

THE COMMON GUILD

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COMMENTARIES

Janice Kerbel

10 November — 2 December 2018



Janice Kerbel

Janice Kerbel's *Sink* is a work that I encountered twice: once as a live performance by 24 female synchronised swimmers at The Western Baths Club (a nineteenth-century swimming pool in Glasgow) on 3 August 2018, and once as an exhibition of monochrome prints, which act as scores for the performance. For me, *Sink* elegantly, provocatively and generatively navigates the complex relationship between live performance and its documentation, a contentious relationship that is subject to ongoing debate among artists, critics and scholars working with theatre and performance. Put simply, this debate hinges around, on one side, an impulse, or indeed necessity, to record the live encounter between audience and performer (as photograph, video, script, score) in order, for instance, to allow the work to reach a wider audience, enable performances to be reproduced, or extend the commercial potential of the work. The other side of the debate is driven by discomfort with the impetus to 'fix' something that is essentially ephemeral; concerns about what is lost or distorted in the process of translation, or about who controls the 'circulation of representations of representations', as Peggy Phelan (1993) famously put it in her polemic on liveness and the ontology of performance.¹ *Sink*, for me, engages wittily in this debate by acknowledging and embracing the limitations of both the live performance, and the scores that document it, as means of communication.

Kerbel's scores are precise and economical, making explicit their incompleteness and partiality as representations of the performances. There is no attempt to capture the performance in a 'lifelike' rendition and there is none of the elision between performance and performance document, with which some performance scholars, like Diana Taylor (2003), take issue.² The information they contain, whether as records of past performances or prompts for future performances, is sparse, but specific. Having witnessed the live performance, there is little ambiguity for me in what is being depicted.

Kerbel's symbols, stamped in black ink on a creamy-white ground, clearly represent human figures adopting poses that I can visualise as a swimming routine. Unlike some notation systems, such as Laban dance notation, there is no need to learn a visual language to read Kerbel's scores. They are iconic, in that they look like what they are representing. However, I wonder how much of this clarity would remain if they were untethered from their context? Severed from connections with the originary event, lacking any supplementary information or clues as to the nature of the scores, would these symbols become an obsolete language? Impenetrable, or open to limitless interpretation and speculation?

The minimalism of the scores invites close attention to what is, and what is not, included. I notice, for instance, evidence of a human gesture in the mark-making. Some of the rubber-stamped symbols are slightly smudged, and the registration is not entirely uniform, as though it has been judged by eye, rather than measured. The scores make some reference to the materiality of the performance location, and specifically to the medium of water. An impression of depth, of swimmers submerged below the water's surface, is created by printing some of the figure-symbols on the reverse side of the paper, so that they appear only faintly visible. The dimensions of the paper correspond to those of the life-size performance space: the portion of swimming pool where the routine took place. However, while the scores acknowledge something of the physical environment in which the performance took place, there is no attempt to evoke the sensory or affective dimensions of the performance. In Kerbel's documentation, there is no hint of the smell of chlorine, the steamy heat of the pool, the distinctive architecture of The Western Baths Club, or the effort and power of the swimmers. For me, this effacement of the materiality of the space and of the physicality of the swimmers was also a striking feature of the live event. The performance that Kerbel devised and orchestrated comprised minimal, meticulously selected and circumscribed elements: the black costumes, white caps and red goggles of the swimmers; the almost-mechanical efficiency and poise of their

performance (the swimmers' held poses requiring immense strength and stamina, with apparent effortlessness); their impassive faces; the soundtrack of metronomic beeps. The swimmers appeared, to me, as cyphers, configuring and re-configuring in a sequence of formations: an animated performance score.

In its invitation to consider both the scores and live performance as artworks operating within carefully circumscribed parameters, as meticulous arrangements of signifiers on a (more-or-less) blank surface, Kerbel's work prompts me to contemplate the inadequacy and incompleteness of systems of communication, whether live or recorded. Meanwhile, paradoxically, the oblique, restricted language of signalling opens to multiple possible interpretations, and re-interpretations.

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1. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Oxon and New York, 1993, p.146.

2. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham and London, 2003.



Photographs by Ruth Clark