

Blue Oyster art project space.

Work & Play, 2014 Blue Oyster Performance Series curated by Samin Son

The Following is a series of short text responses by Samantha McKegg, developed soon after each performance. A version of this text will be published in our 2014 Annual Publication.

***Hammer Piece* Samin Son, Tim Player, Danny Brady 13 March 2014, Blue Oyster alley way**

The audio accompaniment to the first performance of *Work and Play* welcomes anyone who dares to enter the seemingly empty Blue Oyster Gallery Space. The shuddering and scratching sounds beckon towards the alleyway behind the gallery. Bleak and anonymous, the space is filled with discarded wooden fittings and cabinets from the gallery, and this makes an inexplicably fitting setting for the three men in army garb. Samin Son, in his Korean uniform, re-presents *Hammer Piece*, with the local additions of Tim Player as fellow destructor and Danny Brady providing sound.

As with previous incarnates of this performance, which are available to view online, hammers are the primary tool used to demolish the wooden pieces. The act is ritualistically intense – and in person the violence and force of Son and Player's actions are mesmerising. To be in the audience of Son's performance is to be integrated in the performance itself. The audience is constantly shifting to avoid flying hammerheads and wooden shards as Son looks back at his viewers with wide eyes yelling as if he is commanding them to participate.

This time, however, the audience dares not participate in the ritual of *Hammer Piece* – to participate would mean to subject oneself to the self-punishment that accompanies the act. Viewers wince as Son and Player drag themselves over the roughly cemented alleyway and enter and hold torturous poses. The performance has started the series with a force of sound, action and destruction – I look forward to what the weeks ahead will bring.

– 13 March 2014

***Spatial Harmony* Hana Aoake and Nick Graham 14 March 2014, Blue Oyster alley way**

Swaddled in a transparent child-sized rain poncho with her whole body tightly wrapped in tape, 'Spatial Harmony' begins as Hana Aoake enters the back room of the Blue Oyster through a barrier of plastic wrap – although this action resembles a birth and Aoake's dress makes a second skin. The sight of her feminine body through the plastic poncho is reminiscent of a mother nature that has been laminated. Aoake constructs equilibrium between the man-made and the natural as relics of consumerism and of nature are found in the space she performs in – rocks, plastic tape, grass cuttings, bubble wrap, a bouquet of flowers and empty packaging.

Nick Graham's accompaniment mirrors this balance and his engineered sound resembles chirping crickets amongst the white noise of night with Aoake's laboured breath amplified, however, as this sounds builds and reduces to an intense static, Aoake seems to struggle to maintain her artifice of harmony between the organic and plastic. She rips the tape from her skin and hair and tears of the plastic covering her body as the audience wince and realise how unnatural her second skin was.

If Samin Son and Tim Player's response yesterday was to fight, today Hana Aoake's response was flight. Yesterday's audience stepped back from the violence surrounding the two men but today's audience follows Aoake – voyeuristically shifting to get a better view of her actions and of her body.

– 14 March 2014

Toothpaste Transcription of Panopticism Part I and II Samin Son
15-16 March 2014, Fish Bowl/Community Gallery Window

Samin Son, in his Korean riot police uniform, occupies the small, allocated window space of the Dunedin Community Gallery. His method, derived from earlier works of his Tooth Paste Action Series, is to make the window a visual medium through a layer of toothpaste – which is spread out directly from the tube in the initial stages of the performance (discarded toothpaste packaging on lie in front of the window). From the outside, the transcription is backwards and difficult to decipher but Son's movements are visible. Once the window has been filled with his transcription, Son reads aloud the 'window page' over an amplified sound system. Once the transcription has been read, Son smudges out the segment and continues transcription from where he finished – he repeats this process for two days, 9am until 5pm. At the end of the second day the window is washed clean.

The visual effect of this technique, combined with Son's dress and his confined window space, create a fluctuating sense of the roles played in the performance. When considering the content of his transcribed work, Michel Foucault's essay 'Panopticism' from Discipline and Punish, the role of surveillance and the role under surveillance seem to shift between Son and the audience. In uniform, Son is like a prison guard but the confined space he works in is like a prison cell. Passers-by can see Son at work, whether they choose to look or not – putting Son under surveillance – but ironically the window he works on displays a government web link consequently reminding the audience that they too are under surveillance.

Overall, the performance is unsettling. The audience comes and goes as they please, curiously looking in the window, but Son grows visually exhausted from the process. His performance is regulated by the potential of having an audience – and like the central concept of Panopticism – he works in anticipation of viewers. I have sense of guilt as I watch him as it is my consumption of the performance that drives him to continue in this arduous task.

– 17 March 2014

Reading Cut & Paste Ritual Part I, II, III & IV
Samin Son, Nikolai Sim, Brendan Jon Philip, Matthew Ward, Richard Scowen and Ruby Gray
18-21 March 2014, Blue Oyster

Over four consecutive days Samin Son carried out a 'Reading Cut & Past Ritual' in the backroom and alleyway of the Blue Oyster Art Project Space. The four parts were ritualistic not only in name but in repeated procedures – they each begun at 1:11pm, involved a reading or physical presence of Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish and a fellow performer/a participant in the performance had their hair cut by Son. The 'Cut & Paste' occurred in a literal haircut, and as often associated with army crew cuts suggested a cutaway or removal of identity. Son then, through a series of verbal commands and physical actions, seemed to be conditioning or brainwashing the participant, and thus replacing the participant's identity with one that aligned with Son's art practice.

The first performance, featuring Nikolai Sim, was a straightforward procedure. Son guided Sim through the ritual to a climax of a performance together that was reminiscent of Son's Hammer Piece. Brendan Jon Philip went through a similar ritual but now the connection with Son had an increased intensity and had an erotic undertone as the two were immediately in dominant and submissive roles. By the third performance Matthew Ward appeared to have already gone through the ritual, as he was performing his own Hammer Piece while Son removed Richard Scowen from the audience for a haircut. For the final performance Son and Ruby Gray are equals, as Gray and Son both submit themselves to rituals of Reading Cut & Paste.

As the performances progressed the line between audience and participant blurred – by attending all of the rituals an audience member begins to wonder if they are now part of the ritual and the next to be inducted into Son's practice. There is a feeling that Son might grab you and begin to cut your hair and your attendance was your consent. – 22 March 2014

Confession Ritual Samin Son and Nick Graham
22 March 2014, Dowling St Project Space

In the bare hall of the Dowling St Project Space, Samin Son presents a ring of blue cloth, lit from behind, a mirror is to the left of the circle and a canvas to the right – both about Son's height. Nick Graham is behind Son providing sound for the performance as he mimics the ebbs and flow of 'Confession Ritual.'

During this performance Son goes through a series of familiar actions that give the audience flashbacks to performances from the week. The amalgamation of his performances so far provides an opportunity to reflect on the impetus of these works – his compulsory military service in the Korean Army – and on his art practice itself, the mirror and the canvas providing physical symbols these two concerns.

At times his actions are frustratingly repetitive, then they aggressive, then manic, then punishing, and all of this is thrown in the audience's face as he approaches every attendee several times during the performance. The audience nods in recognition of Son's approaches, one person tries to stop him from slapping himself, another holds his shoulder as he grovels on hands and knees, and while no one answers his yells and many still recoil from his violent military persona, he has the full attention of everyone in the room. It is overwhelming but also satisfying to witness such a cathartic performance.

– 23 March 2014

Touch Paste Contact Samin Son
25 March 2014, Blue Oyster Art Project Space

Samin Son performs in the Blue Oyster amongst relics from the last week – broken plywood, hammers, toothpaste packaging, hair clippings and a torn canvas. The items have become art objects in their own right through the gallery space – this sense of elevation is also felt in Son and the performance ‘Touch Paste Contact.’ In the front room of the gallery, Son focuses his attention on the audience and on the room’s large street side window. This is not as public as the Community Gallery Space and not as anonymous as the back alleyway, where the majority of earlier performances were held. Son uses this new space to concentrate his artistic force and the feeling of this performance is of intense experimentation and creation.

Son is dressed in a yellow raincoat, which makes him stand out amongst the crowd, but does not distance him culturally as his Korean uniform has in the past. He sings and chants, first in Korean and then in English – he then goes further and explains the words he sings as a Korean folk song about a homeless traveler musing, “where am I?” The audience is more relaxed and showing a curiosity that I have not seen before. They answer Son’s questions, they laugh at his musings, and they follow his instruction to smear a mixture of water and toothpaste on the window.

There is a noticeable shift towards self-awareness and self-reflection in contrast to his earlier performances but he still retains the initial impact of his more aggressive and endurance based works.

– 26 March 2014

Tending Downwards Tim Player
26 March 2014, Blue Oyster Art Project Space

The floor of the Blue Oyster’s front room is covered in gold paper planes – 2500 planes to be exact. They fill the gallery space, strewn over the floor, and when viewing them in such a large number one cannot help but think of the monotonous hours put into folding them all. Tim Player’s audience redefines the implications of the papers planes, and upon entering the space they begin to engage with Player – throwing planes at him. Player, however, is notably inactive. He is confined in a Dunedin City Council Recycling Bin, his arm protruding from a hole in the lid and the only movement he makes in the bin is when he tenderly switches arms. Viewers try to coax more movement from him – but whichever arm protrudes is playing dead. In the corner of the room, through the floor of planes is a trash bag, which adds the pungent scent of rubbish.

While this is a performance by Player, all of his actions are slow and uninteresting – showing endurance through uncomfortable situations but when isolating his actions there does not seem to be much to say – he folded planes and sat in a bin. What he has done, however, is set himself and the Blue Oyster in such a way that interesting and playful actions are instigated in the audience. Visitors try to interact and get a reaction from Player – they throw the planes, one man performs a reading, Samin Son takes advantage of Player’s mobility and wheels the bin to the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Player mocks their efforts – and by the end of the day long performance the only response he gives his visitors is to exit the bin and collapse on the floor.

– 27 March 2014

***Unbalanced Protocols* Ali Bramwell and Charlotte Parallel
28 March 2014, Blue Oyster Art Project Space**

A crowd fills the middle room of the Blue Oyster, it is the smallest space of the gallery but with the addition of wooden stands a sizeable audience squeezes into the space. Ali Bramwell and Charlotte Parallel are in the middle of the crowd under a low hanging, high wattage light bulb, which illuminates and heats the room. Their attention is focused on the table between them as they begin 'Unbalanced Protocols.' Large heavy pieces of metal are fit together and clamped to the tabletop making a box with two microphones placed inside. The top of the box defines this construction as a game board, and with the addition of wired up speakers it becomes apparent that Bramwell and Parallel are setting up a game of backgammon.

Bramwell and Parallel are candid as they play, opening a couple of beers, casually talking between themselves and asking members of the crowd for advice on their moves. Their casual attitude to the game contrasts what they have made, and their banter seems odd amongst the chaotic game. The metal construction looks heavy and cumbersome as the playing pieces are wired to an amp underneath the table and when they are moved begin entangling and complicating the game board. Movements on the board are amplified through the wired game's speaker and the metal makes clanging sounds with plenty of static and reverb. There is a weird experience of focus being brought explicitly on this game's construction through these sounds but at the same time the noises obscure what is actually happening in the game and it is difficult to follow moves. The audience is primarily guided in the game's progression through Bramwell and Parallel's reactions to moving playing pieces and the winner is only realized when Bramwell concedes defeat.

– 28 March 2014

***LINE AND NISH* Samin Son, Motoko Kikkawa, Amy Shin and Adrian Hall
29 March 2014, Blue Oyster Art Project Space**

From 7PM to 9PM, Samin Son, Motoko Kikkawa, Amy Shin and Adrian Hall figuratively tether themselves to the Blue Oyster Gallery. They operate and interact within the space and on the street outside for the two-hour period. Beyond the spatial and temporal restraints they impose, their actions are improvised and unrestricted. The gallery space is bare, with only a few items around the periphery – a line of alarm clocks, amps providing constant reverb, some neatly folded clothes, bags of salt hung from the wall, a ladder and as viewers arrive, an audience forms around the edge of the gallery and at the front window. The four artists create and recreate a shifting dynamic in the room as they interact with objects, the audience and with each other. The performance is what occurs within block of space and time that they operate – a technique used by Adrian Hall in previous performances.

The performance begins as Kikkawa and Shin begin playing a violin and cello respectively, they continue to intermittently provide accompaniment throughout the performance. Son and Hall enter the room separately, and it is when all four artists

are in the room that the power and energy of between them begins to emerge and fluctuate. Between the four of them aspects like being two male and two female, two locals and two from out of town, different ages and different ethnicities, and then any combination of them interacting during the performance makes a work that consists of numerable actions and interchanges. The performance is a web of activity and interaction as each action is connected to what precedes, what follows and what happens concurrently.

– 29 March 2014

Orira Samin Son

3 April 2014, Blue Oyster Art Project Space

Samin Son's final performance of the Work & Play series begins without the theatrics of earlier works. Son and a few audience members who have arrived early gather outside the Blue Oyster Art Project Space – in front of the large toothpaste coated window – and huddle around for a cigarette. Son suggests that this is part of the performance – and intended or not, it feels appropriate. Son's relationship with the Dunedin audience has been growing and evolving throughout the series and as this to be the last performance there is a sense that Son needs to disconnect himself from the people, space and time that he has been working amongst.

Once inside, Son gets to work. A tarpaulin, ladder, squeegee and bucket of water are set up for cleaning the window. A recorded track is playing, and reminds the audience of the energy, experimentation and intensity that Son has brought in each performance of the series. It is titled Oriria, sharing the name with the present performance, and is an ambient pulsating and humming track of chanting and throat singing created by Son during a residency at Yogiga Expression Gallery in Seoul, South Korea. Son cleans the toothpaste from the window and consequently removes the last trace of the performances from the gallery. Throughout the week relics of performances by Son and others have been gathering in the space, and energy has been building amongst this performance remnants connecting each piece to the others.

When the track has finished Son takes an opportunity to communicate directly with the audience. He speaks of his art practice, his personal history and of his next move following this performance series as he faces visa issues and is required to leave the country temporarily. Son seems tired and in a way relieved when the window is clean, no one can deny that Son has been consistently pushing himself throughout the series. Each audience member is thanked by Son and in return thanks him – although this is the end of Work & Play there is a feeling that the impact of this series will remain in the consciousness of the Dunedin audience for a while yet.

– 4 April 2014

Samantha McKegg is a Dunedin based writer and critic. In 2012 she graduated Otago University with a Bachelor of Art History with Honours, focussing her thesis research on Auckland based performance artist Shigeyuki Kihara. Samantha currently reviews exhibitions for the Otago Daily Times.

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