

# Doing it right: Recorded responses to 'Art as a Verb'

On June 11, 2015 I visited Artspace in Sydney's Woolloomooloo for the exhibition *Art as a Verb*. Whilst there I decide to make 'voice notes' on my iPhone, perhaps as a live commentary on the experience of *seeing*. Playing them back, I realise that I'm yet to master this technique, but in addition to a lot of heavy breathing they include:

"Ryan Gander's *The Medium* [pause]. Works in prominent and unexpected points in the gallery speak to me of good ways to think about exhibition making and audiences looking."

"Artworks are stand-ins for people ... there's real humanness on display ... These works remind me of myself, people I know. Works sharing something familiar are bound to do that. [There's] something profound about the repeated process... "

"There's a grouping of seminal works by artists such as Marina Abramovic and Vito Acconci ... sit[ting] in the back of the gallery, displayed on monitors in a circle ... it's like a central nervous system ... like a historical backbone to the show. [This grouping] ... makes these works feel stronger, more important, like 'going home' to visit your parents. Wait, what does that mean? Note to self, be nicer to Mum and Dad."

"I should make a list of all the verbs within the show ... looking, smiling, eating, learning, clapping, [pause] singing [trails off]"

"Being surrounded by so much 'doing' ... makes me question what I'm doing, what I SHOULD be doing. [pause] Keep going."

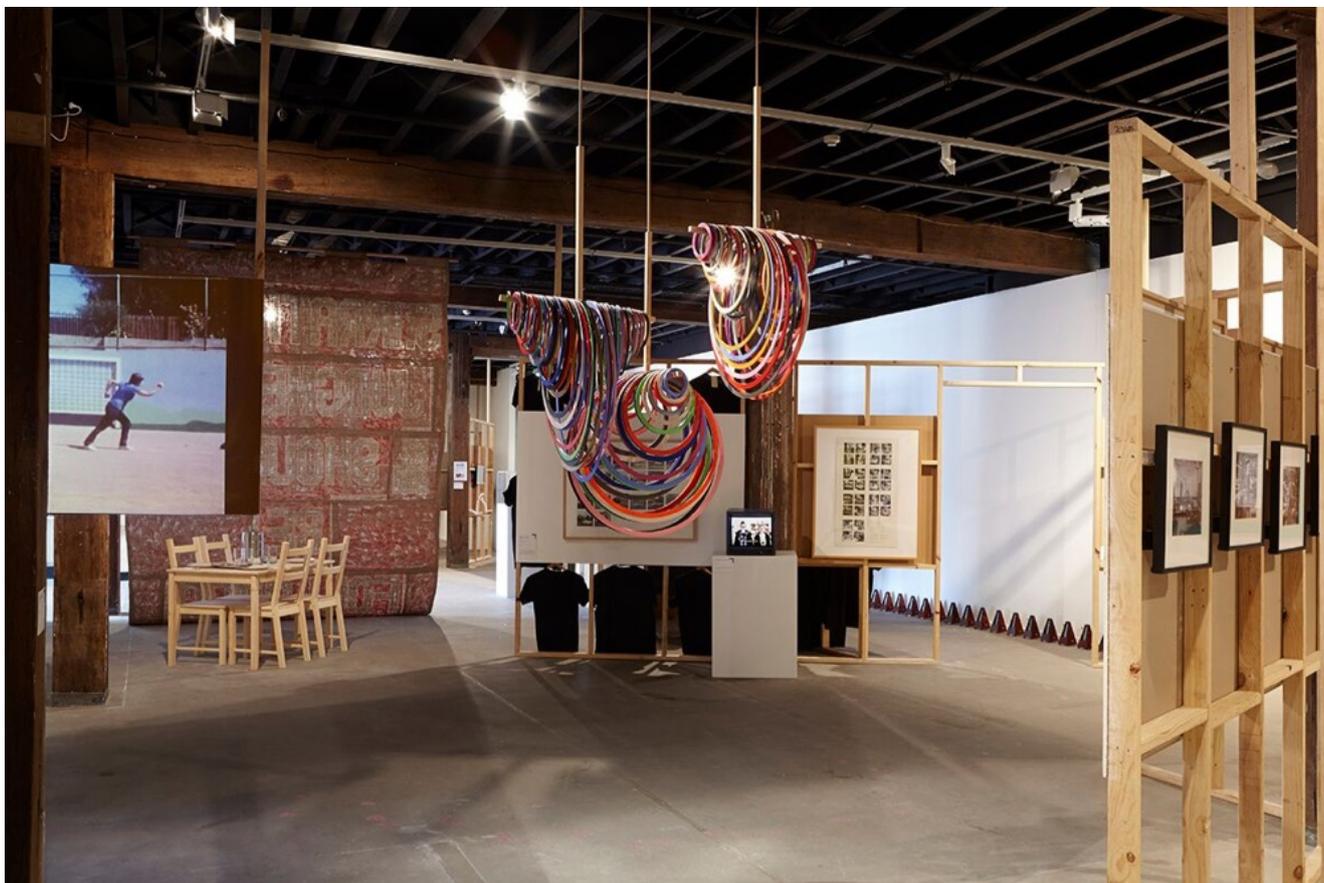
"This show is like a maze, a guided tour and a labyrinth. I like it."

"It's like I am the final work in the show; it's like I am a verb!" (Embarrassingly, I am not alone in the gallery when I say this out loud.)

At the end of my visit and when I feel like I'm done, I linger in the foyer to enjoy Ceal Floyer's *Til I get it right*, a sound work that's followed me around my whole visit. It's on repeat both in the gallery and, happily, in my head long after I leave.

*So I'll just keep on/ 'til I get it right...*  
*So I'll just keep on/ 'til I get it right...*  
*So I'll just keep on/ 'til I get it right...*

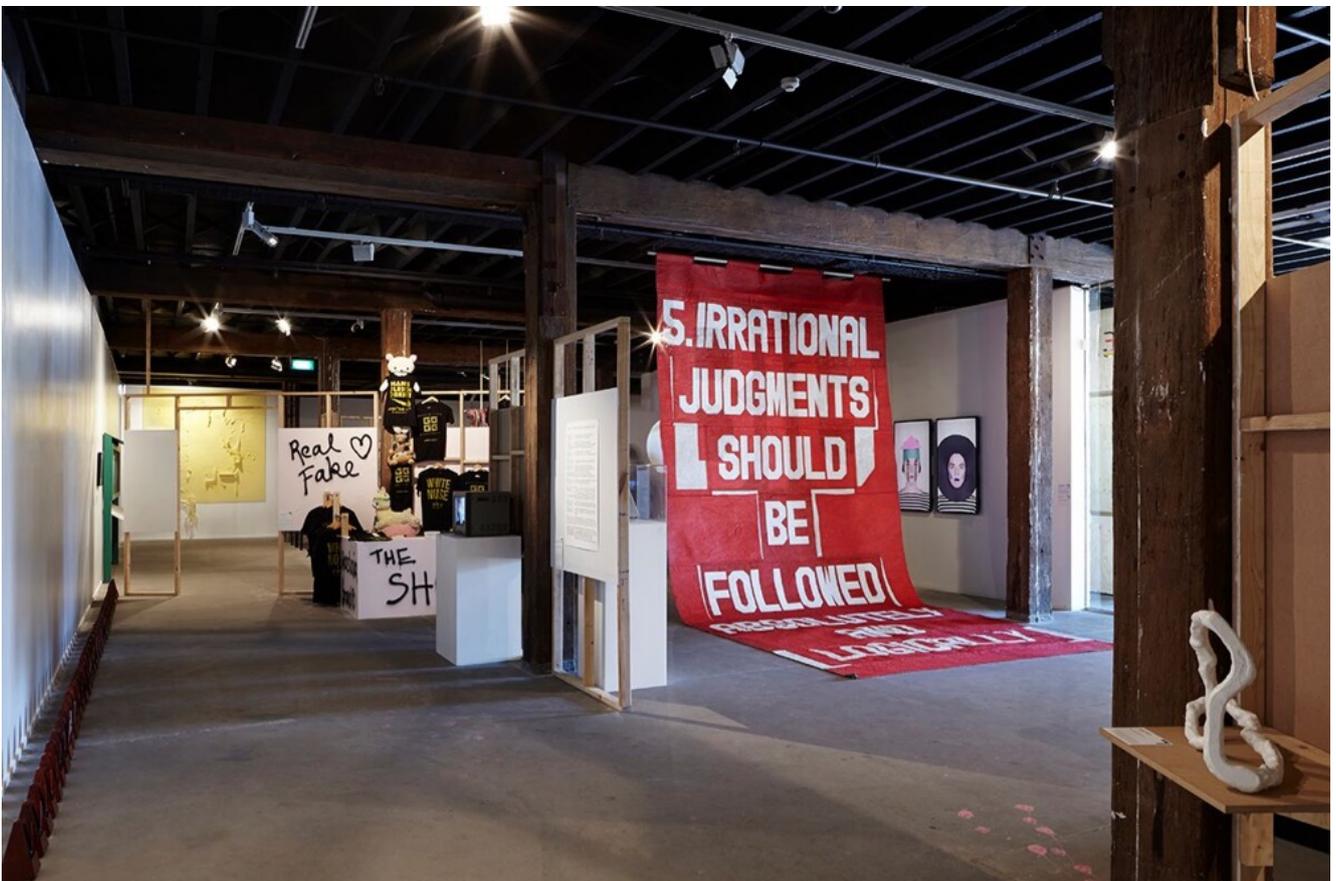
Art as a Verb, [Artspace](#), Sydney, 4 June - 26 July 2015.



'Art as a Verb', Artspace. Photo: Zan Wimberley



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## Talk it out

The performance show I should've stayed in Sydney for was [Work out](#) at the MCA. What I stayed in the MCA for was William Eggleston's video work [Stranded in Canton](#), 1974—documentary photography turns absurd trip that held me far longer than *13 Rooms*. I shouldn't have been surprised that a packaged blockbuster of performance work was upsetting.

The *13 Rooms* problem that really stuck was substitution (there were a few others—see below). Substitution of the artist for another performer is problematic when the hinge of the original work was the artist's reclamation of agency over her own body. This hinge is almost completely reversed in the re-objectification of women's bodies through the replacement of a very particular body (subject) with any other hired female body (object).

When Abramovic pins herself to the wall, nude in a spot light, for indefinite periods of time she exerts agency. When a number of anonymous women are paid to do the job for her they become objects of a higher authority. About turn. It's just not the same thing to watch someone paid to suffer, as it is to watch someone who chooses to suffer.

Repeat re Joan Jonas's work.

The substitution problem isn't specific to *13 Rooms*, but put it in the mix with the contextless mist of that exhibition and the crux of the work is hard to find.

So, re-presentation of performance over time.

Tino Sehgal's *This is new*, 2013, was the only work that shirked the curatorial heavy hand. The invigilator who said 'O'Farrell comes out for gay marriage' was the single performer in the show not choked by the shuffling factory line.

I've been waiting a long time to be Sehgaled, so there was that too.

Sehgal, who doesn't allow documentation of his works and only verbal sales agreements, has got something in this no paperwork no photos please policy. Radical immaterialism. Radically visible evasiveness too.

Re-performance and controlled transmission were also rolled out at the [Trio A](#) workshop held recently at VCA. Yvonne Rainer has a very particular way of facilitating the ongoing life of her iconic 1966 dance work. I sat down with Ash Kilmartin and Eliza Dyball to talk about their involvement in a workshop run by one of Rainer's 'transmitters', Sarah Wookey. Eliza and Ash spoke of, and in, the language of Yvonne and Sarah—*check in, tune up, take away*.

Speech and the body. We talked about trying to close that gap—a gap that is wider for most of us than it is for a dancer. Eliza recalled an exercise where they each notated the dance and another participant then performed those instructions. The result was apparently often miles from the intention, which speaks of shift through the subjectivity of language.

Ash perceives in dance culture an acknowledgment that over time a work will change since it is passed down through the body and every body is different every day: 'you're not the same body two days in a row'. Sehgal and Rainer both transmit their work primarily through speech and both use the body and voice to

either allow for or resist a shift in the work over time. Choreography expects another body to perform the work. And choreography acknowledges time. For those reasons Rainer's and Sehgal's works have a built-in protection against misrepresentation over time. Choreography not as a means (of instruction) but as a method (of making).

Sehgal controls the form, as Ash pointed out, and the content of the work is allowed to re-form each time it is performed. If the form of the other works in *13 Rooms* were preserved, the content was all talk.

### *Postscript*

My rant about *13 Rooms* includes, and this is an architectural as well as communication hitch, that the lack of context given about the works meant we became voyeurs popping in and out of the 13 white boxes like it was a freak show. The poetic and political was lost to the spectacle.

Also, the 'coincidence' that when I visited the exhibition each of the works involving women had the performers passive—often nude—and in those involving men, the performers were active. I went to the catalogue—the last hope—to find essays by four men and no women's voices. But that was just a coincidence too so it's cool. Lazy curatorial non-decisions left a bad aftertaste.

And (last one, I promise) what a slap in the face that the opportunity to contextualise Australian performance practice in this canon of significant international works from the last thirty years was used to show work by the very early career Clark Beaumont duo (not that their work isn't strong and interesting—which is beside the point) rather than acknowledge the key works of this mode from recent Australian art history—Rrap, Parr, Stelarc ...

[\*13 Rooms\*](#), Kaldor Public Art Projects, Pier 2/3, Sydney, 11-21 April 2013.

[\*Work out\*](#), MCA, Sydney, 22-28 April 2013.

Thanks to Ash Kilmartin and Eliza Dyball.



William Eggleston, 'Stranded in Canton', 1973, video, 77 mins



Marina Abramovic, 'Luminosity', 1997, re-performed for Kaldor Public Art Project 27: 13 Rooms, 11-21 April 2013



Sarah Wookey performing Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A' at Viva! Art Action, Quebec, 2011