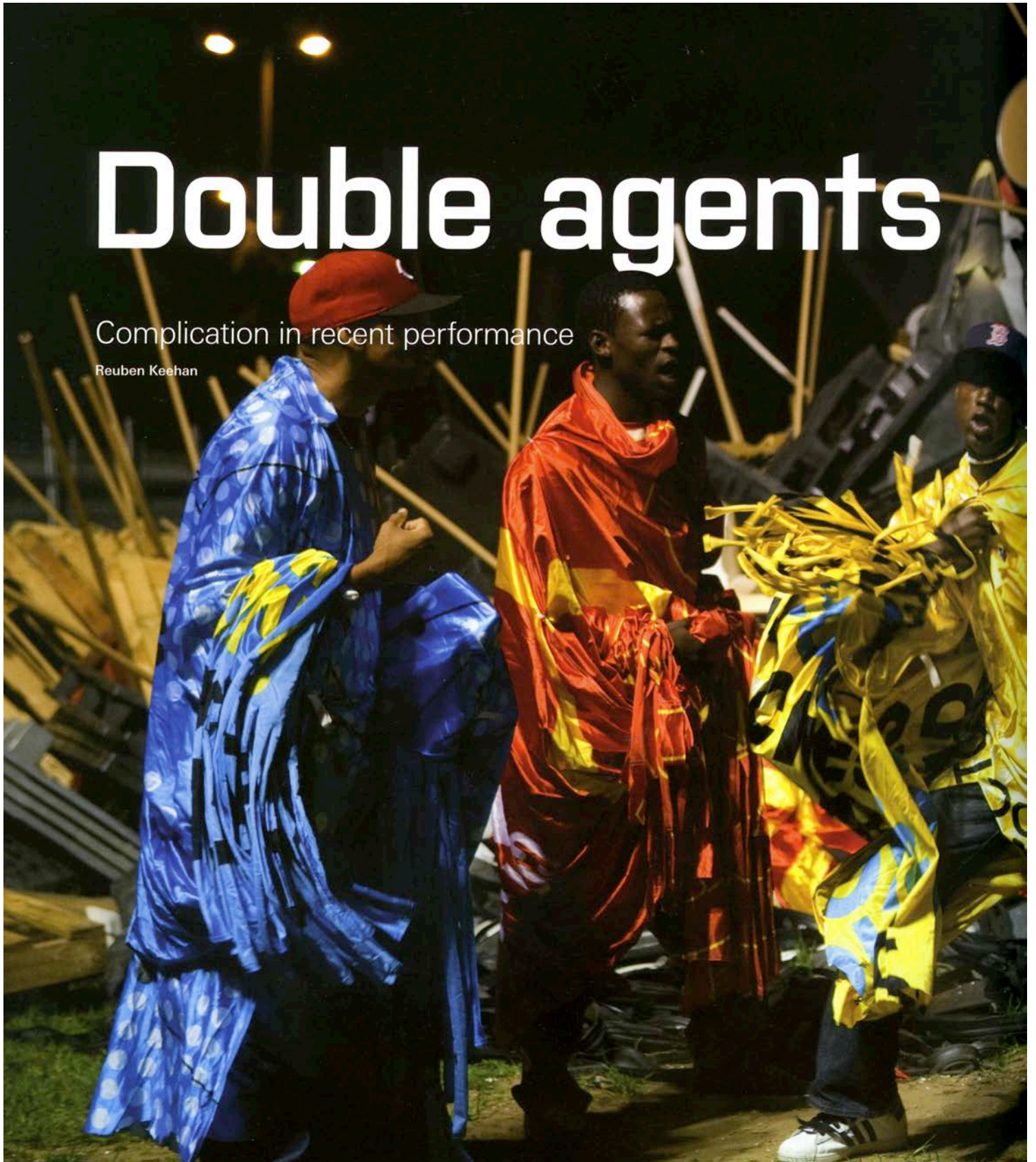


# Double agents

Complication in recent performance

Reuben Keehan



The specificity of these new sorts of encounters lies in their general refusal to delineate a point of originality in the relationship between the performance and the document, or their frequent insistence that the document presented, or even the act of presenting that document, is itself the work of art.

Recent years have seen new levels of visibility for performance in Australian art, and with it greater purchase among a younger generation of practitioners. As with any shift in perceptions of how art might be made or exhibited, the reasons for this change are complex. Certainly the improved accessibility and durability of reproductive technologies that gave rise to the institutional and commercial legitimisation of video art earlier this decade are contributing factors. Such is the intertwining of the performative gesture with its documentation in recent practice that an increase in available modes of reproduction would be inconceivable without a commensurate proliferation of actions to be reproduced. The most sophisticated examples of this type of practice, then, are those that demonstrate an awareness of the relationship between performance and documentation – of its problematics and potentialities – and which exploit or complicate it. In the process they suggest models of artistic agency which, while not entirely separate from the immediacy of the encounter with the performing body, are also not entirely reducible to it.

Naturally, this tendency is hardly limited to Australian art. It might even be described as particularly transnational in the scope and ambition of the artists who work in these ways. But perhaps most pronounced is the capacity of its reproductive media to traverse national borders, enabling the transaction of ideas and practices between geographically dispersed milieux. As opposed to widely distributed electronic images of a painting, sculpture or installation, the specificity of these new sorts of encounters lies in the confusion of primary and secondary registers – that is to say, their general refusal to delineate a point of originality in the relationship between the performance and the document, or their frequent insistence that the document presented, or even the act of presenting that document, is itself the work of art. In the case of activist, interventionist, conversational and research-oriented art whose ephemeral practices are increasingly indistinguishable from everyday life, artistic status is conferred retrospectively through a given practice's reproduction as document – 'the only possible form of reference to an artistic activity that cannot be represented in any other way', as Boris Groys has put it.<sup>1</sup>

Lucas Ihlein's 'project blogs', for instance, are the chief vehicle for documentation of a series of artistic projects. Each is defined by a

certain set of parameters and predetermined time frames which in practice correspond exactly with the artist's life. In Ihlein's work the process of documentation itself is incorporated into the project, as made explicit within the terms of the speculative proposition that inaugurated his project *The sham*, 2006–07: 'I must not leave my suburb boundaries for two months. I must write a blog entry every day to observe what happens.'<sup>2</sup> The project and the blog can therefore not exist independently of one another. Blogging becomes a rigorously diaristic process that cannot pretend to effectively restage the event, nor even report on it objectively, because it constantly draws attention to its own mediating role and direct participation in that event.

Ihlein's art lies in the liminality of the relationship of the blog to its subject. He does not possess the authority to confer artistic status on his quotidian adventures as he interacts with his friends and neighbours in *The sham* and the *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, 2005, or accumulates various forms of counter-knowledge in *The Bon Scott blog*, 2008, as these activities are subject to the normative dynamics of social engagement. His acquaintances might not know they have been interpolated by an artistic project, nor might they even care. Art arrives instead in the process of the daily blog entry, at once a document of and a reflection on cumulative events within the parameters of the project. Since the blog is located inside those parameters, it is both a document of and reflection on the process of documenting and reflecting. Moreover, although all three project blogs Ihlein has completed to date have received gallery-based manifestations as installations, they do not depend on material presentation to be understood as art. If art requires an audience for completion, this has, in most cases, already occurred at the end of the computer screen. Exhibition of Ihlein's work in a gallery format, then, becomes a curatorial exercise, placing it in dialogue with other practices and discourses, rather than a presentation of the work itself.

Often consisting of inert objects, videos and photographs, Astra Howard's installations also tend to signify that the art has occurred somewhere else. As with Ihlein, Howard's practice could be framed as a series of intensive engagements with everyday life, but her activities are strategically positioned to announce themselves immediately against established flows within public space, if not as art, then at least as unusual. Much of Howard's work centres on her 'action research' into

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**Ash Keating, *The uprising 5*, 2009**, from 'Activate 2750', type-C photograph, 66 x 100 cm, photography Alex Kershaw, courtesy the artist and BREENSPACE, Sydney. © The artist.

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**Lucas Ihlein, *Bon and me*, 2008**, digital photograph from <http://bonscottblog.com>, bronze sculpture by Greg James, courtesy the artist. Photograph Simmo.

opposite

**Laresa Kosloff, *Roller disco*, 2005**, Super 8 film transferred to DVD, courtesy the artist and Artspace, Sydney.

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**Alicia Frankovich, *A plane for behavers*, 2009**, performance 1, performance view, Artspace, Auckland, May 2009. Photograph Sam Hartnett.

the behavioural codes and hidden narratives of urban space. This has been effected through a series of conversation booths that have been remarkably successful in provoking public interaction. In most cases these transactions take the form of written exchanges scribbled in felt pen by Howard and members of the public onto the clear Perspex walls of her ongoing *Surveillance with public intent vehicle (SPIV)* model booths, or as stenographic accounts of stories relayed within the privacy of the booth displayed publicly on externally mounted LED screens, as with her 2006 *CITYtalking* project in Melbourne's laneways.

Howard's booths and their modes of activation are aesthetically determined enough to invite speculation that they might be art – the artist dresses entirely in white if only to provide contrasting ground for the text on the Perspex – but like Ihlein's daily encounters, they operate perfectly well independent to this. What, then, is the purpose of documentation, if only to confer a given status on an activity that does not require it for its completion? Howard's performances are so vibrant that their framing as art through the process of installation must, no matter how fascinating, always provoke a sense of distancing, a certain melancholy – not so much for the loss of the original, but for not having been present to witness an action unencumbered by the mediating force of its installation. There is nothing new in this; this is the normative, neutralising function of documentary photography. In some senses Howard's forensic gallery presentations parody this rational-critical neutralisation, suggesting it as the hidden behavioural code of the site of institutionalised art. Ultimately, though, the installation is the blank proposition that an event occurred and that it is worthy of consideration. Art, in this instance, is the prolonging of the ephemeral to critical ends.

This much might be seen, in different ways, in the found performances of Laresa Kosloff and the activist spectacles of Ash Keating. In addition to her better-known video performance practice, Kosloff has for more than a decade produced a body of Super 8 films that document physical activities taking place in public space. Crucially, these activities are not the artist's own. Kosloff's short films jettison cinematic framing conventions in favour of formally composed static shots of an array of everyday leisure activities: swimmers in a wave pool; a roller disco in a public park; a waterside laughing club; the

outside world reflected from the windows of a luxury car dealership through which the rituals of sale are visible, and so on. The specific use of the outmoded, culturally loaded medium of Super 8 produces a simultaneous sense of nostalgia and distancing. The warm tones and uneven focus make it difficult to pinpoint the events in time, an effect consolidated by the general exclusion of periodically specific signifiers from the frame.

In an extremely short period Ash Keating has progressed from tactical, street-level guerrilla actions to more ambitious, strategic mobilisations of bureaucratic, commercial and administrative forces. Within this trajectory there are two identifiable strands of practice which have become more closely hewn as the artist's projects have grown in scale. These strands correspond neatly with Keating's two major performance personas, both of which press notions of ugliness and beauty into the service of the political. The first persona involves the artist himself, playing the besuited Everyman, performing repetitive, thankless-looking tasks as he sorts through consumer detritus, methodically configuring it into rigorously formal installations and highly poetic gestures. The second figures as a theatrical return of the repressed excesses of consumer society, manifested as an amorphous waste monster that implicates an array of industries – including the art world – in reckless environmental destruction pursued in the name of production. Here waste becomes an abject costume worn by the artist and an ever-growing cast of actors. In Keating's large-scale temporary public installations – *2020?*, 2008, and this year's 'Activate 2750' – waste is accumulated to such a point that it soon overtakes the artist's role as performer.

Kosloff's found performances bear methodological and propositional similarities to Robert Smithson's photo-series 'Monuments of Passaic' from 1967 and, closer to home, Bruce Barber's *Found situations*, 1970–72.<sup>3</sup> In Kosloff's films, however, performance is doubled – the act of finding and framing performances to be transformed into performance art is itself a performance, and in this sense the films can be read as the trace of that performance. Keating, too, transforms non-art material into art by activating it in such a way that it performs itself. This is achieved by the oddly photogenic making visible of what is intentionally kept hidden, and through a series of ever-changing waste installations animated by the

artist and actors who tend them. Keating, as the author of these vast undertakings, conversely becomes less visible, but remains implicated as a kind of administrator resembling the Everyman commuter of his own performing persona. Neither artist presupposes an audience for their primary performances: Kosloff utilises documentation to produce or at least delineate art; Keating breaks his projects down into numerous exercises whose only constant accompaniment, whether they are undertaken publicly or privately, is the camera that records them. Again the function of documentation in both artists' works is not to recall the original act, but to mark it as having taken place.

In Alicia Frankovich's *Trajectory*, 2008–09, simple black-and-white footage of the artist performing an ambiguous, repetitive gymnastic exercise is projected onto the top of a slide projector and the underside of a DVD player, with the remaining portion of the image hitting the wall behind. The image is tiny, tailored to the proportions of the near-outmoded media onto which it is projected. Deliberately refusing conventional modes of display, the exhibition of documentation in *Trajectory* is so excessively sculptural and disruptive of its function as documentation that, as with Kosloff's act of documenting, it is itself performative. For *Flying fox*, 2008, Frankovich held her leg out of an office window for one hour, but expressly forbade the use of video or any documentation of the leg moving in or out of position. Even more reductively, the only record of a forthcoming performance in Zagreb will be that produced by a scriptwriter.

As with Tino Sehgal's more widely known work, such restrictions on documentation confer uncommon authority on anecdotal accounts of the performances, creating the potential for a certain collective authorship as eyewitness accounts are transmitted from person to person. In other instances the audience unwittingly becomes part of the material of the work, as a function of the broader structural dynamics of the art field activated with extraordinary agency by Frankovich. A recent performance at Artspace, Auckland, saw gallery director Emma Bugden hoist a harnessed Frankovich to the ceiling using an abseiling block and tackle before lowering her again, then opening the door to the space and welcoming visitors.<sup>4</sup> The action was repeated every five minutes for an hour. While the physical work of the performances was clearly undertaken by a rapidly tiring

Bugden, the audience, precisely through its inactivity, was incorporated into the work. Those present for the original action could be considered not so much spectators as actors performing the role of spectators. In attending the event they voided their primary audience status, which was instead conferred on spectators of the event's documentation.

Frankovich's work could be said to strategically confuse – even scramble – the relationship between performance and documentation, making explicit an implicit function of the work of the current generation of practitioners of performance-based art. All in their own way toy with the authority of the event and its reproduction. Such work is therefore never completely closed to the possibility of new uses, meanings and authors, but, by implication again, claims a certain authorship for those uses and meanings while in each iteration de-authorising itself. No presentation of any sensible register that refers to a work is ever less than part of the work. It is the arrangement of these registers through what might be described in terms of an expanded installation – aesthetic decisions made in the documentation, framing, placement or reportage of an event, its staging and restaging – that foregrounds the expression of a certain artistic agency. To be sure, the agency embedded in the impact of live performance events, especially those that temporarily divert the flow of bodies and attentions in public space – be it the gallery or the street – remains powerful and relevant. But ongoing experiments with the records of these practices and their strategic configuration, not to mention the increasing role of documentation in critically advancing other, less dramatic, ephemeral practices, suggest means by which artists might extend this relevance beyond their own pure presence to participate in the wider discursive context of the public sphere – a dual agency, of sorts.

1 Boris Groys, *Art Power*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 54. Groys suggests that practices in which 'art becomes a life form' and the deployment of art documentation as an artform are products of the specifically 'biopolitical' conditions of the current age.

2 Lucas Ihlein, 'Two types of blogs', *Bilateral*, 24 April 2009, at <http://www.lucacoid.com/bilateral>. This and other reflections by Ihlein published on his 'blog-as-notebook' have been significant in my consideration of his work.

3 Both Smithson and Barber proposed industrial structures as minimal sculpture, readymades produced as art through the process of art documentation.

4 'Alicia Frankovich: A Plane for Behavers', Artspace, Auckland, 16 May – 27 June 2009.