

## IMPERSONATIONS Morimura, Colette, and Dellsperger in Costume

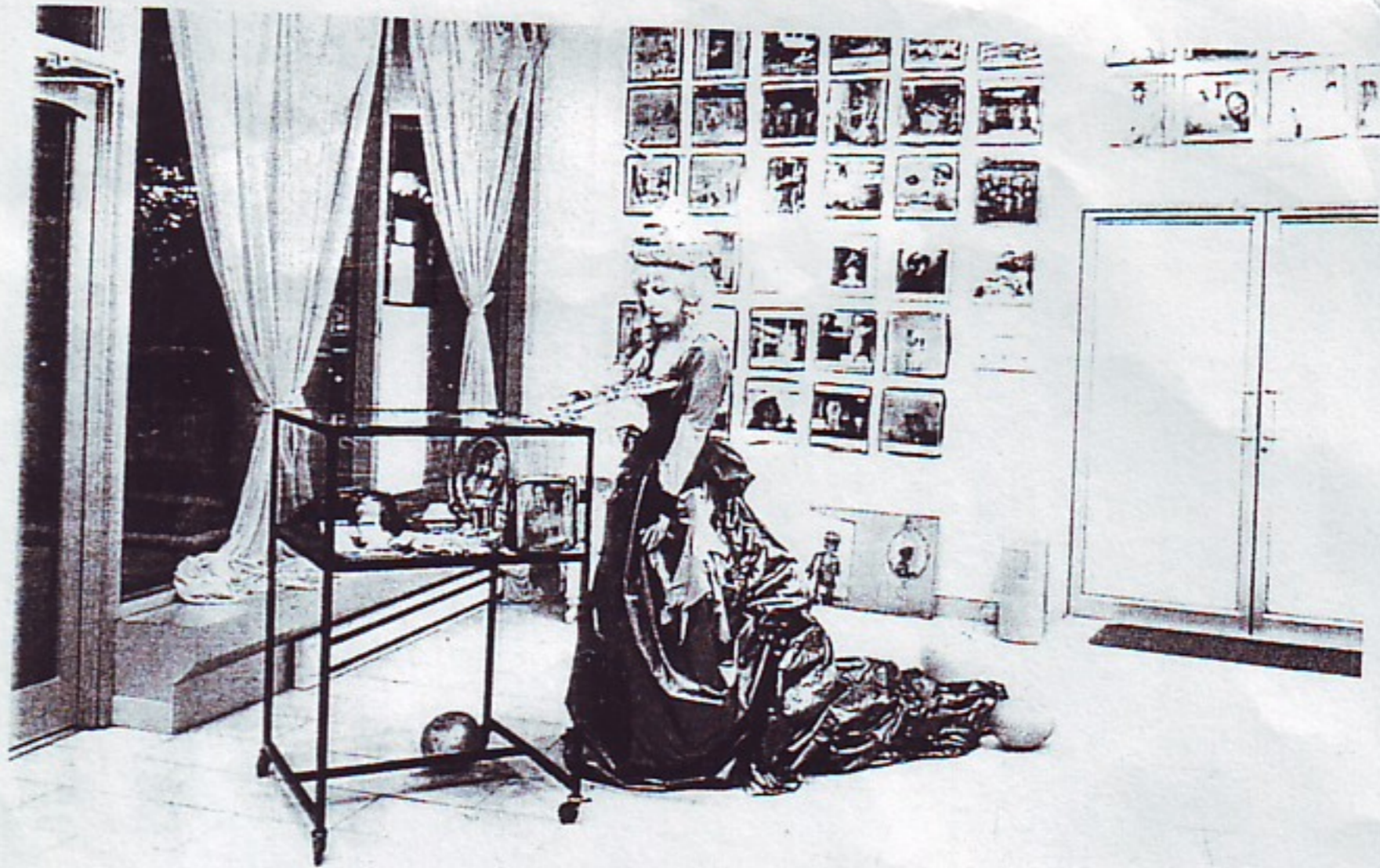
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Yasumasu Morimura, *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo*, Luhring Augustine, NY, 2001; Colette, *Maison de la Lumière*, Egizio's Project, NY, 2002; Brice Dellsperger, *Body Double 15*, Team Gallery, NY, 2002.

Yasumasu Morimura, the Japanese artist renowned for meticulous impersonations of the feminine icons found in European and North American entertainment and art, has now moved south. His project, *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo*, recreated the celebrated Mexican painter's fantastic self-portraits as a lush extravaganza of exotic Hollywood camp. Printed on canvas and often elaborately framed, Morimura's digitally manipulated photographs feature painted backdrops against which the artist is seen, dressed in replicas of Kahlo's elaborate folk costumes, sometimes accessorized with Japanese ribbons and flags. An unexpected affinity between Mexican and Japanese traditional attire emerges, most notably in *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Will to Live)*. Like a consummate geisha, Morimura sits on a wooden chair, festooned with heavy jewelry and solemnly holding a flag embroidered with the Chinese characters for "life" and "cut." Behind him is a hospital bed upon which he again appears, swathed

in sheets that open to reveal two bloody wounds in his back. The figures are set against a desolate landscape of rocks, under a sky half night, half day.

Morimura stares out intently from every photograph with a dignified hauteur that comes alive in his DVD projection, *Dialogue with Myself*. On a plain wooden bench with room for two, Morimura as Kahlo appears, fades away, and reappears in a series of beautiful costumes. As he calls out incomprehensible Spanish phrases in a manly voice, Morimura's graceful gestures display the art of a master *onnagata*, the male Kabuki actor that specializes in female roles. Dressed in a plain black suit and playing an electric keyboard, Morimura also appears as his masculine self, listening carefully to Kahlo's insistent speech and responding with musical sounds and words of Japanese. Performing as male and female, past and present, East and West, Morimura conveys a fierce determination to be understood, no matter what the language.



Colette, *Maison de la Lumière*,  
 installation view at the third Montréal  
 Biennial, 2002. Photos: Courtesy of the  
 artist and Egizio's Project, NY.



Yasumasa Morimura, *An Inner  
 Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Will to  
 Live)*, 2001. Photo: Courtesy of the  
 artist and Luhring Augustine, NY.



Brice Dellsperger,  
*Body Double 15*,  
 2002. Photo:  
 Courtesy the  
 artist and Team  
 Gallery, NY.

The idea of Morimura's separate self persists, perhaps because his impersonations cross gender lines. The artist Colette, on the other hand, appears to have dissolved the boundaries between her everyday self and the female characters she portrays. Assuming various historical identities, she is often seen at openings decked in ruffles and ringlets as if these are normal twentieth-century attire. Taking advantage of her strong resemblance to the Marquesa Casati, the heavily made-up and elaborately costumed early twentieth-century muse to such artists as D'Annunzio and van Dongen, Colette has transformed herself into glamorous women from Mata Hari to Marie Antoinette. Most often, she's played Olympia, sometimes reclining on a bed in the pose of Manet's infamous courtesan. In the nineties, however, she replaced herself with a mannequin, who will continue to appear. Thus, the reign of Olympia is now over, and Colette has resigned, although she can still be seen in costume at art world events.

The House of Olympia is now the *Maison de la Lumière*, an edifice decorated with paintings that were seen in an exhibition at Egizio's Project; the installation was one of the features of the third Montréal Biennial in 2002. After transferring digital photographs of herself and her environments to canvas, Colette coats them with paint and glitter—a process she calls “Colette-sizing.” The images are covered with dotted lines and layers of glitter and paint, as if light has dissolved all materiality. She presided over the exhibition as a mannequin looking in a mirror that is not a mirror, but another full-length self-portrait in which she is holding a

key. Like Miss Havisham's ghost, she exists in a world on the verge of being obliterated by glittering dust. Another self-portrait is festooned with bits of broken plaster molding. The rather tacky craftsmanship somehow manages to evoke the romance of ruin and decay.

For both Morimura and Colette artificial appearances are tools for dissolving the boundaries of gender, culture, and time. Neither artist is willing to let self be imposed by the outside world, nor do they attempt to seek it in inner authenticity. The consistency of their chosen appearances is the result of an exaggerated sense of style. Reaching back to the past, Colette shapes realities far from the boredom of everyday modernity, but her evocative masquerades lack Morimura's edgy transgression. His various identities may be contingent and temporary, but his attention to detail and grounding in Japanese tradition lends a piercing spirituality to his exquisite approach to drag.

Although Brice Dellsperger also uses himself as a vehicle for remaking art, his models are films, not paintings. Unlike Morimura and Colette, he uses other performers as well as himself. Since 1995, Dellsperger has been engaged in *Body Double*, a series of video projections that recreate popular films. In most, all the characters, both male and female, are played by a single actor, often a man in drag. Dellsperger's works turn dramas between separate individuals of differing gender into solitary dialogues among ambiguously gendered selves. Like a hall of mirrors, popular culture's artificiality reflects endlessly back upon itself. The three video projections on view at Dellsperger's exhibi-