

Reduplication of the Real

A recent Cardiff-based exhibition of performance art stills aimed to investigate the possibility of establishing these traces of events as stand-alone art; could they achieve the status and saleability of art-photography or even equal that of more traditional forms of art such as painting? tactileBOSCH is an experimentally minded arts organisation based in Cardiff, established ten years ago by photographer Kim Fielding and performance artist Simon Mitchell. The gallery and studios are located in a dilapidated two-hundred-year-old former laundry that is more akin to a squat in its state of repair and leakiness, causing viewers to sometimes regard the plastic buckets that catch the rain as curiously and intensely as the 'real' works of art. This reflects viewer expectations when visiting the organisation's exhibitions, they anticipate that their notions of 'what art is' will be challenged. It reveals their highly experimental approach, an approach that has established their reputation as key players in the Welsh Arts scene. They are also commendably fundamental to Cardiff's, and therefore Wales' visual arts positioning on the world stage. Not only do they encourage international artists into the Cardiff-arena, not only do they actively represent Welsh art in the international-arena, but they also do much to represent and encourage emerging artists. Constantly evolving, the gallery space adapts to each show and allows the artists to have direct involvement in decision making, placement and the hang of their work; unheard of in most exhibition spaces that take delivery of works but retain full control over the manner in which they are displayed. This results, not in a shoddy, mismatched exhibition as might be expected by traditionalists, but instead creates an exciting, thought-provoking and thoroughly refreshing hang that enhances each individual work as well as the shows as a whole. As the gallery website states, "This ability to transform itself has resulted in a living, breathing environment, capable of producing a complex dialogue between artist, curator, gallery, location and audience".

'Reduplication of the Real' curated by Neil Jeffries featured a range of national and international artists and photographers. It was the second in a series of three exhibitions operating under the title of 'Auxesis', meaning growth. This growth possibly refers to the continuing successes of tactileBOSCH upon the stage of British arts as well as the growth in popularity of performance art (the focus of the first exhibition in the series,), performance documentation (this second exhibition) and art photography (the focus of the third exhibition).

Ordinarily the photographic documentation of performance art is considered a by-product, snap-shots of a live art event that ensures a trace of site- and time-specific performances live on once they are complete. In presenting these traces Jeffries' aim is to test the waters and initiate the wider acceptance of photographic stills of performance art as an art form in itself. The first step in such an endeavour is the curation of exhibitions like 'Reduplication of the Real'. The second stage is the attendance by audiences and any subsequent reviews by critics, although the success of this depends on how the show is received. Next, other galleries and curators take up the mantle and curate similar shows. Combined these steps familiarise the viewer with this form of art and engender wider acceptance of it. Jeffries, of course, is not operating within a vacuum and there is a precedent with a genealogy reaching back at least to the 1960s when performance art was taken up by artists as a political act to remonstrate against the then established hegemony and autonomous art-object. Western women artists, for example, took control of the representation of their own bodies using performance with feminists such as Carolee Schneemann and her

memorable performance 'Interior Scroll' (1975) during which she read a protest document pulled from her vagina. There is also a precedent for major galleries to exhibit stills as evidence of performances. In the Tate Modern's 2005 Joseph Beuys Retrospective (Germany, 1921-1986) Simon Wilson's photographs of Beuys' 'Action Piece' (1972) and Caroline Tisdall's photographs of his Anti-Vietnam War performance 'I like America and America likes me' (1972) were both displayed. There are also a number of smaller events and organisations that cater specifically to performance art such as the 'Performa Biennial' event in New York. As well as those that focus on the trace objects from performances such as Cardiff's 'Trace Gallery & Collection'. And naturally there is a multitude of publications, texts, reviews and critiques of performance art that include analysis of the manner in which it lives on beyond the event.

There is a final possible step in the acceptance of performance art stills as a genuine art form: the sale of such works and their increased value. However this in itself is problematic as such works do not yet accede to the usual commodity status accorded to objects of art. Further, the stills belong to and are copyrighted by those who take them, but what of the original performer; are they recognised as authors of their own work when it is so transformed? Do they receive a percentage of the profit and how is it divided, who receives the greater share, the creator of the performance or the creator of the still image that records and immortalises that performance? Are sales even an issue when so many performance artists choose this route in order to embrace themes of anti-commoditisation and anti-commercialism with the lack of autonomous, precious art-object as an end result? And does the sale of a photograph by a photographer then destroy the performance artist's original anti-commercial act? Despite the good intentions and the difficulties of establishing ownership and the commercial value of performance stills there are other problems that impede viewer engagement. They are transformative objects and the translation from live performance to still image isolates a part from a whole that inevitably lacks much of the original in intentions and themes. The viewer is acutely aware of this and cannot escape the feeling that they are missing out on something. The still lacks the excitement, the full sensory experience, the narrative, the audience reaction and any other site specificities that occur as a result of live art. Take, for example the triptych of Adina Bier's performance in 'Reduplication of the Real'. In the first image we see a woman apparently naked beneath several layers of cling-film wrapped tightly around her body. From a blood smeared hole in the crotch of her cling-film covering she appears to be pulling out fish. Before her on the ground lie other objects also wrapped in cling-film, we can identify a bicycle wheel but no more within this image. In the second image she is upright and visually concentrating on a fish held in her hand, her gestures suggest she is sewing, but perhaps she is tying the string around the tail of the fish that appears in the third image protruding from her vaginal area. The uncertainty reveals the difficulties in reading the original live act within a series of stills.

Bier informs us that much of her work is concerned with sound, movement, body, and texture. We can imagine the stench, we can perceive (or misperceive?) a possible narrative, we can relate to the pejorative notion of the 'fishy fanny' and find humour in her comments on the physicality of woman. However we gain no sense of sound or movement and little of texture or other informative factors by looking at these stills. We cannot know if the wrapping was part of the performance or did she arrive conveniently ready-wrapped and stuffed with fish? Did she wrap the other objects as part of the act? Did she use them within the performance and, if so, how? So many

questions conceived by the curious viewer must remain unanswered and it seems much is lost in the translation from live to still. But does this actually matter? Can we not accept the still as it is, referencing an original but transformed? Another example within the exhibition is the still of American artist Thomas Stevenson's epic journey across Cardiff pushing a large mirror on wheels. The act depicted in the still is again shown in isolation from its original context of time and space. We gain no insight into the weight of the mirror, nor the great distance he pushed it across the city. There is a suggestion of the indifference of passers-by in the jogger caught in the mirror's reflection who does not even glance at this unusual sight (or even his own reflection) at the precise moment he is captured by the camera's lens. The performance itself is mythologized by those who witnessed it and heard Stevenson talk of his astonishment at the disregarding passers-by, possibly in direct contrast to the interested enquiries he would more likely have had from an American audience. All this is lost in the single still image we are confronted by in 'Reduplication of the Real' and creates problems for the audience who cannot fully understand what they are seeing, again lessening the degree to which they can fully engage with the works. As Jeffries states these stills "distort, sometimes beyond recognition" and this very often happens with little or no coordination between the photographer and artist. Not only are the original intentions of the performance artist lost with the stillness of the photograph, but also the original aesthetic, their work becomes something other than they intended. For the artist there is a sense of removal from their own work, but this is inevitable for all artworks, referred to by Roland Barthes as 'the death of the author', as their autonomy diminishes and their works take on a life of their own. But rather than mourn this sense of loss could we not instead celebrate the transformation as an exciting development as the work continuously evolves as it is processed by others? So the question remains, can the still photograph that documents and acts as a trace of performance art operate as stand-alone art? Of course it can and does! But can these images command the respect, the prestige and the prices of other art forms out in the main-stream? Time will yet tell as performance photography itself continues to struggle with its own acceptance amongst more traditionally minded audiences. Photography is seen as too immediate, dispensing with the romance of the lonely artist suffering for art, too throw away in our wasteful times when photographs are constantly taken in all forms by all people of all ages, it no longer seems a specialist medium. For these reasons it has difficulty being accepted by audiences as 'proper art'.

However the supporters amongst us can encourage others to embrace the transformative process and accept the stills as individual works of art. 'Reduplication of the Real' can be regarded as a definitive status affirming step towards this. Yes, the stills trace an event, but also transform that intangible happening, lost in the past, into a tangible object that references but evolves from its origin. And this article can be regarded as another small step towards the inclusion of performance art stills as a legitimate medium in the wider discourse on art. All we need now, perhaps, are some record-breaking sales?

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