

The Velodrome Project

Catalogue essay by Alex Martinis Roe for 'The Velodrome Project', Brunswick Cycling Velodrome, Melbourne 2006

CUT

Think of a sporting event crossed with a sculpture park and you get Alicia Frankovich and Laresa Kosloff's idea of a spectacle. Presenting a one-day event at the Brunswick Velodrome, these two artists have straddled the divide between public and performance art. *The Velodrome Project* occupies community space and acknowledges it as a context for art. However, this idea of 'public' is prevented from sedimenting into absolutist permanence by the use of time-based performances. In limiting the life of their large-scale sculptures to one day, Kosloff and Frankovich celebrate a lack of authority in their works that is usually present in public art forms.

CIRCLES

Frankovich and Kosloff employ the aesthetics of geometric abstraction in the production of their sculptures as a way to discuss the ideology of transcendental escapism. The Velodrome has a surreal architecture, which already feels like an immersive sculpture. Its **circular** spatial organization is functional, yet it is easy to focus on its geometry. The artists focus on the uncanny relationship between its formal qualities and its use value. Engaging this logic, black paint has been used to cover a large **circular** area of grass on the field. Clearly understood as a large, black HORIZONTAL **circle** when viewed from above, it immediately recalls floating geometric shapes in so many modernist paintings. This reading at once collides with the materiality of its media: 'painting-on-the-grass', which is recognisable as a method of advertising at sporting events. This intervention is a sculpture: it uses the ground and its spatial dimensionality as a key to its relevance. However, its status as an object is nullified as it works illusionistically as a void. Conversely, its status as a painting is what brings us back to its objectivity. This complex dynamic effectively links 'the void' to abstraction. The painted **circle** playfully intimates that abstract painting makes a void. This problematises the term 'abstraction' by asking: how can abstract painting be differentiated from 'representation' when it is depicting a void? Kosloff and Frankovich show the aesthetics of transcendence as representational. By hollowing out the black **circle's** profundity it is returned to an advertising trick: just paint on the grass.

LOOP

The **circularity** of the Velodrome and the painting on the grass are conceptually extended by inclusion of **cyclical** elements as the temporal dimension of the **circular**. The **loop** can be thought of as another dimension of the **circle**. This physical relationship is clear at the Velodrome: to enable a smooth continuous movement in a limited area, the **circular** movement of bicycle wheels requires a **circular** structure. The **sloping** concrete walls utilise the **centripetal** force generated by the cyclist's speed on the **circular** structure. Therefore in order to *use* the static **circular** architecture, the cyclist must expend energy and time. Significantly, the cyclists break the focus on the Velodrome's seductive geometric design. This assists in recognising the artworks' critical interruptions of the aesthetics of 'abstraction'.

Every hour, on the hour the artists repeat two performances which themselves involve elements of repetition. This recalls video editing and the prevalence of **looped** video in art exhibitions. It also makes a connection between the live and televised experience of a sporting event and the distinct culture of spectatorship, which bridges the two.

FLIP

The first performance is organised like an event in a gymnastics competition. Kosloff and Frankovich raise their arms in a kind of salute, run straight toward a **circular** mini tramp, jump onto it and then **flip** their bodies VERTICALLY in the air and land on a crash pad. The artists make several points of difference from the gymnastics model in order to rework our understanding of gestural signification. A gymnastics salute is usually made to competition judges, but at the Velodrome Project it is made facing away from the stadium seating. In addition, the crash pad is made of hand sewn PVC and has a faux industrial company logo (derived from the name of a Russian gymnast) sewn onto it. Perhaps the most important difference is the landing position of the artists. In gymnastics, success is often determined by the stability of the final, standing pose after a trick. Instead, Kosloff and Frankovich intentionally land on their backs, immediately undercutting rhetoric that posits VERTICALITY as a demonstration of control. This performance presents a safe, HORIZONTAL landing as the desired outcome of this action. Lying on their backs is not presented as a submission or failure, nor is it a description of a 'natural' outcome. As a gesture, it has more relationship to slapstick than to gymnastics. These two languages of movement form an important amalgam, describing both as choreography. Charlie Chaplain was Bertolt Brecht's favourite performer because his movements were so obviously a set of perfected gestures that responded literally and predictably to events. Thus his character was presented as a reduced set of symbols, removing any sort of illusion of inherent connection between Chaplain's body and the performed character. Evidence of a character's gestural construction does not reduce the pleasure in slapstick performance, it encourages a more discerning response to naturalistic portrayals of gesture. Kosloff and Frankovich's performance of gymnastics does not place value in its 'failure', instead it seeks to foreground all our movements as part of an oppositional discourse of success or failure to meet normative gestural habits.

CURVES

The performance uses slapstick to illuminate gymnastics' hierarchical value system that privileges stability and VERTICALITY in achieving certain gestures. This logic is extended to sexual politics by the appearance of the artists not as gymnast bodies, but as 'normal, female' bodies. By making it clear that gymnast bodies are constructed according to an ideal and are valued according to their approximation of that ideal, it becomes evident that to achieve a 'normal' and/or 'female' body, their must be some similar process. Thus, by using gestural systems that are more easily understood as constructed, Kosloff and Frankovich achieve an illumination of the latent discourse of the natural in the 'normal female body'. It is the repetition of everyday gestures which lull us into believing they are natural. Further, they become normative as a result of that repetition.

The act of **flipping** the 'normal, female' body has an unprecedented affect on the performer. We witness a kind of freedom when their body is in the air. Stripped of the

framing devices which control the action in sport or gymnastics, the airborne body speaks of sublime experience. We are presented with a corporeal model of transcendence, which seems different from abstract painting's transcendental ideology. Perhaps in that moment of freefall, the female artist is achieving pleasure from her own physical experience regardless of the 'male gaze': usually so prevalent in displays of the female body.

FLAP

Dance and sport privilege certain aesthetics of bodily control, which relate heavily to value in geometric order. To extend this observation to a more general discussion of how cultural practices strive to approximate simplified norms, Kosloff and Frankovich attempt to realise the potential of a parachute to form a **semi-sphere** in another performance. The parachute can also be seen as a kind of drawing material to respond to the **onion domes** of the Russian Orthodox Church behind the Velodrome. This action operates as a critique of that attempt to reach geometric harmony, because it is evident that its success is entirely dependent on the weather. The parachute is not really in the control of the artists, which works as an analogy for lack of authorial control over intertextual meanings. The artists show that this control is affected by the context of the attempt. The wind may blow hard constantly which would result in the achievement of a **semi-sphere**, or it may (which is more likely) blow in intermittent gusts in different directions. In that case all you get is a lot of **flapping**. This performance resembles Joan Jonas's early video *SongDelay*, where the artist and a group of friends used geometrically organised bodily movements in conjunction with chalk and sticks to draw their relationship to the nature reserve where they were performing. This kind of drawing practice is developed by Kosloff and Frankovich's use of the parachute. Deliberately referring to these 70's performance-based drawing methodologies and acknowledging them as an established language, the parachute drawing highlights the mimetic failure of these technologies as a valuable tool. In extrapolating the parameters of the drawing so extensively (collaboration, physical strength, environmental unpredictability) the performance points to the vulnerability of all the elements of The Velodrome Project. Striving to approximate a norm is heralded as reductive practice. Instead, The Velodrome Project starts with simplified signs and refers outward to a multiplicity of meanings.

SQUARE

A huge blue **square** sits VERTICALLY in the field facing the stadium seating. The **square** is a simplified field, which is simultaneously a representation of a 'window to the beyond'; a 'blue screen'; a billboard and even a piece of sky. For geometric abstractionists a **square** form could bring about a transcendental experience. This is remarkably similar to the logic of cinema and the idea of a screen as an immersive location for the mind. 'Blue screening' technologies allow a film set's blue backdrop to be digitally transformed into anywhere. In sporting arenas a large screen is a method of watching live footage of the current event. It is as if Frankovich and Kosloff's screen is televising the Velodrome Project! The big blue **square's** transcendental references are all brought back to reality(?) via evidence of its material construction. The fabric sags on its frame and **flaps** in the wind, imitating the **flapping** of the parachute. In this way the rhetoric of geometric order becomes a crumbling illusion: at best a mathematic language for understanding a world that is much more messy.

MATRIX

A massive model of a piece of Luna Park's roller coaster made of white wood sits on the Velodrome green. This structure operates as a kind of vantage point within the 'sculpture park'. As a parallel to the stadium seating and similar to the framework for a building, the structure refers to the potential of architectural beginnings. Drawing the two together, Frankovich and Kosloff describe the architecture of public leisure from which we are denied access: it is under construction. As symbolic of the desire to have fun: it stops when you get what you want. Wanting it is more fun than getting it. This comments on the fairly new apartment complex behind the Velodrome. Developers sell display homes as a kind of fantasy removed from any context. Unfortunately, community life in these developments is often different to the daydream. Further the structure seems a ghosting of the future. Will the Velodrome be developed into something else? The structure also puts forth hope: adorning the structure are two **circular** pieces of wood with **star** motifs on them. These seem like a glimpse of the potential that could develop from the beginning of any structure. This **matrix** of wood decisively complicates modes of spectatorship by presenting a model of public space that is about participation (Luna Park) but also private ownership (you have to pay to get in). Here the artists have placed it in the centre of a field as a set of dynamics to be observed from a distance. A discourse on the state of community life is presented in relation to art practice and its use of public space.

SAUSAGE

Inviting audiences to come and *view* the project, rather than *participate*, *The Velodrome Project*, is staged as a spectacle rather than a community fete. The audience viewing from above looks down on the **circular** field in the centre of the Velodrome as if it were a HORIZONTAL screen displaying a montage of static and moving elements. This simultaneously analyses the differences and similarities between the sporting event and its televised broadcast. The recorded event becomes a two-dimensional, linear narrative. Yet from the vantage point above the sporting ground, the only departure from this dynamic is the energy of the crowd. Similarly at the Velodrome Project, the tradition of the BBQ serves as social interaction in the collective experience of spectatorship. However, the food isn't figured as part of the art. The art is defined as a spectacle and the viewer is not participating. This is a clear dynamic that utilises the spatial dynamics dictating the viewing position to parallel and contrast other forms of community contact, in such a way that it induces critically honed modes of spectatorship. Kosloff and Frankovich present us with a challenging and unusual kind of art spectacle: *The Velodrome Project*.

PASTE

The ideas that inhabit this format are extrapolated within each element of their spectacle. Each sculpture/performance interrogates normative models of order and exposes their geometric, cohesive and transcendental presentation as ideological. Using forms that are considered apolitical and abstract to refer to a larger range of specific cultural practices, Kosloff and Frankovich exert a play between 'form' and 'content' in such a way as to collapse their distance. In so doing they reverse normalising representational strategies that take multiplicity and reduce them into generic signs. They have developed a series of temporary tactics for starting with reductive signs and pushing their intertextuality to the forefront of their viewers' spectatorship.

