

FEATURE

VALUING THE EXPERIENCE

The exhibiting, buying and selling of performance works is complicated, but recent initiatives in Australia offer considered ways forward

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The cynic in me believes the renewed commercial interest in performance we're seeing in Australia is motivated by performance's spectacular qualities and its perceived mutability to the cult of populism that dominates our industry. We live in an experience economy. Institutional and commercial art audiences want to be entertained, and institutions and commercial art businesses want to cultivate the dually high social media engagement and levels of audience attendance that are synonymous with this medium. The proliferation of performing bodies on social media = bigger audiences = more sales + higher visitation. It's a winning formula. However, I'm optimistic that this current wave of commercial interest might be part of an industry-wide shift, in which performance might also receive the critical attention it deserves.

The Australian art world's growing interest in performance is motivated in part by the recent cross-sector research project Precarious Movements: Choreography and the Museum, led by the University of New South Wales, which looked at dance and choreography in a visual art context through the lenses of commissioning, curating, conserving, presenting and interpreting choreography. Performance-specific programs at institutions, like Brian Fuata and Latai Taumoepeau's *MONUMENTAL* (working title) (2022-2023) at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, have also played a role. But largely, I'd say this shift is occurring because post-pandemic there is a growing audience desire for shared experiences—and performance artists and dancers from the region are receiving international acclaim. Fuata and Taumoepeau were the 2020 and 2022 winners of the ANTI Festival International Prize for Live Art. Fuata has performed extensively internationally, including at the Performa Biennial (2015), and this year Taumoepeau debuted a major site-specific work—*Deep Communion sung in minor* (archipelago, THIS IS NOT A DRILL)—in Venice to coincide with the biennale. Los Angeles- and Berlin-based Australian choreographer Adam Linder's *Shelf Life* was also the inaugural commission for the Kravis Studio at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York in 2020.

Performance poses obvious challenges for both galleries selling and for individuals and institutions collecting this medium. However, internationally, performance art and dance have a long and established history in commer-

cial spaces. Reuben Gallery in New York presented Simone Forti's *See-Saw* in 1960 and Joseph Beuys's *I Like America and America Likes Me* was shown at René Block Gallery in 1974. Institutions like MoMA have since acquired props from and documentation of performances, as well as performances themselves, such as Simone Forti's *Huddle* (1961). In 2015, MoMA acquired the rights to perform *Huddle* along with six of Forti's other works. This acquisition included extensive documentation of these works' previous iterations and a set of instructions on how to perform them in future, which Forti developed with curator Ana Janevski over two years.¹ Famously, this also involved the collections specialist involved in this acquisition, Athena Holbrook, learning the choreography of these works herself, in a process the MoMA Media and Performance Department describes as "body-to-body transmission."²

Today, the world's best-known performance artist, Marina Abramović, is commercially represented by Sean Kelly (as she has been since the early 1990s) and other performance artists are represented by leading international commercial galleries: Croatian artist Nora Turato by Sprüth Magers; American artist and academic Theaster Gates by White Cube and Gagosian; and British choreographer Sarah Michelson by David Zwirner, for example. Art fairs prominently feature performance, too: Art Basel in Switzerland has showcased performance since 2014, while Frieze London has run its 'LIVE' program since 2015. Performance specific art fairs, like Performance Exchange, London (established in 2021) have also emerged in recent years.

In Australia, we have a similar history. Performance artists like Mike Parr and Jill Orr have been performing for decades and documentation of their work can be found in most Australian major institutional collections. Until recently, both these artists were commercially represented, as are intermedial artists like Agatha Gothe-Snape (by The Commercial) and Richard Bell (by Milani Gallery), for whom performance is an integral part of their practice, and Brian Fuata is now represented by Sumer Gallery in Aotearoa New Zealand, which intends to sell both his performances and documentation of them on a case-by-case basis. There is also a tradition of dance in commercial galleries that can be traced back to the late dancer Philippa Cul-



From top:
Angela Goh, *Body Loss*, 2017–. This performance at 'The same crowd never gathers twice', Buxton Contemporary, the University of Melbourne, Naarm/Melbourne, 2024. Collection of the University of Melbourne. Courtesy of the artist and Fine Arts, Sydney. Photo: Gregory Lorenzutti

Brian Fuata, *Apparitional Charlatan Minor Appearances (accumulations 2020-2021)*, 2021. This performance at the 10th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (APT10), Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA), Meänjin/Brisbane, 2021. Courtesy of QAGOMA. Photo: Brad Wagner

Brian Fuata, *Errantuation (mist opportunities)*, 2021. This performance at APT10, QAGOMA, Meänjin/Brisbane, 2021. Courtesy of QAGOMA. Photo: Chloé Callistemon