



Double Exposures: Performance as Photography, Photography as Performance by Manuel Vason

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reviews

Double Exposures: Performance as Photography, Photography as Performance by Manuel Vason

Bristol and Chicago: Intellect/University of Chicago Press, 2015, 200pp, ISBN 9781783204090 (hardback)

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In the image to the left, a table is covered in an off-white sheet (see [Image 1](#)). The sheet is covered in scrawled silhouettes: bodies splayed crime-scene style, syringes, a gun, a boot print, and blotches of red. At the wall to the back, which the table abuts, blood seems to hang in three small drips; and on the table itself are perched a microscope peering at slides, a disembodied bird's head, petri dishes with assorted bits, and a photograph of a nurse in a jet black mask. In the image to the right, a nude man reclines in a greenhouse chair, head slung back, eyes closed, and the entire scene is covered in a gleaming drape of cobwebs.

This diptych by Manuel Vason and Giovanna Maria Cassetta is included in the latest publication from Vason, the accomplished photographer who collaborates closely with a wide range of performance artists – not as mere documentarian, but rather as co-producer of their work. Indeed, the question of documentation, a perennial problem for those who work in the ephemeral arts, seems, with Vason's astonishing *Double Exposure*, to have slipped from the frame, a surprising turn for a book of photographs of live art. This may be because this is not, in intent or effect, a catalogue: as David Evans writes in the book's introduction, the images collected here are both 'the exhibition and the performances' (p. 9), a stunning experiment in the complex interplay between photography and performance that draws its audience in by evoking the capaciousness of a constitutive gap of knowledge. What is, or what happens, *between* the photographs in each diptych? Who is there? How do we know? What connects these visual fragments?

Double Exposure is the most recent publication from the Live Art Development Agency (LADA), which has experimented with the form of the *book* as a constituent part of performance-based practice. This may be its most innovative and ambitious publishing project thus far, at least in how the images, complemented with a handful of short exploratory essays and artists' notes, both portray and occasion discrete moments of collaborative performance. The diptychs themselves are divided into two series. In the first (which includes the images described in the opening paragraph of this review), Vason asked previous collaborators to direct two photographs about their work, one of which would include in its frame Vason himself. There is an almost tangible humility to this series, called 'Reversing the Gaze' (p. 54), in part because the photographer's body itself becomes a living object within the performance. Of course, photographing the photographer is not without precedent; but somewhere in the multiplicity of Vason being used in so many ways by these artists, the camera becomes something even closer to an audience – or rather, the emptiness behind the camera's eyepiece somehow makes space for us, distanced by time and geography from the shoot, but nonetheless present for the event.

In another series, with jamie lewis hadley, two more images convey a more direct sense of injury (p. 115). In the image to the left, we see half a man facing a white brick wall, back to the camera, left arm raised straight to the sky. The arm is covered in a thick coating of blood, dripping down the man's back, and is wrapped in bandages like a striped candy or a barber's pole. In the image to the right, we see half of the same man, now facing the camera, arm again raised, showing its other half. Here the bandages have been cut, interrupting the clean lines of the wrapping, and are covered in small blots of blood. The reader (or spectator, or audience member; those distinctions are challenged by the book) cannot see his wounds. In this series, performance artists with whom Vason had not previously collaborated were asked to devise works explicitly for the



Image 1. Diptych by Manuel Vason and Giovanna Maria Cassetta, featured in Manuel Vason, *Double Exposures: Performance as Photography, Photography as Performance* (2015), p. 73. Photograph courtesy of Manuel Vason.

productive of two complementary images. Here the energy of the first series – the audience-making it produced not despite but *through* the published book – recedes, replaced by something like a centripetal force in the space between each diptych's two images. That force is narrative, evoking a longing to know how each pair of images are related and what happened between them; but it is also, like performance itself, durational, undoing the fixity of photography's technique: to capture a moment in time. There is death in those spaces-between, and love, and sex, and more than a few drops of blood; we cannot see them, but we feel their tug.

It somehow feels as if the vibrancy of these diptychs, their hold on us, their dependency on us, would not have been possible in a form other than this book, at least not with quite the same effects. And this is perhaps *Double Exposure's* greatest offering. In so many other cases, where photography documents live art, its claims to performance – the photograph itself as an act – so often seem hollow, unable to summon or eventuate the same kind of vital, mortal thrill of a performance event. But here

they are alive, 'contaminating' (as Vason and Evans both claim (p. 20)) both the forms of which they are a part (performance, photography, book) and, in their insistent summoning of us into their mysterious worlds, spectatorship itself.

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Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis and the Black Male Performer by Michelle Ann Stephens

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014, 328pp, ISBN 9780822356776 (paperback)

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Michelle Ann Stephens displays great care in the construction and execution of *Skin Acts: Race,*