
Framed

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Rebecca Adams | Candice Cranmer | Kellie Wells

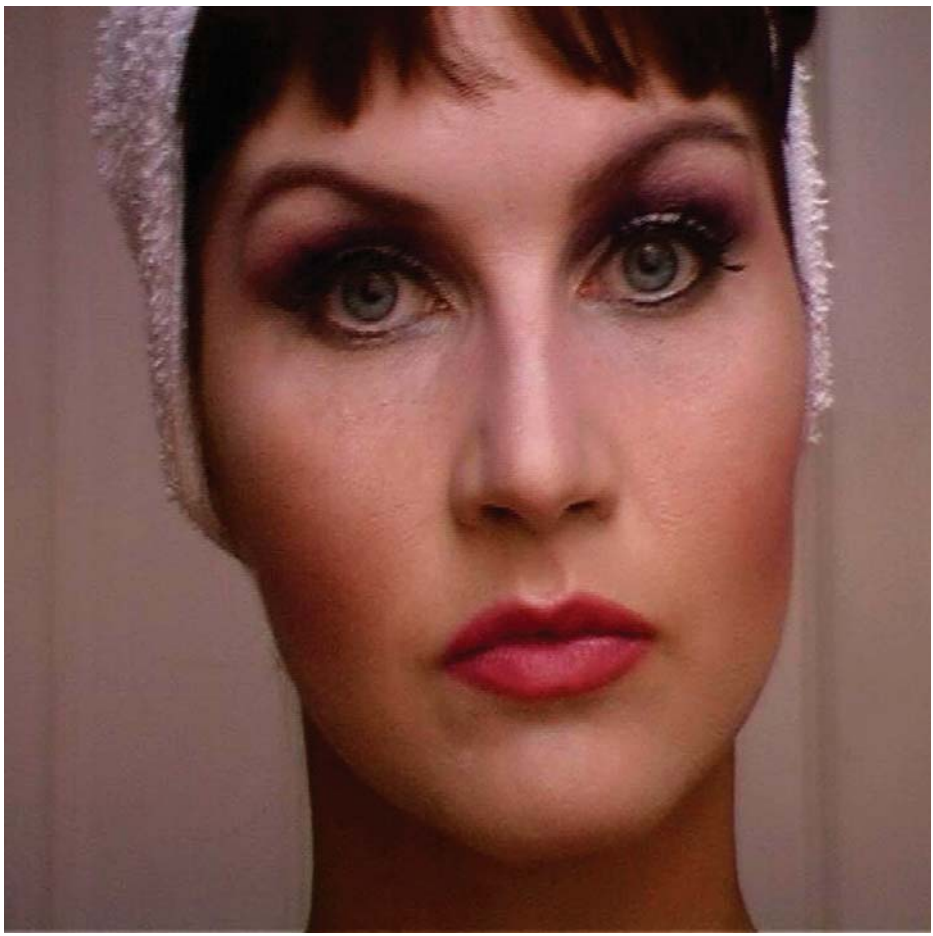
Curated by Simone Hine

It is difficult to view contemporary body art[1], either performed in a gallery or on video, without thinking of body art's lineage from the practices that defined it in the 1960s and 1970s. This lineage is particularly significant in the context of the specificity of time and place intrinsic to performance based works. Given the age and geographic location of each of the artists in this exhibition, their knowledge of the history of body art, and particularly early seminal works, must have been accessed via documentation and descriptions rather than through experiencing the original works. It is therefore not surprising that each of the artists in this exhibition have chosen to mediate their performances through video. This is not to suggest that the artists have chosen a practical approach to the longevity of performance through a digital record, but that documentation has become an inseparable part of the aesthetic and conceptual understanding of body art in general, regardless of whether mediation occurs as a form of documentation or as part the art object itself.

Amelia Jones has been instrumental in articulating alternative readings of body art that account for the role of documentation. Jones has argued that all cultural products are mediated and while the experience of body art may have a particular phenomenological resonance for those who viewed the initial performance, such forms of engagement should not be privileged over the knowledge gained from consequent encounters with documentation of the event. Of particular interest to Jones is the necessary effect of time in creating a history of body art: something that can only be gained through distance from the original work[2]. This distance is achievable through continued access to the work via documentation[3].

Following in the tradition of viewing performance through documentation, the three works in *Framed* have taken place in private locations outside of the gallery and prior to the exhibition. The performances are made accessible through documentation which transforms the private action into a performance by virtue of the frame that indicates the action as a performance[4]. Take for example Candice Cranmer's work *Futile Gesture No.4*: a woman alone in a room inflating and deflating a balloon until it bursts is only a performance in so far as it has been framed as such, both by the camera that mediates the experience and its presentation within the gallery. The presentation of the performance as a video, rather than a specific and singular action within the gallery, conflates the dual existence of performance and documentation into a single event that is endlessly repeatable and for which there is no unique original performance beyond the framed action.

The use of video to mediate the performances in *Framed* runs counter to notions of presence that continue to dominate writing on performance art[5]. Where



Kellie Wells, *Trying to Look Beautiful While My Hand is Burning* (2007) Digital Video (Still)

performance art creates immediacy through a malleable border between the work and the gallery, Rebecca Adams, Candice Cranmer and Kellie Wells have enclosed their performances within a frame that limits the view of both the artist and action. Each work utilises the frame as an essential component that focuses the viewer's attention on a discrete part of the event. Unlike the arbitrary border that disrupts and mediates performance art when documented, these works use the frame in particular ways to generate meanings that could not be achieved through a live performance.

At first glance, *Trying to Look Beautiful While My Hand is Burning* by Kellie Wells appears as a portrait of the artist in a state of becoming dressed. Her hair is towel-drying, but her makeup is evenly applied. As Wells appears to stare directly at the viewer, the frame of the video seems to merge with the diegetic content leaving me to wonder if the camera that the artist stares into, is also the mirror that she used to put her makeup on. This reading of the work conflates the diegetic and extra-diegetic frame into one, beckoning the questions: is Wells staring into the viewer's eyes or her own? And, is this video fiction or non-fiction? In this way, the carefully placed frame creates a dynamic between what would ordinarily be two mutually exclusive states.

While the video oscillates between fictive and non-fictive spaces, the descriptive title places the work firmly within the context of endurance body art. As Wells stares into the camera/mirror, she is unable to sustain composure for any length of time and her subtle shifts between a smile and grimace become unsettling. Unable to see evidence of the entire performance, Wells leaves the audience to trust her that the title of the work is descriptive. The action is private in that it remains off screen, so the measure of corporeal experience is subject to that which Wells allows us to see, or more precisely what her body will not let her conceal. The use of video adds a layer of technological mediation that replicates her own will and discipline, leaving her involuntary responses as the only evidence of the performance. *Trying to Look Beautiful While My Hand is Burning* presents layer upon layer of mediation; from the way the body is adorned, to the way it is disciplined emotionally and physically, to the actual mediation through technology. Wells' body is never present in this work, but is instead constantly deferred across layers of mediation.

Pucker Up by Rebecca Adams follows a similar trajectory to *Trying to Look Beautiful While My Hand is Burning* in terms of presenting a performance that has an involuntary physical effect on the artist's body, but Adams combines this with a clear reference to the Brothers Grimm tale *Little Snow White*. The video depicts Adams, with skin as white as snow, lips as red as blood and hair as black as ebony, eating a presumably perfect red apple[6]. The poisonous red skin of the apple in *Little Snow White* is here made physical as the skin of the apple has been coated with red lipstick. Adams struggles to eat the apple, involuntarily gagging on the thick greasy paste that would usually be consumed off the lips in small quantities over a vast amount of time. The performance has a strangely measured feeling as Adams slowly and deliberately accomplishes the task she has set for herself, while at the same time defiantly fighting her body's involuntary rejection of the apple. *Pucker Up* creates an opposition between femininity and the corporeal body to which it is applied.

Adams's performance is framed in a way that distances the viewer from the action. Her face is cropped at the bottom half of her nose, with the frame extending to the tip of her shoulders. The choice to exclude Adams's eyes from the frame immediately presents itself as a gesture toward subverting scopophilic tendencies within the viewer, because she is unable to arrest the viewer's attention.[7] The lack of address works to exclude the audience from any emotive engagement with the artist; we are distanced from anything that might allow us to feel as though we have shared this moment with her. In other words, the viewer is kept at arm's length unable to access Adams's discomfort and is instead left to focus on her actions. In this way, Adams's corporeal experience of the performance remains private and again, the audience only sees what her body will not allow her to conceal and even that is only a partial view.

Futile Gesture No.4 consists of a very simple gesture that is firmly embedded within an art historical context. The video is a pun of sorts. A female artist in front of a crudely painted monochrome surface inflating and deflating a round balloon appears as a futile attempt to create a colour field painting, with the circle referencing Kenneth Noland's seminal paintings of the 1950s and 1960s. As the balloon inflates and deflates in slow motion the possibility of creating a colour field painting from the unlikely base materials of a woman, a balloon and a video camera seems likely. But in order to achieve this effect Cranmer must be erased from the image and completely hidden behind the balloon. This is never completely accomplished and the video ends with the balloon bursting with a sharp sting to the artist's face. The work playfully engages with the masculine history of painting and its inevitable disconnection from women.

Flatness of surface and lack of pictorial depth were particularly significant aspects of colour field painting and are replicated in *Futile Gesture No.4.* Flatness of surface is achieved through the use of an LCD monitor mounted directly on the wall. Whereas the inflation and deflation of the balloon plays with the level of pictorial depth as Cranmer's face becomes less visible. In this way *Futile Gesture No.4* is reliant on the camera to frame the performance, the monitor to replicate flatness, and the action of the artist to eliminate depth. Perhaps most removed from performance art, Cranmer uses technologies to not only mediate her performance, but to turn it into a painterly image.

The specific temporal and spatial moment of the initial performance is not significant for Adams's, Cranmer's and Wells's works. The gestures exist as single infinitely repeatable moments within the gallery, and the initial moment when the work was performed remains forever private to the artist and is shared only within the frame of the artist's choosing. In this way the works are less concerned with the idea of unmediated presence that dominated understanding of the seminal body art pieces from which these works take their cue, and are instead concerned with simple private gestures. By utilising video in their production, the three works in *Framed* present private actions that are inseparable from the layers of mediation used to construct the event.

- Simone Hine

Candice Cranmer
Futile Gesture No. 4
2008
Digital Video (Still)

Rebecca Adams
Pucker Up
2009
Digital Video (Still)

(Endnotes)

1 The term "body art", as opposed to "performance art", is used here to refer to works that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s that use the body as an art object and are not necessarily performed in front of an audience. *See* Amelia Jones, Body Art / Performing the Subject (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998) 12-14.

2 Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," Art Journal 56.4 (1997): 11-18.

3 Amelia Jones articulates the role of documentation in a way that coincides with ideas articulated by Babette Mangolte, who photographed many seminal body and performance art works. Mangolte states that she "...felt that the originality of the work would be understood only at a future date and perhaps [her] photographs would help in that discovery". *See* Babette Mangolte, "Balancing Act Between Instinct and Reason or How to Organize Volumes on a Flat Surface in Shooting Photographs, Films, and Videos of Performance," After the Act: The (Re) Presentation of Performance Art, ed. Barbara Clausen (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, 2006) 35-50.

4 Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art 84 (2006): 6.

5 Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) at the Guggenheim New York and the re-presentation of her early performance works in a recent retrospective *The Artist is Present* (2010) at the Museum of Modern Art New York, have re-invigorated debates about the importance of the artist's presence within performance art. *See* Jessica Santone, "Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces*: Critical Documentation Strategies for Preserving Art's History," Leonardo 41.2 (2008): 147-52; Caroline A. Jones, "Staged Presence," Artforum May 2010: 214-19.

6 Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, "Little Snow White," Complete Fairy Tales (London: Routledge, 2002) 213-22.

7 John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin, 1972) 55-56; Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Screen 16. 3 (1975): 6-18.

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