk, New York No Wave, Polka music, early Laurie Anderson and David Askevold performances, Morton Subotnik's electronic compositions, Captain Beefheart, Jonathan Richman and Yes vocalist Jon Anderson. Not surprisingly, the Poetics never stayed with one musical idiom for long nor did they release any records.

Twenty years on Kelley & Oursler began mapping the history of their earlier involvement by remixing the Poetics' material on CD, interviewing other musicians and collaborators from the time and building the components of the installation from notes and diagrams they had made in the 70s. 'The Poetics Project' made its first big outing at Kassel's Documenta X in 1997 where the political severity of Catherine David's selection exaggerated its gothic theme park qualities. Besides some parts bought by the Cartier Foundation, the installation was then acquired by the New Media Collection at the Pompidou Centre which has lent it to the Barbican.

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90th anniversary year



Mike Kelley &
Tony Oursler
Nondescript God 1997

Comprising some 17 separate components, the installation typically includes hybridised painted panels with video or audio accompaniment, lit by cheap spotlights on stands. The show opens with the right-angled sections of *Crazy Head* with, on one side, a shaped perforated panel whose large portrait refers to Herbert Marcuse and, on the other side, a 1977 Oursler video of a puppet head whose eyes are on manipulated stalks. Just beyond this is the two-panel painting *X-C* (as in ex-catholic) showing Iggy Pop's penis facing off against a Kelley icon of a cross. Further round the Curve the collaborative painting *New Wave* contrasts caricature portraits of Iggy Pop with Debbie Harry, while *Nondescript God* projects a video of Genesis P-Orridge in drag onto a large and lumpy excremental form. To grasp the improvisatory logic of these pieces consider the elements of *Entrail Diatribe* where a video projection of an interview with Glen Branca moves constantly around a rough seven-foot high painting of a dissected rat. Rats were a popular punk reference (check the first Stranglers' 1977 LP, *Rattus Norvegicus*) and an image of rat entrails takes this fondness to a satirical extreme. Bands like Sonic Youth and Helmet emerged from the ranks of musicians forming Branca's confrontational guitar orchestra which effectively bridged the

worlds of 60s experimental serial music and punk.

This scale of historical recall relates to some of Kelley's other recent projects. In order to lend a droll credibility to unorthodox cultural and aesthetic meanings he takes a perverse reading of Freud's theory of memory. This maintains that consciousness protects us from most external stimuli such that we remember only what didn't have an effect on us. Unsuccessful deflection of environmental pressures results in traumatic memory residues, lying in our unconscious like scar tissue, unrecalled and latently harmful. *Educational Complex*, Kelley's 1995 room-by-room reconstruction of all the institutions he ever attended, proposes that unremembered spaces must signify the site of great trauma; for example, his obligation at art school to imbibe the legacy of Abstract Expressionism. 'The Poetics Project' differs in that Kelley and Oursler treat the band as the likely site of changing cultural structures for which their old music serves as a possible remembrance trigger, a punk surrogate for Proust's *madeleine*. The forms by which these structures are uncovered and remembrance activated are as much the subject of investigation as the period itself. By releasing their uncatalogued original cassette recordings on CDs with lo-fi quality intact Kelley & Oursler highlight their inadequate discography. Unable to remember lineups and dates, their less-than-scholarly approach is to hope for the best. At the Barbican this music can be heard on headphones outside the exhibition itself, making a distinction between original and new material which is unhelpful. For the sleeve notes Kelley writes 'In the end, this work is not so much a portrait of the Poetics as it is an examination of how a history is constructed. [...] hopefully the prehistoricization of the Punk period will be perceived as a war for control of meaning [...]'. As part of their campaign Kelley & Oursler have developed a wide range of video treatments including real interviews with band members, recreations of Poetics' performances, faked footage of rehearsals and band disputes, documentation of the Californian environment in which they played, and so on. However, such distinctions of footage are mostly lost in the atmosphere of distraction which marks this installation no less than it did at Kassel. What might be transparent to them is obfuscating to outsiders who, exhausted by its impenetrability, eventually surrender to a bland multi-media impressionism. The delirium intended by this media assault never fully materialises. The road to aesthetic mayhem must still pass the curator's door and The Curve is really too big for this collection which now comfortably spreads out in an archipelago instead of crowding into semantically dense clusters where sections could interfere with each other spatially and acoustically and sustain intertextuality. Here they seem like stranded fragments of fairground architecture.

The only place where these components unequivocally establish meaning, rather than contingency, is in the video interviews. Here, if you have 14 hours to spare, are some candid and intelligent reappraisals of early attempts at music and performance by David Byrne, Kim



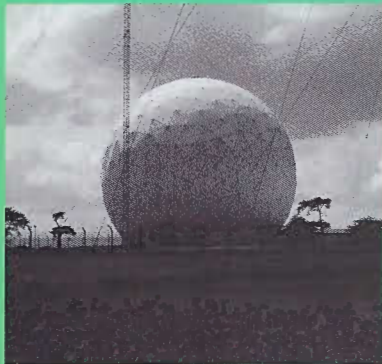
What you see is where you're at
Luke Fowler

26 July - 20 September 2003

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Courtesy of The Modern Institute, Glasgow



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Cindy Sherman

Untitled #411
2003

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ISSN 0142 6702

Art Monthly is published
10 times a year

Annual

subscription rates

INDIVIDUALS

UK £34.00

Rest of Europe \$43.00

Rest of World \$55.50

N America US\$60.00

INSTITUTIONS

UK \$41.00

Rest of Europe \$51.50

Rest of World \$66.00

N America US\$65.00

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Nell Wendler

Publishers

Jack & Nell Wendler

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Published by Britannia Art Publications Ltd. All editorial, advertising and subscription enquiries to *Art Monthly* 4th Floor, 28 Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0DB, T 020 7240 0389, F 020 7497 0726, info@artmonthly.co.uk. Printed in Great Britain by Brown Knight & Truscott, North Farm Road, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN2 3BW. Bookshop/Gallery Retail Distribution: Central Books Ltd, 99 Wallis Rd, London E9 5LN, T 020 8986 4854, F 020 8533 5821, email orders@centralbooks.com; Newstrade Distribution: Comag Specialist Division, Tavistock Works, Tavistock Road, West Drayton, Middx UB7 7QX, T 01895 433 800 F 01895 433 801; USA: Ubiquity Distributors, 607 Degraw Street, Brooklyn, NY 11217, USA, T 718 875 5491; Trucatrice, 710 East San Ysidro Blvd #1560, San Ysidro, CA 92173, USA, T 619 662 3766, F 619 662 3782, email info@trucatrice.com. Periodicals postage paid at Middlesex, New Jersey. POSTMASTER: address changes to *Art Monthly*, c/o PO Box 177, Middlesex, New Jersey 08846, USA. US Agent: Fronto Mailers International, 200 Wood Avenue, Middlesex, NJ 08846, USA. USPS 009 857.

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