

METRO ARTS // EXHIBITION PROGRAM



UNSTABLE MOMENTS / MIRA OOSTERWEGHEL

22 APRIL - 9 MAY 2015

UNSTABLE MOMENTS

Anne Marsh



Performance art has asserted itself, once again, as a visceral and edgy practice in the visual arts. This is evident globally via the biennale networks as artists push against the dominance of object-orientated spectacle that has bolstered the art market for decades. The resurgence in performance is widespread and multifarious but the edgy work is centred on the psycho-social body of the artist.

Mira Oosterweghel's work tests the limits of the body. A female figure suspended, undergoing physical distress or actively engaged in a dangerous pursuit confronts the audience. In *The Weight of Nobody* (2013) the female body is a dead weight hidden beneath a black body bag within a steel frame. Handles positioned at each edge allow four assistants to raise the bag revealing the transparent underside and the body beneath. The performance reminds me of Mona Hatoum's 1983 work *The Negotiating Table* where the artist lay wrapped in plastic and bound by ropes as a muffled soundtrack of the TV news reported conflicts in the Middle East. The audience approached the body mindfully.

Oosterweghel's delegated works engage with a phenomenon that has been around for at least a decade, but in Australia is still resisted by many in the field. It has been a controversial issue for the art world as some believe that the re-making of performance works is an anathema to an ephemeral practice that was touted as a one-off event but, ironically, this also enshrined notions of originality. The concept of delegated performance was made popular in the art world in 2005 when Marina Abramović re-staged iconic work by herself and her peers from the 1970s (*Seven Easy Pieces*, Guggenheim Museum, New York). In 2013 John Kaldor designed *13 Rooms* for Sydney and virtually split the art world as artists and curators argued over the validity of the practice. It is refreshing to see a younger artist such as Oosterweghel embrace this notion not least of all because she critiques the romanticism implicit in the notion of the artist's presence; something that I would argue is very much part of the would-be 'original' ideology of performance art.

In *My Technique Is My Own* (2015) Oosterweghel experiments with delegated works where others perform guided by instructions from the artist. Here the viewer encounters four figures straining against resistance bands pinned to each

corner of the room in an attempt to make meaningful bodily relations with one another. It is a work that is both physically demanding and ideologically loaded as the performers battle with their restricted situation.

Oosterweghel has also undertaken works that have been delegated to her by other artists. In 2014 she re-performed Jill Scott's *Taped* from 1975 at the Monash Museum of Modern Art under written instructions sent by Scott from Zurich. She will re-stage the same work at the Australian Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide in May 2015 as part of *Performance Presence/Video Time*.

Oosterweghel's suspensions are works that test the limits of her own body and in so doing put her in the company of a small group of female artists throughout history who have entertained danger. These include artists such as Marina Abramović, Valie Export, and, in Australia, Jill Orr, Fiona McGreggor and Sarah-Jane Norman. All of whom are interested in the power of ritual and liminal states, as is Oosterweghel.

In *The Body is Full of Electricity* (2014) the artist appears in a narrow room with her feet bound. A wooden board on the floor displays a grid of small electric lights. The audience is backed tight against the walls. The artist walks the grid, pressing hard on each globe to extinguish the light. Metaphorically flirting with electrocution her walk produces a loud pop and a puff of smoke.

In a relatively short period of time Mira Oosterweghel has established a strong practice in the field of body art and delegated performance. Whilst she draws on the history of the discipline, she is not driven by the existential anxiety of earlier artists. The edge here is both fragile existence and endangered humanity in a time of crisis. The political side of body art is highlighted. Oosterweghel says her fascination with suspension engages with a sort of paradox between the utopian desire to fly and the danger and violence of falling she stresses though that her work engages with the language and idealism of activism.

Anne Marsh is the author of Performance_Ritual_Document (Macmillan, 2014) and Professorial Research Fellow, Victorian College of the Arts.



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CREDITS

Cover / Research image for *Unstable Moments* 2015. Image courtesy of Brent Rolton.

Inside left / *My Technique Is My Own* 2015. Image courtesy of Christian Capurro.

Inside right / *A Bodily Negotiation* 2014. Image courtesy of Christo Crocker.

VOTE OF THANKS

Amy-Clare McCarthy, Jess Murphy and Metro Arts, Brent Rolton, Pam Joseph, Jim Oosterweghel, Dane Beasley, Tigerlil, Ivo Verschuren, Anne Marsh.

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Metro Arts acknowledges the assistance of Brisbane City Council and the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.