

# ARTFORUM

MAY 2002

## JENNIFER DALTON

PLUS ULTRA

In her latest exhibition, "A Task No One Assigned," Jennifer Dalton responded to a comment by *New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl characterizing art production as unmandated or self-commissioned effort. "What makes these exercises art?" Schjeldahl wrote of "Paradise Now," a group show at Exit Art in New York in 2000. "Well, what else might they reasonably be? They involve real work that is really gratuitous . . . [and] that's distinction enough." Dalton, quoting him in the press release, has accepted his dictates as both permission granted and gauntlet thrown down. The three interlinked works here manifest the documentary obsession of both insider (elated fan) and outsider (citizen watchdog) in a spiffed-up conceptual practice based on listing and archiving.

For *What Does an Artist Look Like?* (*Every photograph of an artist appearing in the New Yorker 1999–2001*) (all works 2002), Dalton has assembled, as advertised, every portrait of a writer, musician, dancer, filmmaker, designer, visual artist, and architect printed by Schjeldahl's employer in the designated years. The mounts for her rephotographs are color-coded for gender (white for women, black for men, gray for mixed groups) and include handwritten captions rating the subjects on a sliding scale from "genius" to "pinup." Wall-mounted in tight horizontal rows, the 436 postcard-size mug shots quote the format of corporate personnel displays and missing-person picture galleries while evoking the ad hoc arrangements of touchstone images in artists' studios. The piece yields some surprises (musicians predominate) and some tediously persistent foregone conclusions (men predominate, too). What a strange celebrity culture is generated by fetishizing

"creative talent," a je ne sais quoi quality Dalton rightly diagnoses as equal parts brilliant spirit and sexy vibe. Thus Lil' Kim, contriving to look forbidding in a platinum wig and ruffled pink bikini top, is clearly a "pinup"; Iris Murdoch, hunched at her desk in a Hemingway-esque cloud of cigarette smoke, is just as obviously a "genius." Young John and Paul, baby-faced and eager in a Frankfurter or Liverpoolian pub, occupy the exact middle of the scale.

While Dalton's *New Yorker* piece parses the "highbrow general interest" category of art appreciation, the "trade publication" and "private opinion" registers are represented by *Artforum* and the artist herself, respectively. In *Every Adjective Used to Describe Artists and Their Work in Artforum's "Best of 2000"* Dalton carefully records said modifiers in pencil on a long paper scroll. The terms are classed by the gender of the artist, and parity is achieved in praise. But the men's list is nearly three times as long as the women's, a devastating imbrication of qualitative and quantitative analysis: The long blank space filling out the women's column speaks volumes. The *New Yorker* and *Artforum* works are an implicit call to arms, which Dalton answers in a sharp but goofy computer presentation called *Contemporary Art According to Jen*. Decorated with painfully cheesy clip art, the PowerPoint windows cycle through a version of art-world categorization, with headings like THE ARTIST AS LOSER OF THE ARTIST AS DOCUMENTARIAN. A notebook invites viewers to add names to Dalton's index or to invent additional categories.



Jennifer Dalton, *What Does an Artist Look Like?* (*Every photograph of an artist appearing in the New Yorker 1999–2001*) (detail), 2002, 436 labeled and laminated color photographs, each 6 x 4".

"The Artist as Documentarian" includes the name Jen Dalton, alongside Danica Phelps, Elizabeth Campbell, Joseph Grigely, Mary Kelly, and others; we might also think of "chart artist" Mark Lombardi, who uses a conceptualist idiom to discuss relationships of money, influence, and visibility in the larger corporate landscape. And, of course, in taking up the task that Schjeldahl and the rest of us have tacitly assigned her, Dalton pays homage to a previous generation of art-media whistle-blowers. If the Guerrilla Girls styled themselves "the conscience of the art world," Dalton might be our superego—compelled by order and hierarchy, intrigued by power, locked in language yet unable to completely repress the desiring, self-referential, and expansive force from which artmaking springs.

—Frances Richard