

Sophie Serber *Success Breeds Success, Or You Need To Be A Friend To Get A Friend* bologna towers

19 October - 14 December

Recently, a professional theatre actor told me that he feels his job has more to do with sex work than with art. The actor doesn't necessarily create, he said—he embodies the ideas, desires and dreams of others. But the actor wasn't being dismissive of sex work. He was simply describing his job as a service: an actor provides acts, after all. I'm not sure if acts of service are necessarily incompatible with art. Surely art and sex work aren't mutually exclusive. I think the actor was trying to make a point about the suppression of self that acting requires: rather than amplifying an inner world through artistic production, the actor has to diminish that which characterizes them as an individual. The actor's job requires versatility, and in order to be versatile, they have to be willing to transform—even if this means making the self unrecognizable.

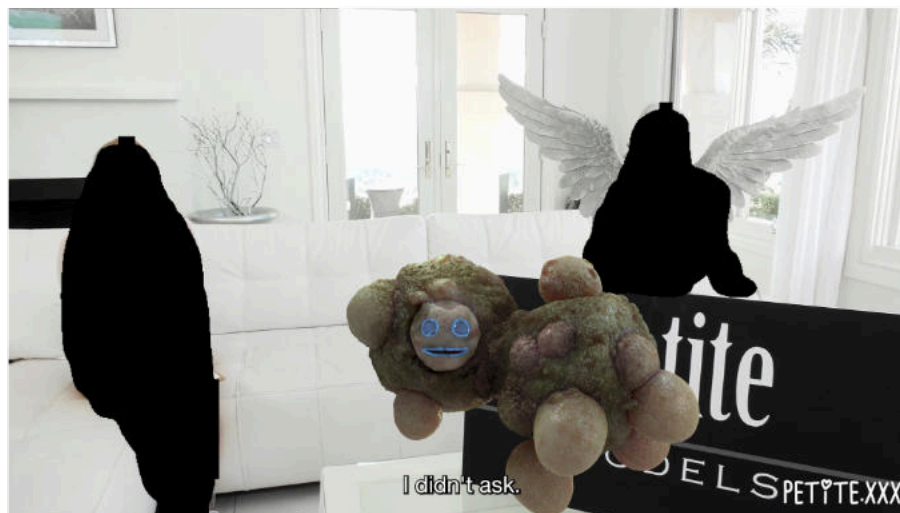
The actor's comment came to mind when I visited Sophie Serber's show at bologna towers (an iteration of the project space bologna.cc), "*Success Breeds Success, Or You Need To Be A Friend To Get A Friend*". The wordy title comes from the video work that forms the centerpiece of the show (all works 2024). In it, the artist is seen performing in a variety of pornographic videos intended for online distribution, as is made evident by the watermarks that adorn the bottom corner of the clips. Serber worked in pornography for a number of years, and did so separately from her art. The show's eponymous video is the first time Serber explicitly merged these two forms of labor (that is, pornography

and visual art). The predominant feature of the work, however, is the artist's choice to crop all depictions of her own body from the video using data extraction software. As a result, the viewer sees a moving, black mass against the backdrop of nondescript hotel rooms and poolsides. Besides the video work, the show

features fifteen paintings, two of which directly converse with the show's titular video.

In the show's accompanying (and excellent) essay by Ivan Cheng, I read that Serber collaborated with her husband to develop an algorithm that recognizes human shapes and "parts." This algorithm was used to erase Serber's body from the video, as well as those of her scene partners. The way the algorithm was trained, exactly, remains unspecified. But what becomes clear while watching *Success Breeds Success*, is that the algorithm has trouble recognizing physical deviations (bodies with many tattoos, mainly) or unusual presentations

of the human body. I catch myself becoming excited when a tattooed shoulder escapes the algorithm's clutch, or when a naked figure in a VR-scene is sufficiently warped by the fisheye lens that it's not recognized as human by the software—though it's evident to me that I'm looking at someone's torso. I wonder what the artist desires of me as a viewer. Is she retroactively condemning her career in porn, and is this video an attempt to erase it? And if so, should I feel guilty for wanting to watch? Or is this erasure actually a form of seduction, like a digital striptease, intended to make the viewer more conscious of porn as a performative medium that is layered, choreographed, referential and exaggerated. In case of the latter (that is: erasure as seduction), I assume the artist wants the viewer to be curious as to what resides under the moving black shapes. Or perhaps the black shapes aren't meant to conceal anything but are themselves the point of the work: the void as a replacement for the actor. The absence of



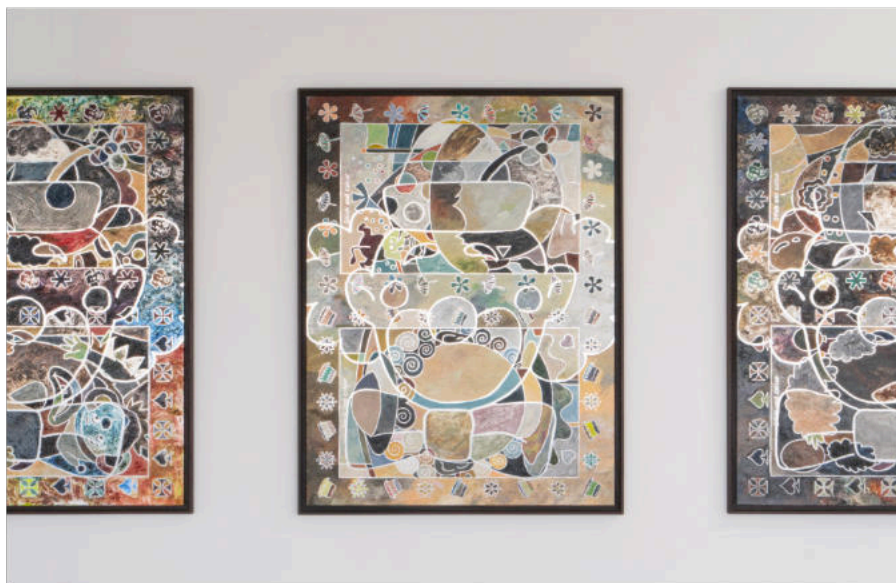
Sophie Serber, *Success Breeds Success, Or You Need To Be A Friend To Get A Friend*, video still, 2024. Courtesy of the artist and bologna.cc.

any recognizable actors—or acts—emphasizes all the more the significance of their work, as porn videos without performers offer remarkably little arousal. The redacted bodies in Serber’s video appear to “undo” the pornographic function of the source material. By masking the identifying features of the performers, it becomes impossible for the viewer to relate to the shapes they see on-screen, or to extract any erotic fulfillment from them.

Masks are an important motif in Serber’s show. Thirteen of the paintings in *Success Breeds Success* feature a clown face, superimposed on an abstract conglomeration of colors. Upon studying the paintings’ titles (*Witches’ Sabbath*; *Saturn Devouring His Son*, etc), the viewer learns that Serber is referencing Francisco Goya’s *Black Paintings*. Goya produced his *Black Paintings* towards the end of his life, when he was suffering from depression as well as gradually losing his hearing, and regarded them as strictly private works, not intended for public exhibition. Serber reproduced the primary color palettes of each Goya painting in her own works, but rather than recreating Goya’s images, she abstracted them as a colorful backdrop for the clown faces in the paintings’ foreground. Each clown face is adorned with patterns Serber found in a children’s coloring book: ribbons, animals, instruments. Collectively, these cheerful images obscure the darker references that sit underneath.

In a conversation with Cheng, Serber commented on the dominating presence of the clown vis-à-vis that of the unmasked, non-costumed and non-performing individual. “The clown is so visible it kills the human,” the artist says “[and] the problem with being unseen is that parts of us can die or become hidden behind the clown [...]”. In other words, being—or acting like—a clown risks eclipsing the

individuality beneath the mask. In pairing a clown image with references to Goya’s dark, introspective paintings, Serber seems to issue a cautionary tale about projection to the viewer: “the performer and the person are not the same.” As the artist’s clown paintings surround the video work in the center of the gallery



Sophie Serber, Page viii. *Fight With Cudgels (1820-23)*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and bologna.cc.

space, Serber is clearly drawing a link between the figure of the clown and that of the pornographic actor. Both figures are expected to cater to the viewer’s desire for entertainment, and both fulfill this need via an exaggerated presentation of the human body: the grotesque features of the clown, and the sexual hyperbole of the porn actor. Though Serber’s paintings and video work clearly differ in terms of media and visual code, they’re both concerned with expressions of labor, and more specifically, the artist’s own labor. Considered alongside each other, Serber’s works appear to interrogate the extent to which art is an expression of “self,” or, rather, a performative service provided. Again I’m uneasy about my earlier desire to watch the porn, as I feel like I’ve fallen into the show’s intellectual

trap: I, too, was eager to project my own needs onto the artist’s work, effectively mobilizing it as an affective service.

However, it’s not wholly evident that *Success Breeds Success* seeks to call out the viewer for the desires they bring to the works in the show. It is clear that Serber is interested in the affective relationship that porn asserts between viewer and actor, and while she appears to be critical of this relationship, she also doesn’t fully renounce it. If she does, though, it’s unclear why she kept the parts that the algorithm failed to censor in the video. One particularly explicit scene shows the insides of the artist’s vagina, made visible through the use of a speculum. The algorithm does not register the pink tissue as a body part, which

is poignant in a way, not in the least because it shows the artist at her most bare, though without being parsed as “physical” or “human”. The most vulnerable image of the artist becomes a mask in itself.

Sofar, I have not yet mentioned the second key feature of the video work, namely Serber’s audio narration. As the video progresses, Serber’s voice is heard reciting from personal emails, tweets and text messages, all composed in the years that she worked as a porn actor. The material is mundane, yet entertaining: it covers the everyday practicalities of working in the porn industry, which Serber relays in an emphatic, yet oddly stilted tone. Serber muses about potential remedies for a “sore cunt” after hours-long sessions with well-endowed scene partners, and contemplates the benefits of cryotherapy, beet juice and magnesium baths. There is vulnerability here, too, and not just because Serber is candid about her doubts and concerns. Sometimes the artist stumbles over her words, misspeaks or restarts a sentence, and all of these “glitches” are kept in the recording unedited, similar to how the algorithm’s failures at erasure are kept in the video. Yet Serber’s overtly performative delivery also suggests the narration may serve as yet another mask. More explicitly mask-like, Serber’s voice is represented in the video by a 3D sprite: a bulbous, oddly pustulent figure—made to resemble an apoptotic cell—that bobs across the screen. The sprite, or dying cell, evokes the idea of nuclear collapse and transformation, though the actual purpose of the apoptosis metaphor remains ambiguous. Does the cell embody “the parts of us that die” behind the image of the clown? But

if this is the case, why does the voice that is represented by the cell speak so candidly? The artist, it seems, is adamant about creating distance between herself and the viewer, yet the desire for this distance is complicated—or contradicted, perhaps—by the use of autobiographical material.



Sophie Serber, *Page ivi. The Seductress (1828-30)*, 2023. Courtesy of the artist and bologna.cc.

In this sense, “Success Breeds Success” is a diffuse show. On the one hand, it wants to entice the viewer to take a closer look, beyond the mask of the artist, and to hold space for what they find there. On the other, though, it seems intent on pushing the viewer away through abstraction (the strictly implicit references to Goya; the self-erasure in the video work), and this suspends the viewer’s ability to get a firm grasp on the show and the story it wants to tell. This is not to say the show is unsuccessful, however. On the contrary, Serber’s works have a rich visual grammar that feels scintillating and alive. Both the video and the paintings demonstrate the artist’s ability to compress large, complex themes (visibility, the right to exist) into demar-

cated signs (a clown mask, for instance), while at the same time resisting the temptation to make that sign the be-all-and-end-all of the work. Rather, the demarcated sign appears to be a starting point for Serber, and that’s just one of the things that makes her work intellectually stimulating and pluriform—though it also risks becoming opaque. Then again, the opaqueness of the work challenges the expectation that art should satisfy the viewer’s projections. In “Success Breeds Success”, Serber attempts to resist the role of performer, and in doing so, asks the viewer to reconsider the notion of art as an affective service.

by Nadia de Vries