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Framing everyday negotiations:
never confuse movement with action
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All images of works courtesy of the artist

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SCREEN SPACE



Jacqui Shelton

Jacqui Shelton's language of movement

A woman in black wellingtons and a blue parker stacks freshly made sandbags into a wheelbarrow, one after another. Their weight is affirmed by each of her slow and purposeful steps. The wheelbarrow doesn't seem to make the job much easier; its single wheel quickly bogged in the soft sand. She unloads the bags onto the beach, onto the harder sand where waves had so recently been. One at a time the woman lays the sandbags in a row, building a wall. She continues to move each of the sandbags in a futile attempt to hold back the ocean waves that inevitably sweep over and around the wall. In a poetic gesture she adjusts her position and continues.

'Never confuse movement with action', Jacqui Shelton reminds us. The artist's own body in motion drives the artwork, acting as the primary means of expression. In a recent collaborative video work by Shelton and Hind Habib at Blindside, the artists struggled to influence the architecture of the gallery or the built environment. Here, Shelton's failed attempt to hold back waves creates a new dialogue between the body and the natural landscape. The artist's body creates its own unique language or syntax that is drawn in the sand and punctuated by every footprint. The prose is continually erased by the washing of the waves and re-written again by the artist.

Inside Shelton's installation at Screen Space we are aware of ourselves as viewers, watching a video, in the presence of a sculpture. The wall of sandbags within the gallery functions as a barrier. The moment we approach her work we are invited to think about the gallery space and its physical attributes, while also becoming conscious of our own bodies and how we move around and between artworks.

As the video's subtitles become visible, we are introduced to another conversation: a completely separate dialogue between two unknown people. These speakers don't seem to be listening to each other enough for the discussion to make any real forward-progress. Instead, the conversation circles, with one asking the other seemingly direct questions such as 'what do you think it would take you to break down into tears like that?' and getting the reply 'maybe she was crying for the animals'. The correspondence is nonsensical and quickly reveals itself as yet another ineffectual exchange.

There is a strong interplay between artist and action, between body and the environment, between what is said and what is understood. Meaning can be found, or not, by looking somewhere between the embodied act and the written word. Each of these taking the form of rhythmic compositions that capture our imaginations but endlessly lead to nothingness.

Shelton's work draws on a forty-year history of video and performance, while making a unique contribution to an ongoing dialogue in contemporary Australian art, an exchange that sees women refocusing on the body via new visual technologies. Shelton fluently uses video to document bodily performances, particularly as linked to an understanding of the body's (in)ability to alter the physical parameters of any given situation. This time an extra layer of ambiguity is added by Shelton's use of language and conversation, highlighting the limitations not only of the body, but of all forms of human interaction and communication. Instead of offering a fixed answer, Shelton's work suggests there is an innate beauty in the language of movement itself.

Alison Lasek

