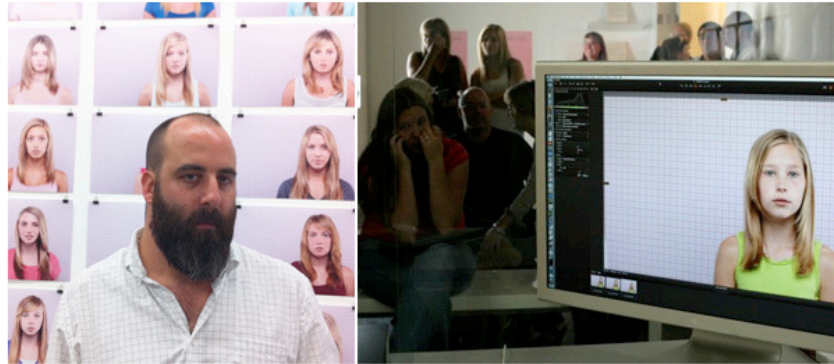


ARTFORUM

That Girl

LOS ANGELES 09.23.10



Left: Artist Charlie White. (Photo: Catherine Taft) Right: A scene from *Casting Call*.

"DO THE PEOPLE in the crowd know what this is?" A sandy-blond teenage girl and her mother were queued against a wall waiting with other thirteen- to sixteen-year-old blondes and their stage moms in the back of the Culver City nonprofit LAXART. "I feel like we're monkeys in a cage," replied the girl's mother. "Or maybe they are."

The crowd in question had gathered on the public side of a glass wall to watch Charlie White conduct his *Casting Call*, an all-day performance event aimed at locating one "California Girl" who would have her image posted on a nearby billboard. Working with the Burbank Casting Company, White had selected over one hundred applicants to "audition" (by having their portraits taken).

Although White's concept flirts with exploitation (the creepiness of the "casting couch," etc.), the event was slightly less icky than I expected. The artist's setup was professional and methodical—clinical, even. Handlers in pink shirts ushered the girls from one mark to another. Photographer Fredrik Nilsen snapped as many shots as it took to get the picture right, while a small team printed photos on the spot and hung them on the wall according to White's directions.



Left: A participant from *Casting Call*. Right: LAXART director Lauri Firstenberg with artist Joel Kayak. (Photo: Catherine Taft)

"These girls are *pros*," an assistant considered, pleased. "They snarl like pros," replied another. The girls had been instructed not to smile, so their head shots—set against a pink grid background—conveyed the bratty poutiness of a dissatisfied adolescent. A set of twins practiced their sulky expressions in a mirror. In front of the camera, a compact girl was propped up on a riser. Lips were glossed. Hair was fluffed, positioned, and repositioned. Once the perfect image was made (not too posed, not too casual—like if Rineke Dijkstra were . . . a casting director), each girl was awarded a poster and a pink T-shirt commemorating the event (and emblazoned with the date: 9/11/10) and asked to autograph a pink banner for the artists: "Zoe's were well represented; "Ashley" signed hers with a curlicue y; "Erika" used a heart to dot her *i*.

On the other side of the soundproof glass, a steady stream of voyeurs—many from USC, where White is director of the MFA program—took in the silent parade of girls. "It's a twisted little piece, but it's honest," observed artist Skip Arnold. "I feel like I'm watching an execution," mumbled a passerby. From time to time, White looked out at the audience, giving a big thumbs-up to friends. "Charlie hasn't stopped all day," noted LAXART director Lauri Firstenberg with some fascination. Firstenberg, who spoke of the project's complex relationship to spectacle, served as a diplomatic facilitator, policing the crowd's casual snapshots and handing out copies of the Model and Parent Release form, a dense document that included a screenplaylike short story by White.

Around 5:30 PM, the nearly nine-hour endurance performance came to a close. "I found White milling around the gallery. "I'm looking for a space outside of commercialism," he said. "So many of these girls are the product of that system, and look at the spectrum that's not represented here." Perhaps this was because the casting call targeted "CAUC/BLND/13-16." The onslaught of "big break"-seeking pretty white girls was indeed alarming, though. And who knows? Perhaps they'll all get their day in the sun.

— Catherine Taft



Left: Participants in *Casting Call*. Right: Artists Frances Stark and Flora Wiegmann. (Photo: Catherine Taft)