

WHY NOT WALK BACKWARD?

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**GERTRUDE
CONTEMPORARY**

WHY NOT WALK BACKWARD?

FIONA ABICARE, CATHERINE OR KATE, TANIA BRUGUERA (CUBA), NINA BEIER (DEN) AND MARVIN GAYE CHETWYND (UK); PERFORMANCE EVENT: BONITA ELY, ALEKS DANKO, ROBYN RAVLICH AND JULIE EWINGTON, AND TIM JOHNSON
CURATED BY BROOKE BABINGTON AND LIANG LUSCOMBE

To those who turned their feet around so that their tracks would confuse their pursuers: why not walk backward?
— Seth Price

The artists in *Why not walk backward?* retrace old steps — their own and others — to appropriate existing, historically significant works of art. Working at the intersection of performance and appropriation, they address issues of temporality and historiography to consider the implications of reiteration.

Why not walk backward? proposes a contemporary variation on appropriation as it is historically understood; an approach that is less interested in the technique as a critical strategy and more as a generative force for artistic practice.

Fiona Abicare takes up this use of appropriation in her evolving installation and performance work. *Artist Actor, Artist Auteur* (2010/14) reworks and combines costumes worn by female artists depicted in film — from Chantal Ackerman's *Lez Rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978) and John Cassavetes's *Opening Night* (1978) — as the material basis to ground an elaborate network of personal recollections, associations and schematic representations. Along with the reimagined costume worn by a performer for the duration of the exhibition, these relations are realised as a tabletop array of associated sculptural forms that appropriate filmic framing and psychoanalytic methods.

From appropriation of another's work to a reiteration of one's own, Nina Beier's sculpture *Trauerspiel* (2010/14) is recreated by an actor employed to perform the creative act on the artist's behalf, armed only with verbal descriptions of the artist's original process. Each iteration of this work dictates that the exhibition copy be destroyed at the close of the exhibition, to be remade again by another collaborator at a later date.

The instructional basis of *Trauerspiel* forms a dramatic composition for the sculpture underscored by the theatricality of *Morphological Mimicry and Mympathetic Magic* (2010/14); an identically coloured theatre-backdrop for the sculpture. If *Trauerspiel* and *Morphological Mimicry and Mympathetic Magic* consider how an object is performed, *Scheme* (2014) speculates on sculpture performed with actions instead of objects or with actions as objects. The immaterial and affective work of *Scheme* — the delivery, twice weekly, of an organic vegetable box — acts as the locus of this performative sculpture, positioning the delivery-person as an unwitting performer. Operating like online stock imagery or reviving a tradition of vanitas still life painting, *Scheme* maintains the illusion of everlasting abundance, as decaying vegetables are removed with each new delivery. Like the visual interplay between *Trauerspiel* and *Morphological Mimicry and Mympathetic Magic*, this performative staging threatens to collapse into pure image at any given moment.

Performance's ability to re-enact or reanimate the past makes it particularly suited to engage with ideas of appropriation. This has occasioned an expansion of appropriation beyond image-making, further highlighted by the recent revival of interest in performance. Re-enactment as a methodology has the ability to reveal history's constructed nature and highlight the ways in which memory informs this process. Cuban artist Tania Bruguera's use of re-enactment in her decade-long project *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* (1985–1996) sees her restage the entire oeuvre of Cuban American performance artist Ana Mendieta. Mendieta fled Cuba for the United States as a teenager during Fidel Castro's regime, thus Bruguera's re-enactment of Mendieta's performances not only pay homage to the artist's legacy but can also be read as an attempt to effect a kind of reclamation of Mendieta's life's work within Cuban cultural identity. The importance placed on Mendieta's own body in her performances means that the physical

act of re-enactment becomes a politically charged one, seeking to transform historical narrative and metaphorically return Mendieta's body back to its place of origin.

Similarly revisiting the past, Marvin Gaye Chetwynd's film photomontage *The Walk to Dover* (2006) playfully follows in the footsteps of Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*. *The Walk to Dover* documents a journey, on foot, taken by her and a group of friends from London to Dover. Wearing comical period costumes and with mud smeared on their cheeks, we see the group forage for food along the roadside and finally make their way to Copperfield's aunt in Dover, played by a man with a prosthetic chin. By reenacting the fictional journey in her own ad-hoc and carnivalesque style, Chetwynd humorously undermines the sanctity of this English classic.

A number of the artists in *Why not walk backward?* take advantage of this potential for humour to disarm and undermine our often static relationship to the past. For *Why not walk backward?*, Catherine or Kate use re-enactment as a way to humorously explore their own position as a female artist duo in relation to male artist duos Paul Harrison and John Wood (UK) and The Art Guys (USA). *We are always trying not to repeat ourselves* (2009) sees them undertake a re-staging of a TateShots video interview, placing themselves in the roles of Harrison and Wood. Instead of creating a close comparison between the two versions, however, their low-budget imitation only serves to highlight the differences between these duos' positions; their status as emerging, female artists in relation to well-known, established male artists is knowingly brought to the fore and irreverently undermined.

Using a number of strategies across performance to appropriate existing, historically significant works of art and historical narratives, the artists in *Why not walk*

backward? strike a bargain between the present and the past that reflects upon our shifting relationship to time, and negotiates potential ways and means in which appropriation can be used in an artist's practice.¹

1. Jan Verwoert, 'Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art', *ART&RESEARCH: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, 1, no. 2 (2007), <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/pdfs/verwoert.pdf>, accessed August 1, 2013.

Brooke Babington and Liang Luscombe

As part of the exhibition *Why not walk backward?* three seminal Australian performance works from the 1970s and 1980s were reworked and reperformed at Gertrude Contemporary by the artists and invited performers. These performances sought to re-examine Australia's often forgotten history of performance art and provide an opportunity to encounter the works in a contemporary context. This program included performances of *This Performance is a Mistake* (1972) by Aleks Danko, Robyn Ravlich and Julie Ewington; *Murray River Punch* (1980–1981) by Bonita Ely; and *Light Performance* (1971–1972) by Tim Johnson.









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Image captions:

Front:

Nina Beier

Trauerspiel, 2010/14

installation view, Gertrude Contemporary
modelling clay, sculpted under instruction by a hired actor

Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London, Croy Nielsen Gallery, Berlin

Photograph: Christo Crocker

Nina Beier

Morphological Mimicry and Mymphathetic Magic, 2010/14,

installation view, Gertrude Contemporary

fabric curtain

Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London, Croy Nielsen Gallery, Berlin

Photograph: Christo Crocker

Inside:

Nina Beier

Scheme, 2014

installation view, Gertrude Contemporary
online organic vegetable box scheme, delivered to the gallery at scheduled intervals

Courtesy Laura Bartlett Gallery, London, Croy Nielsen Gallery, Berlin

Photograph: Christo Crocker

Back, top to bottom:

Marvin Gaye Chetwynd

A Walk to Dover, 2006

digital video

11:33 mins

Image courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

Fiona Abicare

Artist Actor, Artist Auteur, 2010/14

installation view, Gertrude Contemporary

reclaimed spotted gum, stainless steel, etched brass,

print on aluminium, patinated bronze, hydrostone, calico,

Georgette, silk crepe de Chine, leather, Made to Measure

print on card

dimensions variable

Courtesy Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne

Photograph: Christo Crocker