

Assorted thoughts on the work of *Laresa Kosloff*

Making a knob of oneself...
by Lily Hibberd

On Friday the 9th of 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*. 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 greater than the lower parts, here the obliteration of the head and torso shifts the focus to the legs, and they look longer. 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. It is not only that they are distinctly female – with small feet, narrow ankles and chicken-like inner thighs – it's also because 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'.¹ 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 of 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 these 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 is pointless. The prominent form in the more recent works however, are video and performance. With these genres, like Kosloff's oeuvre, the issue of clear definition is an ongoing dilemma and both are

Below: Laresa Kosloff
Deep & Shallow, 2004
Video still
Image courtesy of the artist



distinctly interdisciplinary practices, which 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 in artistic circles.

Accordingly, even though we are presented with video, the premise of *Deep & Shallow* is performance art. And surveying the history of the genre, Kosloff's piece is not merely about performance, it shares many of the concerns explored in various stages of its evolution: the



Left: Laresa Kosloff
Deep & Shallow, 2004
Video still
Image courtesy of the artist

body, human gesture, ritual, the absurd, a social canvas, political discourse, symbolism and feminism.

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 crossed as artists performed private rituals in public spaces, everyday life events became art, and artists became objects.²

As the garbage bag women shuffle around in circles, they might well be acting out a tribal ceremonial dance. Even the costumes are significant, for there is a long history of '... art as magic, as ritual, as disposable object, as body-adornment...'³ For instance, in researching this article I discovered a photo of a tribal penis hat. Need I say more?

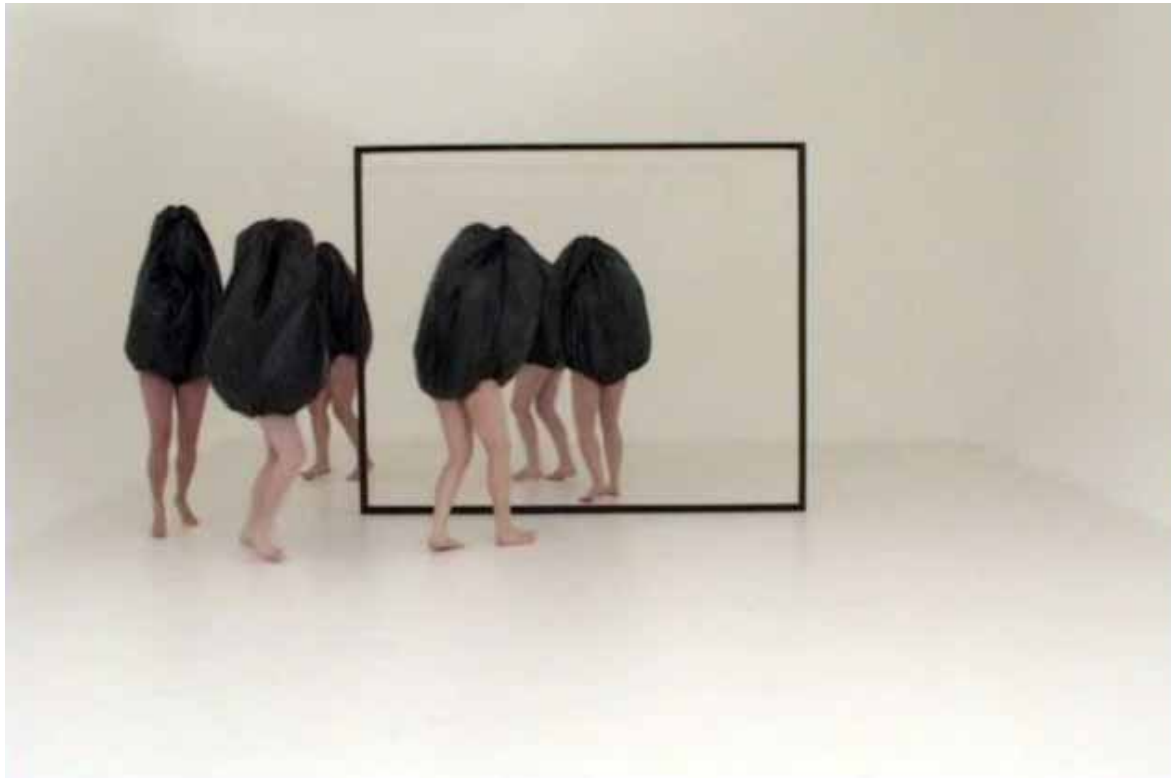
Superficially the appearance and actions of the performers in *Deep & Shallow* is ludicrous and yet these foolish patterns of group behaviour possess features of consequence. In this, the suspension of meaning of every movement is due to their isolation from their explicit contexts, a little like the 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 artist group) have used extensively to explore the limits of the team spirit.

The restricted and repetitious movements of *Deep & Shallow* are definitely in the spirit of the oppressed; whether they be the prisoners of war or military cadets,

such pointless repetition and aimless exercises are mind numbing and possibly soul destroying. So many human endeavours feature rigorous physical training without purpose or meaning – none more than in sport, a sentiment 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 also 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 wearing a pair of shoebox shoes painted with flags representing nations such as Japan, Australia, America, Britain and Germany. With this display the precocious endeavour of beauty modelling is completely ridiculed. Undeniably, Kosloff is pointing us to Vanessa Beecroft, a contemporary American performance artist who presents hundreds of nude women in big galleries slowly acting out modelling poses. Beecroft's work is highly crafted and clever, but it is also very pretentious, the feminist undertones lost in the excess of brazilian waxed beavers.

A little bit of humour goes a long way, and Kosloff articulates it 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 a clear apparition of performance art can be identified with 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

*Below: Laresa Kosloff
Deep & Shallow, 2004
Video still
Image courtesy of the artist*



performer being freed from naturalistic representations was paramount; whereby 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’.⁴

Deep & Shallow has resolute political messages too, take for instance the shoebox shoes with the painted flags. In this situation they might seem arbitrary but in their preposterous employment we can see them much more truthfully. Flags are emblems, a way of identifying an allegiance, a symbol of patriotism. On a recent trip to the USA, Kosloff states 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*. I get a feeling 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 for structure. As the circling characters step through the black frame they are engaging with alternate dimensions. The frame exists as a virtual plane in Kosloff’s visualisation of the space and as a reference to the constructs of Cartesian geometry, which represents a high (or low) point in Western thinking: pure rationalisation. The frame also creates division and difference, as each figure

is either included or excluded from its space. This speaks of segregation and distinction, and this disengagement from society is the emotional world of the derelict. Funny that – it was on her recent visit to New York that Kosloff was astonished by a homeless man who ‘wore layers of garbage bags to keep warm’. She recounts that:

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.⁵

¹ Laresa Kosloff, artist statement *Deep & Shallow* exhibition flyer, 2004

² Anne Marsh, *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia, 1969-92*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne 1993, p.15.

³ Adrian Henri, *Total Art: Environments, Happenings and Performance*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1974, p.7.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.17.

⁵ Kosloff, *op cit.*

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