



## ART PRACTICAL

### Its Own Nothingness

GROUP SHOW

JUL 23 - AUG 20

by *Matthew David Rana*

In title and structure, “Its Own Nothingness,” an exhibition in three acts currently on view at Krowwork, takes as its cue a quote from Jean-Paul Sartre, who stated that “it remains to learn in what delicate, exquisite region of Being we shall encounter that Being which is its own Nothingness.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the works—which explore issues surrounding dance and performance—suggest a fundamental fluidity between such categories. At the same time, they nevertheless attempt to point to the possibility of a being in and of itself—or at least, one that cannot be quantified or given a clearly defined function.

It is somewhat paradoxical then, that the “corps” of the exhibition is made up primarily of video, photography and sculpture.<sup>2</sup> As such, the works by the seven included artists are much more performative than they are performed.

Yet, for the prelude portion of the exhibition, Peter Dobeý’s choreographic work *Photography* turned the gallery into a living tableau consisting of four individuals in separate rooms repeatedly carrying out movements and actions. In asking viewers to consider live bodies in relation to the production of images, the work—which included a man precariously balancing a flashlight on a table in a dark room, and another sitting at the gallery desk, weeping loudly—encouraged a textual reading of the various actions, prompting one to ask: how do we read performing bodies within an already contentious economy of images?

The problematic relationship of performance to its documentation arises here and is particularly relevant to Ariel Baron-Robbins’ videos, which feature the artist “drawing,” dance-like on glass or

paper. While their casual framing may reflect the immediacy of the act of drawing, the videos ultimately fail to capture the performance or elevate themselves beyond their status as documentation.

Nevertheless, when doubly framed by Dobey's prelude, the various repetitions and reconstructions that occur within Act Two of the exhibition can be read as compulsion, which not only points to a traumatic "real" state of being, but also disrupts the act of repetition itself as a means to screen that encounter. This is particularly palpable in Tad Beck's photographic series titled "Cliff Jump" (2010), in which the artist photographed nude subjects reenacting—appropriately enough—jumping off cliffs. The perspectives of the resulting images are distorted, showing us bodies that suggest leaps into the void, but are ultimately inert against the wood floor that supports them.

Yet, with the exception *Prayer Rope* (2010) by Sarah Filley, which consists of a black-knotted rope strung at various points across the main gallery, most of the works here fail to negotiate with the gallery space itself. This was particularly disappointing given the exhibition's general theme, as was the apparent lack of engagement with the materiality of the image itself, with the majority of the artists instead opting for more conventional methods of framing and display.

While both timely and relevant, ultimately, "Its Own Nothingness" does not quite live up to its purported aim to present works that risk the possibility of validating and elevating Being itself. Although as Sartre himself admits, it is unclear what—if anything—actually could. The risk however, resides in the more modest claim that this kind of validation can take place within the arts at all, as a field of production capable of supporting ostensibly meaningless activities in which the outcome or function can remain unresolved. In relation to these concerns (explored elsewhere on this site), this exhibition proves one thing: that it is a risk worth taking.

"ITS OWN NOTHINGNESS" IS ON VIEW AT KROWSWORK IN OAKLAND THROUGH AUGUST 20, 2010.

NOTES: 1. Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Origin of Nothingness" in *Being and Nothingness* (New York: First Washington Square Press, 1992), 56. 2. The exhibition will be followed by a final "postlude" in the form of a butoh-inspired project by Tbird Luv.