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PAST-PRESENT-FUTURE

Alice Maude-Roxby

Unlike reproductions of other types of artworks, photographs of performances, by virtue of their focus on the artist's body, allow the viewer to engage with the artist in a haptic as well as a visual sense. Encountering the shared ontology of the body makes the viewer mindful of his or her own physical presence as witness to the pictured event (even if it is well after the fact).¹

Asked to consider the work of contemporary photographer Manuel Vason in the context of the exhibition *Live Art on Camera*, where I situated seminal performance photographs in relation to persistent stylistic particularities and conventions of the photographer's practice, I recall how important it was to include Vason's books. These were objects to be read, rather than selected 'exhibition' photographs produced and displayed on a gallery wall. This curatorial decision acknowledged how it is that through these publications—viewed, read and handled in people's homes—one can better understand what Vason continues to contribute to this genre.

Now leafing through the pages of two sets of books on my desk, I see how the publications of Yves Klein from the 1950s and early 1960s share a dialogue with three contemporary publications by Manuel Vason. I'm studying Vason's books and noticing the relationship to Klein in that, whilst they could be called 'catalogues', they do anything but reflect on something as finished or in the past. Klein's books are deliberately designed to operate in the present, through the assimilation of separated elements which, when placed into the hands of the viewer, position one actively within the physical process and raw vocabulary of the work. Vason's work similarly engages the viewer from publication to

¹ Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998 p. 14.

publication in distinctive ways that variously expose the collaborative processes of production and quite differing senses of time. These processes range from the more reflective mode of recording live performance as actions past, to performance to camera where the viewer of the book becomes the third single person present as witness. Here quite an intense and intimate one-to-one engagement between viewer and image sequence reflects that same intimacy between artist and photographer. In *Double Exposures*, a visual dialogue between artist and photographer enunciates a vocabulary of the artist given over to the incorporation of Vason's body as subject, seen literally immersed, often through the surface of mechanisms or materials, and positioned directly within the locus of the practice of the artist. In this way one's awareness of the surface of the image, the surface of the page, brings attention to the layers through which Vason's body is seen. In the case of Florence Peake and Vason's collaboration, a web like plastic surface obscures Vason from view. In his collaboration with Giovanna Maria Casetta, a surface of highly reflective metallic foils intercepts between the surface of the page and the surface of the body.

I'm compelled by how both Klein and Vason utilize the book form to maximise physical engagement with image, sequencing, format and print quality. Each, operating in very different eras, injects into culture both the physicality of the practice and the nuts and bolts of a process by which something will, or has, become made. For Klein, in the late 1950s and early 60s, obstacles were to be overcome regarding the representation of these processes and the ways in which the viewing experience could be limited through the inadequacy of translating the brightness of colour and surface of his sponge sculptures. To translate these into book form he bypassed restrictions of available printing processes in order to put a set of components into the hands of the reader. For example *Yves Peintures* (1954) seemingly opens with a catalogue essay format, but this is purely a set of lines imitating text on a page. No text is legible. The book itself is assembled from 16 sheets of heavy weight paper each signed by the artist. Different sheets of commercially printed paper are glued onto these cards. Although the publication in fact pre-dates Klein's painted monochromes, they

appear as beautifully coloured monochrome paintings.

By so early on producing the impossible—non-reproductions of paintings that did not exist—and producing an image of paintings that defy the world of images, he may have felt compelled to move backward in order to move forward and actually paint the monochromes that he brilliantly anticipated.²

In Manuel Vason's different publications, certain artists appear and reappear, foreshadowing and recalling the changing relational modes in and of performative presence. The varying photographic approaches in each publication heighten and animate a sense of time, pulling from the past to the present and into the future. Progressively from *Exposures* (2001), to *Encounters* (2007) to *Double Exposures* (2014), Vason articulates a series of positions made evident in his photographs that move from that of photographer to collaborator in performance to camera, to being the subject of the artist's image seen immersed within the vocabulary of their practice. This progression is also plotted through the dynamics of how the body is seen within the publications. In *Encounters*, a systematic rhythm of small cuts cover the surface of Kira O'Reilly's body. Over a sequence of three consecutive pages the reader beholds the image of the skin tone of their own hands physically engaged with the surface of the photographs through the turning of pages.

One's involvement in the event—the choice to become a “contracted partner”—is thus made tangible. This contracted partnership is made manifest by the visual and haptic dynamics that one experiences in literally “handling” the performance photographs. While leafing through publications ... the viewer participates in a sort of narrative. Unlike an ideal “documentary” narrative this story unwinds in ways that may not be anticipated.³

² Philippe Vergne “Earth, Wind, and Fire or to overcome the paradox of Yves Klein, the molecular child who wrote to Fidel Castro on his way to Disneyland” in *Yves Klein: With The Void, Full Powers*, Washington: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2010 p. 50.

³ Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998 p. 14.

O'Dell brings attention to this contractual nature of the audience committing to be present at a performance where the body is put at risk and proposes that this contract extends through the subsequent engagement of the viewer through handling and viewing photographic documentation within publications. In Vason's case, photographs embody the vocabulary of gestures associated with the artist's practice. These are translated as well in terms of the format and sequencing of book pages.

Both Vason and Klein can be contextualized within a wider history and analysis of performance photographs. Predominantly photographs of Klein in action are captured in black and white. At that time black and white negative film was much more highly developed than colour negative film and therefore available in a range of film types better able to cope with differing light conditions and to meet the needs of speed and movement in the work. Nowadays the use of black and white film as photographic style is still in evidence in some live art practices, but since the application of 'grey mode' to a colour file is possible in digital practice, the black and white image is certainly now associated more with a deliberate 'style' and aesthetic or desire to relate to an earlier history and use of 'deadpan' documentary associated with conceptualism rather than being rooted in the earlier associations of 'urgency', 'consequence', 'proof' or 'relic'. Interestingly in the case of Françoise Masson's photographs of Gina Pane's work through the 1970s, the colour negative (which could only be bought in a limited range of quality, so not ideal for action and particularly risky for performance that was not to be repeated) was used but overseen through the hiring of this professional commercial photographer who recorded the work live but whilst moving photographic lights between the audience and artist. Pane's grids of photographs, of *constats*, seem to have also indicated a 'future' reading for the work by breaking down the stages of the action into a series of images. The resultant grids of photographs read somewhat like a step-by-step instructional guide for future use. Vason's work shares some qualities of Pane's work in the application of conventions of high-end or 'professional standard' photographic technique and

print quality to a genre previously associated with 'documentary' aesthetics as well as in shared territories of risk, viscosity and life.