

Making a knob of oneself...Assorted thoughts on the work of Laresa Kosloff

Article by Lily Hibberd, Un magazine Issue #2, 2004

On Friday 9 July this year Laresa Kosloff opened her studio at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces for a one-night presentation of her recent video work *Deep & Shallow*, 2004. Projected on a large screen at the far end of the space the footage comprises five minutes of physical performance sequences carried out by a group of six women in an empty, white studio space. Each performer wears a black garbage bag tied in a knot over her head at the top and tucked into a pair of bloomers at the hip. While ordinarily the upper half of the body seems proportionally longer than the lower parts, here the obliteration of the head and torso shifts the focus to the legs and they look bigger as a result. The loss of identifying human features in the upper realms also instigates an appearance of truncation, even decapitation of the figure. Other than variations of height the legs remain the only individualising feature for the six bag-wearers, however these lone appendages are strangely similar. Not only do they have distinctly female anatomies, those small feet, narrow ankles and chicken-like inner thighs, they share the same proportions of these features. On the flyer produced for the exhibition Kosloff states that she chose them "because their legs looked similar to mine". This is an odd prerequisite on which to select your actors and most women would consider that having the shape of one's legs publicly analysed under fluorescent lighting borders on the lunatic. Adding to the folly is the rustling the garbage bags made with every movement, which is the video's only accompanying soundtrack.

In the company of Kosloff's previous works *Deep & Shallow* is not alone in its offbeat approach. Many of her pieces are quirky, often funny and sometimes even disturbing. Looking over a series of works Kosloff's practice is difficult to define. She uses Super 8 video, stop animation, found footage and video recordings of live choreographed performances. Shifting between various structures, subjects, mediums and presentations, it becomes apparent that to apply any concrete parameters to Kosloff's work would be pointless. The prominent media in the more recent works however are video and performance, and similarly for these genres the issue of clear definition is an ongoing dilemma: both are distinctly interdisciplinary practices that relish such shifting boundaries. If only to appease the archivists among us, one could categorise *Deep & Shallow* as video art, primarily because the work has no intention to present itself live to an audience at any time. The other distinction here is that video eliminates one thing that is essential to performance: risk. The potential of failure in live works and the now commonplace crossing of the barrier between the audience and the performer (thespians call this 'the fourth wall') elicits an anxiety in the audience that is becoming a consistently less popular sensation in the forums of popular culture. This is concurrent with the rise in media that further encourage the suspension of disbelief through virtual realities and immersive environments. Performance art stands apart from these mainstream sensibilities and that's probably why it is making a strenuous comeback.

Accordingly, even though we are presented with video, the premise of *Deep & Shallow* is performance. Surveying the history of the genre Kosloff's piece is not merely about performance art, it shares many of the concerns explored in various stages of its evolution: the body, human gesture, ritual, the absurd, a social canvas, political discourse, feminism and symbolism.

In *Deep & Shallow* the most evident pattern of behavior is ritualistic. This applies directly to body art as "...a particular genre of performance art, exhibited by the body of the artist and performed actions on that body... Some insisted on the ritual aspects associated with such acts (a modern 'primitivism') others claimed to be analysing social rites and stereotypes. The division between private and public was tested and traversed as artists performed private rituals in public spaces, everyday life events became art, and artists became objects". As the garbage bag women shuffle around in circles, they might well be acting out a tribal ceremonial dance. Even the garbage bag costumes are significant, for there is a long history of "... art as magic, as ritual, as disposable object, as body-adornment..." For instance, in researching this article I discovered a photo of a tribal penis hat. Need I say more?

Superficially, the appearance and actions of the performers in *Deep & Shallow* is ludicrous, and yet these foolish patterns of group behaviour possess features of consequence. In this, the suspension of meaning of every movement is due to their isolation from their explicit contexts, a little like the apparent absurdity (at least to the uninitiated) of contemporary dance movements. The action of this slow, shuffling around in circles is like those poor people sent on workplace group therapy exercises; a ritual that DAMP (a Melbourne-based collaborative artists group) have used extensively to explore the limits of the team spirit.

The restricted movements and endless repetition of *Deep & Shallow* are definitely in the spirit of the oppressed; whether they are the prisoners of war or military cadets, the pointless repetition and aimless exercises are mind numbing and even soul destroying. So many human endeavours feature rigorous physical training without purpose or meaning, none more than in sport, which Kosloff has made palpable in the 'Nike' sequence of *Deep & Shallow*. In this footage, a lone garbage bag character makes every effort to diagonally cross the space, however her crudely painted 'Nike' shoebox shoes unexpectedly decelerate her motion across the floor. This is an intentionally ironic moment and contains a sly reference for fans of British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman. In another sequence the entire group of characters are arranged in various supermodel-type poses, changing position every few seconds, with a rustle of plastic. Each is wearing a pair of shoebox footwear painted with national flags, representing countries such as Japan, Australia, America, Britain and Germany. In this presentation the precocious endeavour of beauty modelling is completely ridiculed. The piece points us to the work of Vanessa Beecroft, a contemporary American performance artist who presents hundreds of nude women in big galleries slowly acting out modelling poses. Beecroft's performances are highly crafted and clever yet somewhat pretentious, the feminist undertones lost in the excess of brazilian-waxed beavers.

A little bit of humour goes a long way and Kosloff articulates this well with her use of ridiculous movements and props. The shoes and the garbage bags are not employed purely for their appearances, it's the movements and characterisations of the (amateur) actors that imbues them with (non)sense. This goes right back to the 1920s where an apparition of performance art can be identified in the formation of a physical, non-verbal theatre as envisaged by Antonin Artaud, whose scripts were not properly realised until after World War Two by protagonists of the 'Poor Theatre' such as Jerzy Grotowsky. In this latter movement the notion of the performer being freed from naturalistic representations was paramount. The actor is transformative, not reliant on conventional period costumes or props. This notion of appropriated objects being at once symbolic and bizarre was also a crucial component of the Dada movement, exemplified by the

work (and life) of Marcel Duchamp, a movement which is defined as, "... a deliberate courting of the anti-rational, negative gesture; and a commitment to social or political action".

Deep & Shallow has a resolute political message too. Take for instance the shoeboxes with the painted flags. In this context they are arbitrary but in their preposterous employment we read them more truthfully. Flags are emblems, a way of identifying an allegiance and a symbol of patriotism. Recounting a recent trip to the USA Kosloff says that she was overwhelmed by the sense of nationhood and power of the country and this gave rise to the flags as a feature in *Deep & Shallow*. There is a sense that a few other themes were incited by Kosloff's encounter with this global super power. The appearance of a large black frame in the video acts as a metaphor. As the circling characters step through the black frame they are engaging with alternate dimensions. The frame exists as a virtual plane in Laresa's plan drawings and as a reference to the constructs of Cartesian geometry, which represents a high (or low) point in Western thinking as pure rationality. The frame also creates division and difference as each figure is either included or excluded from its space. This speaks of segregation and distinction. This returns to refuse in the disengagement from society that is the emotional world of the derelict. Once again, on her recent visit to New York, Laresa was astonished by a homeless man who "wore layers of garbage bags to keep warm. He had a big garbage bag nest and garbage bag hat, and he liked reading the newspaper. It was in the middle of Soho... and in three months I never got used to seeing him there".