

Bettina Funcke, John Kelsey,
and Georgia Sagri

A CONVERSATION

Bettina Funcke: Let's jump into the middle of things. The most striking thing about the exhibition at Kunstverein Braunschweig is that there will only be sculptures. You don't consider them to be remnants of performances and they are not props. Does that also mean these objects don't have a potential to be activated again? Do you see them as truly separate from the performance?

Georgia Sagri: When the objects are activated via a performance, the event and the central figure of this event defines them. But what if the objects were already autonomous in such a way that they would allow us to be part of their story? It's not necessarily me who makes the story. That is why, when I create a performance piece, I don't build it with a beginning and an end, but rather as if it was already playing, as if you were entering a cinema. The movie has already started, and you have just missed the beginning or you have to leave because the movie is too long and you are tired and bored. Then at a certain point, you had to make a decision to leave.

Yeah, this makes sense when you perform and the performers perform with you. But it's your first show in which you only focus on showing objects, right?

John Kelsey: Do you have a word for these things? Artifacts, props? Are they sculptures? Do you have a term that you prefer to use to designate the specificity of how these objects operate in your practice, in the world and in the museum? I would say that they are staged objects and assemblage instead of installation.

Oh, so together they are like an assemblage, but you can also see them separately. You are bringing together works from the past ten years for the first time. And the new work, so to speak, is to show them together as one assemblage.

They are also all doubled.

Some of the objects are exhibited doubled because some of them were made twice and exist twice. And I call this state of doubling the staged objects a module.

You also subvert the idea of a gaze by doubling because there is no way to see two at once. In this exhibition you can never see both. You have to move around the space in order to encounter the repetition.

You see it from different angles; it shifts continuously.

Like in Noh theater and Kabuki—I did months of intense Kabuki theater seminars—the actor's head doesn't move. It's always the hands and feet that move, but the head stays still. In this state of stillness, the eyes need to appear like they are looking at something, but not as if they are looking straight at the audience.

The opposite of the Mona Lisa effect!¹ You know, how her eyes seem to follow the viewers who are passing by while she actually gazes straight out of the painting?

Yes, so, in order to execute the Kabuki head and eye coordination you need to cross your eyes and get a little bit more relaxed. The moment this happens you see everything doubled.

Crossing the eyes... that is so interesting because my friend Jim Fletcher has been experimenting with performing extreme and catastrophic emotions on stage by crossing his eyes.²

And with Kabuki it's like that, catastrophic, because you need to stay relaxed, move slowly and immediately turn the head. The timing of the head's movements is really important. It is a change of direction.

Dramatic!

Yeah, it's dramatic. If you do a turn left, it needs to happen together with the eyes. There is a particular way of looking while turning.

And that is so counter to today's kind of spastic eye and roaming attention. There are thousands of attention and eyeball shifts everywhere, consuming information. But never an event, no decisive shifts or turns.³

*The head makes the figure. The head is not just the head, it's also about the way it gazes: never looking directly into the audience's eyes. This happens to allow the viewer to contemplate the figure instead of anxiously feeling like someone is looking at her. It allows the viewer to look at the figure, the protagonist or the characters, and the story, so that it doesn't feel like the viewer is being chased by the figures. Like, "I'm looking at you more than you look at me." This is what I try to do: instead of assuming a role of domination as the performer, the objects in my work allow contemplation. In the case of *Dynamis*, for instance, the objects were carried out of the exhibition space in a casual manner in order to allow the audience to take note of the objects and distract their gaze from the performers. In a sense, the objects act as the head in Kabuki.*

*That makes sense. You're blurring the conventional hierarchies of performance. At *documenta 14*, I couldn't tell at first who the audience was in your piece and who was performing. The audience's movements looked like they could also be your instructed movements. And the performers' slowness and long pauses made them look like viewers. This intense potential of both interiority and openness was amplified spatially, since in Kassel, *Dynamis* took place in a glass pavilion, which was pretty crowded with the lined-up metal objects alongside the performers. When I walked in, I felt like I was immediately on stage, in the middle of the piece and part of it, with no escape, even if people tried to hover on the edges. Later I saw the photographs of people carrying the metal objects through the*



Dynamis (2017)
Twenty-eight sculptures
and ten breathing scores
in Athens and Kassel,
aluminum, acrylic paint,
glass, rubber, various
metallic parts, simultaneous
performance for six days in
Athens and Kassel,
documenta 14, Glass
Pavilions, Kurt-Schumacher-
Straße, Kassel, and various
public spaces



streets of Kassel, extending the stage beyond the pavilion. No beginning or end, no inside or outside, but blurring it all.

There are two sets of each object. Each object is an organ: the brain, the ear, the heart, the sex, the leg, the arm. One set of the objects remained inside and one set was brought outside. It is like this: You have a common *field* and you have the *module* inside and outside. It's the movements and the moment of bringing the organs out into public view that's more important.

And then this whole thing is doubled in another city.

Yes, it happens at the same time in Athens and Kassel, with two different groups of people. Through the work I refused to choose between private and public, inside and outside, north and south. I felt with this piece that I wanted to question duality. Duality is at the core of property. By property, I mean the act of giving a new context and value to an object by removing it and moving it elsewhere, thus blurring assumptions.

Because when the object returns to a space, is it commercial space?

I guess one of the assumptions is property referring to ownership and commerce. Though I try to work beyond the existing formula, which assumes that taking an art object out into public space turns the act into a symbolic gesture. For me, performance is neither a symbolic gesture nor an event that takes place to turn the object into stasis, extracting value from it.⁴

That's probably what happens in Paul Thek's art, which involves the processional manipulations of objects, which are later displayed with this aura of relics—almost religious. And they are always singular.

Exactly. They are always singular. In this case, whenever you see an object after a performance it's always as if it's waiting for you to understand the symbolic gesture that brought it inside, that makes the object private.

But now it sounds more like it's an and. Each of the objects could exist independently, but they all are together as well, the assemblage moment. This reminds me of watching the videos of your performances. There's always endurance and repetition of the inside coming out and going back in. And it's not circular. It's more like it sways with gravity. It's like trying to go somewhere repeatedly but you don't know where to, so you are searching through repetition.

Does this have to do with the idea of a score? A score never happens just once, it needs to be performed.

The score is a very important aspect because when you have a score as a musician you don't just play it. Most of the time the audience understands the score as something that is fixed, yet it is activated by the musician.

But it is never finished because, being a score, it is always at the level of potential.

That's the whole point! In order to be activated, the score needs someone to play it, someone to know how to read it. Even if you know how to read it, it takes hours, weeks, years to play a score. There are many occasions in which you can't play a score; you simply can't.

In *Dynamis* you also had objects titled *Breathing Scores*, through an installation of objects made of blown glass. And when you see them on the wall, it's easy to see them in terms of a rhythmic sequence, the way they are linked up, with gaps between them. And they were produced through a bodily, rhythmic practice of blowing glass.

Yeah, it's breathing. I feel very unsettled with the idea that most of the time we assume that breathing is something that is given.

It's an object actually produced by breath. That's pretty amazing.

And it's made out of glass. I found an expert on glassblowing techniques to teach me how to do glassblowing and in this way I returned to thinking about breathing, about breath as production.

Do you see anything negative in the way you are presenting these objects in the museum? In the sense of destitution or abandonment of the objects by extracting them from the event of the performance, subtracting them from their history? Was there any kind of negativity in this gesture, in your way of thinking? Or is it an affirmation of the objects in museum space? Is there any feeling of orphaning these things here, in the cold space of the Kunstverein? Aside from *Working the No Work* everything else is repeated—or is it all split in half?

The piece *Documentary of Behavioural Currencies and Dynamis* are both made in doubles; they are *staged objects*. In the text and light box *STAGED* I explain that I am trying to suspend this work between an idea and an object, and provoke the Platonic and Cartesian thinking that reduces objects to ideas. I'm asking in this text, "What about the objects that participate in texts?" Like in literature. Those are *staged objects*. They are not exactly ideas and not exactly objects. When you have an object on a stage it suggests an entire world. Every theater show does not only consist of the characters that interact with each other, but also of the objects comprising the world that encompasses them. A staged object is not only existent in a theater play, it is also existent as the objects that surround us, in terms of social conviction, and they create the way we relate and identify. For example, if you take this stool from the office of the gallery and place it on a stage...

Is that a mimetic object then?

Not really, it is this stool on stage that mimics the stool at the office.

So, a mimetic object is an object performed?

Or a performing object: the stool performs. And then it's something else in the museum.

Staged objects are also those that are made to represent this stool, and they are made to be performed. They are made for someone to act with them.

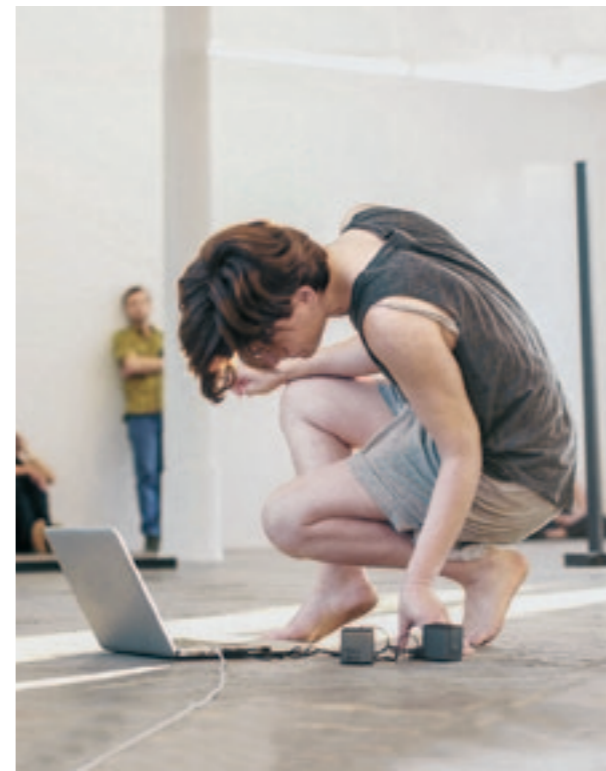
For example, a real stool is made out of wood and very solidly constructed, but maybe on stage it would be made out of paper and ink.

People will agree that it continues to be a stool even if it is made out of paper.

It's not about displacement.

It's not. I talk about the objects used in Plato's dialogues to explain that these objects do not exactly function on the level of the object or on the level of ideas, but rather they function as objects in a theater play. Let's not forget that Plato was trained as an actor and playwright before becoming Socrates's student. In this way I call these objects *staged*, and this is how I treat my objects, as triggers for contemplation about something else outside of the object. I am interested in the objects' function within literature that allow for further contemplation beyond the discourse of the institutions of language and art.

Μοντέλο της Αντιγόνης
Antigone Model (2013)
Real-time audio recording
and editing, performance,
July 4, 2013, variation
of 7hrs
KW Institute for
Contemporary Art, Berlin



Can we talk about the brain? The other day you were talking about the particular section of the brain that has to do with action and emotion.

The amygdala. It's the small mass of grey matter in the brain that involves the experience of emotions. Or, let's say, emotions produce the signals for actions to then take place. So, a depressed person doesn't act because this part of the brain is...

Shrunken, yes.

Actually physically shrunken? Not just numbed because less firing reaches it?

It is like an instrument waiting to be played. If you don't play it, it shrinks. Then the signals that it gives for actions to occur become more limited.

This emphasis on performativity in our culture tends toward performance without feeling.

Yes. There are a lot of colors and joyfulness in my objects, as a reminder that colors entail feelings. Emotions are the transmission for the activity and without emotions you cannot do anything.

This reminds me of the Invisible Committee's last book, *Now*. There's a part where they are making a distinction between choice and decision. Choice is what we do most of the time on Instagram or wherever... choosing to go to work. It's different from a decision, which is more like something that cuts through time and space in an active way and that involves emotion. And feeling.

It goes beyond choice.

In the moment of making a choice, emotion is not a criteria. You can like things on Instagram but it's never a decision. It's more like doing something as a choice because you must be productive.

At what point is productivity a decision rather than just a choice?

Even if the decision is to not work, the moment of decision is always productive because it goes beyond given choices.

Productivity in the sense of creativity is not productive in the sense of labor. It is something inventive, which is a decision. It is not about on or off. That's also the reason why the objects are not inside or outside but inside and outside. The activity occurs simultaneously inside and outside. So, the decision does not take place according to the parameters of the structure of the piece, or the structure of the exhibition, but it's taking place within this and, which allows the space and time for people to make their own decisions on how they experience and understand the work, and how the performance can shift them within this framework.

Hmm, and the doubling is also a going-deeper into the work. It's not shying away from the work by saying it's inside or outside but it's also inside and inside. Zadie Smith wrote in response to the cultural appropriation debate that the problem with artwork is that you have to go deeper or leave the gallery. To her, Dana Schutz's Open Casket wasn't cathartic because it was neither good enough as a representation nor as an autonomous piece. That's the problem! The problem is not cultural appropriation. It didn't go deep enough... neither inside nor outside.

Yeah, I liked that response too. When I was in Paris I saw [Alberto] Giacometti's prop for Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. And it was the only prop on the stage, a single dead tree. It was presented in the museum under this kind of psychedelic mood light. But, of course, along with this piece they

needed to show all the photos of how it looked on the stage with actors, alongside glamorous shots of Giacometti hanging out with Beckett backstage. But this is so different from your exhibition. You would have two trees and no photos. What about this decision of not helping the objects? I guess that's a negation of the museum from your side. There's a *taking care* that happens in the museum, a curating *taking care* in the sense of art handling, but there is also the idea of pedagogical *taking care* with an educational department that considers its main task to communicate the art to the public. In the Whitney, I once wanted to play with the wall texts and they didn't let me do it. They told me that the wall text is their one lifeline between the art and the public, and if the artist fucks with that, well then the whole enterprise of the museum is put in jeopardy. But you're doing away with the lifeline all together: the label, the educational help, and the communication around the object—it's interesting. I don't know if it's purely negative. It's not pedagogical either. It's not taking care of providing an idea or a reason why these objects exist there. The tree exists because of Giacometti hanging out with Beckett.

The point is, in which way could the object exist without Giacometti and Beckett hanging out backstage?

I don't know either, but to not help the objects is maybe the interesting decision you make in this show. I mean, you are helping them a lot by subtracting the information, because you are helping them to stand up as what they actually are, or could be. If you lay out information and help the viewer interpret or contextualize them in the absence of an event or a performance, is that really helping the objects?

What I like about gamelan music, which is why I went all the way to Indonesia to follow gamelan musicians, is that the music is played for many hours in order for people to be able to think. The music is made to allow people to contemplate that it is not supposed to be listened to.

To not prevent thinking.

The music that doesn't prevent thinking, and thinking itself takes place over time. You're shedding these objects of their time.

And their history. It's an interesting idea. Are you subtracting an object from its history or are you freeing it into a new possible history?

Is it a sort of trust that the history is somewhere in the object? I don't have to impose the history. History takes place through the objects' coexistence with their surroundings and through the decisions of the viewers.

That reminds me of Duchamp's manipulation around the urinal. He packaged it with the photographer and the mythologies and scandals and all that, and now it's a urinal with history.

He was appropriating history. He was creating a lexicon for the object.

But you're doing the opposite.

I'm doing the opposite because we have a lot of readymades. We are now acting towards history as a readymade. Objects need to allow for the creation of history through contemplation, not for the appropriation of readymade history. This is similar to the argument I had during the protest.

Which protest?

During Occupy Wall Street. Everybody was so fixated on the symbolic weight of Occupy that they became defenders, protectors; they wanted to control it. Instead of just saying,

Four crosshatches and two lines (2013)

Solid steel (5 cm), acrylic paint

150 × 190 × 190 cm

Solid steel (10 cm), acrylic paint

10 × 180 cm

Μοντέλο της Αντιγόνης

Antigone Model (2013)

Real-time audio recording and editing, performance,

July 4, 2013, variation of 7hrs

KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin

BOTTOM:

It rained milk yesterday

outside the city (2011)

Painted foam core, garbage can lids, chain, milk,

leaves, flower petals, granola bar wrapper

Dimensions variable



“Okay, we’ve done this and now we can leave. We can go somewhere else.”

So you feel that the Occupy movement got stuck in its own symbolic management?

Yeah, in terms of naming something when you can also make the decision to be silent. You can see this as a tactic. Leaving means opening a space for someone else to contribute. You can procrastinate your desire for a fixed object that has a symbolic value for you.

But at the same time, Occupy Wall Street maybe wouldn’t have been effective at all if it hadn’t bogged itself down in its refusal to leave that story. Then it wouldn’t have become a problem for the police.

We don’t know that.

We don’t know, but that’s the idea of an occupation; you go in and it doesn’t just happen once. It keeps happening. There’s repetition, there’s a rhythm, there’s a breathing thing happening, a hanging out. Or it’s not even noticed.

The crazy thing is that everything is relegated to chance. There is no such thing as a fixed story. Something has occurred at some point, but these things didn’t occur because they were assuming history. That’s what the media was playing out by advocating particular demands, like better wages, more jobs, free education, etc. And because the movement was intelligent enough to not play with the symbolic values that were expected, the media was trashing it as naive and, of course, there was also the police. The police were demarcating space. The barricades were demarcating space. Either you go beyond the barricade or you get used to its constraints and you negotiate. The occupation itself is not the space, it’s in which way you are moving through and beyond the barricade.

I’m just thinking about it in terms of time because an occupation implies a certain kind of duration or persistence. An occupation that doesn’t persist isn’t an occupation. It’s just a passing through like tourism or shopping or flâneuring. An occupation involves a kind of a blockage, no? It’s a different idea of inhabiting space. You’re supposed to leave the park at six o’clock, but if you stay in the park, then it’s a problem. But if you stay for five months maybe the problem becomes another sort of a problem, and more so when it’s policed, contained, and stuck in itself.

But if you assume that this was already there—

Which?

The condition of control that the space implies is already there, by how we have been educated on property, on the difference between public and private. The moment of the occupation and protest occurs when you are there. When you stay a little bit longer and someone comes with a flashlight telling you to leave, there’s the realization that for the guard the occupation is a symbolic act. But what makes the occupation happen is not the guard, but how people disregard, how they forget the regulations and then don’t obey the regulations anymore. There can be actions that are not reactions to regulations.

Not a response to control, more like a destitution.

Yes. The moment of destitution is when people forget the regulations because they build something much more exciting even if the regulations still exist. So, if this action continues growing, continues growing with its own rules, with its own textures, ideas, and senses, then it becomes a threat. Fear occurs because it is difficult to abandon the

already established rules and it springs from those who try to understand and regulate what this process is—let’s call them the self-appointed bureaucrats inside an action—and those who are growing within the creative process of the action. There is control because both parties start to speak the same language, because they are trying to understand what the action is, what it does, what it is trying to create. We need to recognize these moments and find ways to allow for their inclusion so that they don’t become the central theme of the action, we need to be able to speak our fears so we can exorcise fear and move on. This also has to do with how we understand representation, political representation. Is it possible to be part of a performance that doesn’t go along with the discourse of the event? Is it possible for the objects to exist on the level of the imaginary? How is it possible to gain visibility without using the rhetoric of the event?

Is this how the objects are in the space now? Is this the simultaneous performance in the two cities during documenta, so you can never see it fully?

Yes. This is reason that the objects are also able to be in a museum without being abandoned.

Right.

If a performance is not participating in the discourse of the event, the objects are also not engaged within the discourse of the event and therefore not available for the viewers’ contemplation.

Maybe it’s an event to encounter an object in a space without its history. Because history is not an event. It’s a story, it’s a symbol, whatever, it’s science. But the object in the space is more at the level of the event. It seems to me that what you’re resisting is the idea of the event as something to be documented. It’s a very contemporary art idea that the purpose of the event is to be documented. *Dynamis* resisted that at every level. There was no way for a person to even see it because it was happening in two cities at once. Everything was doubled, extended over time. There was just no way to see or record that event. It’s interesting too that you never see the whole body. It’s seven organs? Even when you install them in the space they are never installed as a kind of figure, are they? They’re kind of piled?

The organs create a kind of different body. What is this body that is able to slip away from the madness of totalitarian capitalism?

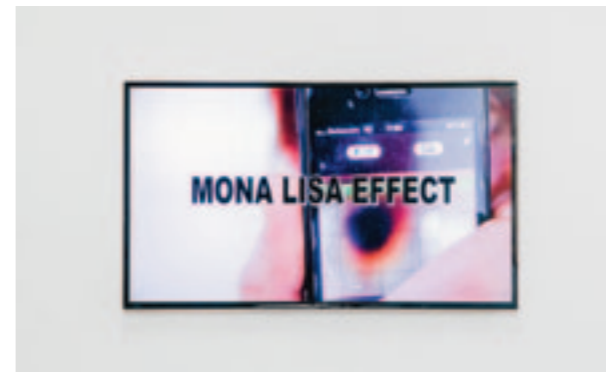
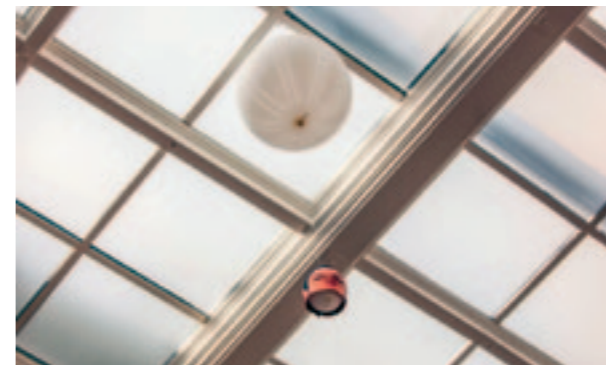
And even in the space of the Kunstverein, these things are planted there. I don’t know how it’s going to feel to wander through that space and encounter these objects, but even if they’re fixed there is a kind of slipping away that happens, I guess. And in the place you encounter these things in their slipping-away moment.

The object status is so transitional.

You are going to walk in there and see these objects and feel a kind of restlessness, something unfixd. I’m trying to imagine this show without having seen it.

Your description is accurate, but the objects are also treated as if they were guests in a house. The objects are situated in such a way that they appear to be wandering. The viewer must make decisions about how to move through the exhibition in order to navigate a unique trajectory to look at the objects. The objects direct and empower the viewers, even if this sometimes creates unpleasant feelings.

All the types of mimetic objects.



Copypaste (2014),
Snout is wall and wall is Snout (2014)
Tsa! (2014)
Performance, approx.
10’ loop, repeated
unannounced throughout
the duration of the
exhibition *Mona Lisa Effect*,
April 13–June 8, 2014
Kunsthalle Basel
TOP:
Bye Bye Head (2014)
Print on fabric, balloon,
helium, string
Dimensions variable
MIDDLE LEFT:
Mona Lisa Effect (2014)
HD video 6’ with sound
looped
MIDDLE RIGHT:
Detail: *Copypaste* (2014)
Overall (print on fabric)
Coat hooks
150 × 90 cm
Detail: *Snout is wall and
wall is Snout* (2014)
Photo wallpaper on
plaster wall
450 × 35 × 900 cm
Installation views
Kunsthalle Basel



You are going to be meeting them at the level of a mimesis, on a kind of stage, especially with all the doubling.

You cannot have a mimetic object if you don't have some kind of original to mimic—but if there is a constant mimesis, then what is that?

The nervous system.

And it's a symmetrical space. The doubling is also spatial.

Like a brain or lungs.

When I entered the space I thought, "It's actually also double!" In terms of its architecture, one side mirrors the other, and the top floor is identical to the lower floor. I thought that the architecture of the building was more than apropos for this exhibition. Then I walked and made a first diagram of the basic movements that could be made inside the space. I found that there were four movements. Then I thought of Charles Fourier and his book *Four Movements*, and Christina Lehnert told me that the building was built during the time Fourier was writing *Four Movements*. That information made me feel even more certain that I wanted to have this exhibition happen at the Kunstverein.

Its historicist symmetry is perfect for you.

Do you want to talk more about a particular piece in the show? Will you redo the *Do Jaguar*?

Yeah I will redo the piece.

The first time since 2009?

Yeah.

Are the works the actual objects from 2009 or are you going to remake some of them?

Some of them are from 2009 but some of them are made from files, or they are remnants of previous assemblages. I feel very enthusiastic about some works because I will actually make them again, in the sense that some of them are digital files and can be remade. To bring them into a new space means that I will actually move them from the digital realm to a physical one. I don't replicate them exactly as they existed in their previous forms, but I will make them again specifically for the space of the Kunstverein.

So all works have a double date.

Not all of them but some have double dates.

Can we see the logo?

I started cutting pieces out from the newspaper. It was the day of the German elections.

Which newspaper did you read?

It was a Greek newspaper announcing the results of the German elections.

The victory for the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland).

And then I placed the newspaper pieces on the scanner staging the movements of traffic flow on the ground floor of the Kunstverein, mimicking them on the scanner and making different variations of the patterns of movement that occur in the Kunstverein, and slowly I realized that it looked like a dismantled communist symbol. This piece was the logo for the advertisement of the exhibition. It's also the title of the exhibition. I didn't want to have a title. I wanted to have my name doubled—*GEORGIA SAGRI GEORGIA SAGRI*—and that made my name a *module*.

1: Georgia Sagri. *Mona Lisa Effect*, Kunsthalle Basel (2014), referring to the notorious effect of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. *Mona Lisa* was painted ca. 1531.

2: Jim Fletcher: "Yes it's relaxing and catastrophic at the same time, when you realize you are seeing double because you have two eyes."

3: Jim Fletcher: "When your own two eyes are working hard to make it seem like they are one portal-vision, it's actually very touching."

4: Stasis here is used according to its Greek etymology, which means static, standing still.

"There is no country in our hearts" I told her and she looked at me with surprise. I couldn't suggest a drink after that look of hers. With that gaze of hers, its discomfort that made me think of my knees and how I need to open my bag without reason, just checking things in my bag I walked and walked for hours.

SALOON: There is no country in our hearts (2013) with works by Roman Stańczak and Kostis Velonis Performance, September 27, 2013, 8pm Warsaw Museum of Modern Art
TOP:
SALOON: There is no country in our hearts (2013)
HD video with sound 1'14"
Collection of Warsaw Museum of Modern Art

