

NEW '06

Catalogue essay by Liza Vasiliou for 'NEW '06' curated by Juliana Engberg, ACCA, Melbourne 2006

For *NEW '06*, Laresa Kosloff directs, performs and hand-makes a series of abstract objects and costumes that communicate feelings about deep and shallow space with references to modern theatrical performance and design. In *Spirit & Muscle*, 2006, she executes nine short gestures that intentionally blur the distinctions between modern dance, gymnastics and yoga: movements representative of the balance between strength and vulnerability, poise and awkwardness, masterful control and uncertainty. Her face is masked by a changing display of Suprematist forms and shapes, simplifying the figure into geometric blocks of colour. Her bare legs remain exposed and appear disembodied, throwing the physical symmetry off balance. Throughout her performance, Kosloff's movements are shaky, even clumsy, contradicting the logical formal structures and the innate expressiveness of the paintings she wears.

Kosloff's video performances are grounded in both the modern movement and Bauhaus tradition, and express her fascination with shifting contradictions inherent in modernism. *Spirit & Muscle* is developed from a combination of many sources, including Pablo Picasso's early Cubist experiments in costume and theatre design and Oskar Schlemmer's inventive dance performances developed for the Bauhaus stage. Schlemmer devised a 'workshop' of experimentation premised on a set of intellectual and philosophical approaches towards the challenges and problems of avant-garde dance creation. Many of Schlemmer's Bauhaus performances explored the relationship between the human figure and space, and used geometric costumes to transform natural movement into standardised, artificial gestures.

The articulation of Kosloff's limbs is angular and all lines of direction and composition playfully parody the regularity of the human body's motion in space. Her naked legs animate the inanimate abstract forms of her costumes representing a play of contradictions between imperfection and precision, individualism and standardization, organic and machine, chance and exactitude. Her performances arise from working through drawings rather than rehearsals, a storyboard of gestures and graphic representations of problems that have not yet been solved, despite accurate preparation. There is nothing definite or 'absolute' here; only amusing and inventive contrasts of form, colour and movement and intuitive improvisation and experimentation.

Spirit & Muscle also responds to modernist divisions and gender distinction. As observed by Whitney Chadwick '...modernism celebrates masculine authority, constructed categories predicated on binary oppositions, where women have occupied the negative relation to creativity and high culture.'¹ Kosloff paints her own series of modernist artworks and uses her body as a canvas, literally inserting herself into the modernist canon. Her 'presence' rather than 'absence' within the oppressive forms of high culture challenges the distance modernism espoused between itself and that which it objectified and mastered. Kosloff contrasts masculine, geometric forms and areas of pure colour with fleshy tones and curvy shapes of the female body emphasising the tactile properties of the works. Her gestures are expressions of female physical power, blurring distinctions between conventional representations of the female 'passive' body – the pose – and the 'active', masculine body, absorbed in the display of physical perfection.

Kosloff's strong interest in comedic actors of the silent film era is also evident here, particularly Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, and more recently Jacques Tati. Through *Spirit & Muscle*, Kosloff uses her non-objective painted costumes as 'characters' to reference real figures; for example, her monochromatic white diamond with the black top hat plays homage to Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin's playful stylisations, namely his role as the 'tramp', altered our perception of ordinary people through costumes and gestures, rendering naturalistic representation of actors as 'unreal'.

Kosloff's use of comedy alludes to contradictions intrinsic to modern utopias and utilitarianism. Her work's playful component draws from the comic configurations employed by Jacques Tati and his struggles with the modern city. In *Mon Uncle*, 1958, each scenario demonstrates Tati's inability to adjust to his ultra-modernistic, technology driven surroundings. Comedy and chaos converge and firmly established utopias are undermined by incompetence and awkward, comedic gestures. This crisis can be traced to the modernist myth of progress and mastery. *Mon Uncle* oscillates between utopian ideas of mobility, liberation and order and emotions of disillusionment and failure. Like Tati, Kosloff adopts humour and play to destabilise these conventions, contrasting modernity's 'cool' qualities with dissymmetry and disharmony, evoking a desire for connection and meaning that seems destined for failure.

Kosloff also draws from Buster Keaton's use of clownery and his pragmatic narrative structure. Keaton's humorous storytelling acts out playful subversions of the connections that hold the facts of the world together, illustrating the incongruity of quest and resolution, will and action. Likewise, *Spirit & Muscle* displays disunity between task and completion. The weight of each costume appears to comically influence the choreography. Kosloff responds to problems in a pragmatic way, attempting to balance abstract concepts with emotional impulses and the physical with the psychological.

Kosloff also alludes to the cinematic inventions of space played out in the antics of Keaton. As David Cairns observes in *The Gag Reflex*, 'By accustoming us to see the world as flat planes, Keaton has prepared us for a joke in which a character is surprised by the presence of depth in a world that appears to him as well as us, as purely two-dimensional.'² Kosloff wants us to acknowledge how a sense of self is defined by how we navigate both real and fictive space, a literal and metaphoric collision between states of interiority and exteriority.

As distinct from *Spirit & muscle*, which utilises the studio as her backdrop, *Dizzy pupil* favours a black, formalist setting where Kosloff inhabits an open, unlimited area and wanders aimlessly. Spinning, rotating and limping produce wobbly and unpredictable movements. Like Keaton, she stands in abstract space and appears shocked and disoriented at the discovery of occupying three-dimensional environment. She is confronted by her own solitude and appears to struggle with form, space and meaning, being surrounded by nothing but emptiness and a black void.

Here, Kosloff uses Kasimir Malevich as a referent, constructing her costume and theatrical design according to his Suprematist paintings; 'Malevich pioneered the black square on the white field as one of the first forms in which non-objective feeling came to be expressed. For Malevich the black square denotes feeling, while the white field expressed the void beyond this feeling.'³ Malevich's negation of tradition, in favour of the 'representation of the unrepresentable', was at the core of his practice.⁴ His paintings suggest a feeling of nothingness and infinity, elusive qualities that are played out in

Kosloff's performance through disorientating effects, addressing the nature of subjectivity as she struggles to position herself in relation to the world.

Modernism espoused a 'utopian dream of a space beyond representation.'⁵ Like Malevich, Kosloff seeks refuge in the 'square' form. Throughout modern art, the square has provided a visual aid to an existentialist quest. It has provided a metaphorical means to transcend reality and produce a portal into another realm: a doorway to nowhere or the threshold to another world. The square has enabled artists to conceptualise and create new realities in an endeavour to find a 'meaningful connection, identification and signification for the inexplicable mysteries of the universe.'⁶ Kosloff inhabits simple cubic structures that provide an opportunity to search for a formal solution to her own existential problems, whilst allowing the spectator experience the same kind of introverted, self-examination.

Both *Spirit & Muscle* and *Dizzy pupil* investigate aspects of modernism, exploring the relationship of opposites that upset ideas of 'stability', 'mastery' and 'absolutes'. It seems that no single narrative can sufficiently account for all aspects of human experience. Kosloff's work disputes modernism's claim for autonomy and the separateness of the aesthetic from the rest of human life.

¹ Chadwick, Whitney, *Women, Art and Society*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1990, p9.

² David Cairns, 'The Gag Reflex', *Senses of Cinema*,
(www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/04/33/the_gag_reflex.html), 2004

³ Herschel Browning Chip, *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968, p.343.

⁴ Ibid, p. 337.

⁵ Hal Foster, *Postmodern Culture*, Bay Press, USA, 1983, p. 8.

⁶ Herschel Browning Chip, *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968, p.345.