

## **'Dragging' Liveness in the Video Art of The Kingpins**

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Two bikers with flowing grey locks and leather-clad suits emerge from the darkness mouthing the words to a succession of excessively loud tracks. Their bearded dancing girls adorned in sequins and sparkles soon appear and begin thrusting their hips back and forward to the pulsating beat of the purple, flashing lights. These opening moments of The Kingpins' multi screen video installation, *Rhapsody Happens* (2005) first screened at Artspace in 2005 (14 April-7 May) prompted the central questions in this essay regarding the imbricated relationship between live and mediated performance. The experience of viewing these performances was reminiscent of watching a live music concert and yet simultaneously evocative of the type of performances evident in music video clips. The two bikers, framed by their individual screens, appeared like the lead singers of a perverse rock band with their two back up dancers writhing around in between them. The three life-size screens positioned against the back wall of the gallery were suggestive of a theatrical stage space in which the audience were able to move back and forth between the screens weaving their own networks of response.

The experience of viewing the mediated performances in *Rhapsody Happens* was as immediate and compelling as a performance experienced "in the flesh." This was no doubt due to the combination of the intensity of the imagery, the sound and editing techniques, the work of the performers themselves, in their gestures and poses for the camera as well as the immersive space of the installation. In a recent interview with Kingpin member, Angelica Mesiti she made the point that 'we're interested in communicating a sort of energy of the live experience via different methods' (Angelica Mesiti, 2007). The focus on this essay is to unpack these different "methods" that The Kingpins utilise to produce the effects of liveness in their video performances. The central argument is that The Kingpins "drag" the spontaneous, style and language of music video clips and mash this with elements from pop culture, cinema and other theatrical and performative modes of representation, to

create an immediate viewing experience. It is through “dragging” the liveness of the video clip that they are able to engage the viewer’s sense perceptions and bring them physically closer to the action on screen.

### *Reconsidering the “Live” Experience*

*Rhapsody Happens* is indicative of the imbricated relationship between live and mediated performances and between video art and performance art. This relationship has been developing since the mid 1960s with many early performance artists recording and documenting their performances on video. Michael Rush notes that the ‘video camera became a partner in the performances of several influential artists’ (Michael Rush, 2001: 47). This is particularly evident in the hands of artists such as Vito Acconci and Bruce Nauman, who literally turned the camera on themselves in fabricated situations or in their studio. In Australia the intersection between performance and video dates back to the early 1970s with the appearance of Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy at Inhibodress Gallery in Sydney. Adam Geczy makes a similar point to Rush that video emerged during this time as ‘a fairly natural companion to experimental performance practice’ (Adam Geczy, 2004: 3). Drawn to the real time immediacy of video, Parr and Kennedy used the camera to document their gallery performances such as *Idea Demonstrations* (1972) and *Trans Art 1*(1972), which as Sue Cramer suggests, ‘are artworks in themselves, rather than documentation of performances’ (Sue Cramer, 1989: 4).

Contemporary performance artists are increasingly turning to video production as a mode of communication, which is not surprising when we consider that most of our communication occurs through a mediated interface. As RoseLee Goldberg notes in her history of live performance, ‘performance art today reflects the fast-paced sensibility of the communications industry’ (RoseLee Goldberg, 2001: 126). She also highlights the increase in video performances from the 1990s onwards, which, as she explains, ‘were frequently enacted in private, exhibited as installations and considered extensions of live actions’ (Goldberg, 2001: 121). In these works the space of the document becomes the only space in which the performance occurs.

This is evident in the performative videos of artists such as: Paul McCarthy, Bill Viola, Gillian Wearing, and Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* films (1994-2000), as well as an emerging breed of performance artists based in Sydney including Brown Council, Rachel Scott, Monika Tichacek and The Kingpins. The rise of this type of performance poses fundamental questions about the nature of "liveness" and what constitutes a "live" performance. Can a video performance produce the effects of immediacy, intimacy and spontaneity that are associated with liveness?

Let us consider Philip Auslander's argument in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. Auslander suggests that the construction of live versus mediated is a 'competitive opposition at the level of cultural economy' and not at the level of intrinsic or ontological differences (Philip Auslander, 1999: 10). It is a matter of different industrial and technological practices and not necessarily a difference in perception or consumption. Therefore it would seem that the effects of a mediated piece may be as visceral as those produced by a performance experienced in the same time and space as that in which it is produced. For instance Monika Tichacek's video installation, *The Shadows* (2004-2005), which was awarded the prestigious Anne Landa Award for video and new media arts at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2006, is a recent example of an artist combining the techniques and aesthetics of video with the traditions of endurance performance to dismantle the opposition of live versus mediated. The extreme close-ups of Tichacek's face as a metal pin impales her tongue are no less affecting for being screened and looped inside a darkened installation space. In fact the mediation of this act increases the effects of immediacy and intimacy that are characteristic of liveness and brings the viewer closer to the performer.

Auslander's view on this is that the live and the mediated are mutually dependant for reasons that are both historical and experiential. He suggests that the concept of "live" only developed in relation to the ability to record a live event and 'historically the live is actually an effect of mediatization, not the other way around' (Auslander: 1999, 51). With the development of the live broadcast and the advent of television the definition of what constituted a live performance was reinvented. What had been

a spatial and temporal relationship became simply a temporal one, evident in the prominence given to “live” dialogue with news reporters in television broadcasts. The experiential effects of “going live” have created a language associated with immediacy, intimacy and interactivity through the mediated screen of the television. This is still evident in the continuous output of reality television programmes that play up the effect of being “live to air.” One of the most prominent examples is the popular television series *Big Brother*: consider the live eviction night with host Gretel Killen holding her earpiece, anxiously awaiting the *Big Brother* verdict. The urgency and immediacy of waiting for the “live” response brings the viewer closer to the action and creates a shared viewing experience. In recent developments the term “going live” is also being used in relation to websites, so that we are now prepared to extend the concept of liveness to non-human entities. It would seem that in an increasingly mediated society it has become a difficult task to separate the live from the mediated.

### *Drag King Culture and The Kingpins*

The story of The Kingpins is one in which the key ideas of this essay are all strikingly evident from the beginning: the combinations of live performance, pop culture and mediated images are all on display in Sydney’s queer nightclub culture where Emma Price, Katie Price, Angelica Mesiti and Técha Noble began their artistic collaboration in 2000. In fact, this association dates back further: Emma and Katie are sisters, and Técha and Katie were friends during high school, while Emma, Técha and Angelica all came together at the College of Fine Arts (CoFA), sparking their collaborative process. After leaving CoFA Emma, Angelica and Técha moved into a warehouse in Surry Hills with six other artists, forming the Imperial Slacks Gallery. During this time they began assisting each other on their individual projects as well as curating shows for the gallery. The decision to enter a drag king competition emerged as an idea to have a bit of fun outside of their ‘individual serious art practices’ (Mesiti, 2007). Emma and Técha had previously collaborated as the Diorama Queens and Angelica and Katie shared a background in formal dance training, so it was a natural progression for the quartet to join forces when an

opportunity to enter the Drag Kings of Sydney (DKSY) competition at a local nightclub presented itself.

Drag kings are mostly female or female-identified performers who dress in masculine drag and personify male gender stereotypes. The drag king is a relatively recent phenomenon not to be confused with the male impersonator, which has been a theatrical genre for at least two hundred years. Whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of masculinity the drag king performs masculinity often parodically and as Judith Halberstam notes 'makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act' (Judith Halberstam, 1998: 232). In the 1990s, drag kings became a sub cultural phenomenon and according to Halberstam, queer clubs in most American cities began featuring drag king acts and contests. (Halberstam, 1998: 233)

A similar phenomenon took place in several Australian cities in the late 1990s with a wave of drag king events and competitions. While most documentation and discussion surrounding drag king culture has focused on America and the UK it would seem that there was a vibrant and exciting community developing "down under". In Adelaide, the first drag king performances and competitions took place at *Feast*, the annual lesbian and gay arts and cultural festival, founded in 1997. *Feast* took place across multiple venues in the city of Adelaide and continues to showcase a range of queer performance and cultural events today. In 'Drag Kings "Down Under": An Archive and Introspective of a Few Aussie Blokes', Vicki Crowley describes in detail one of the opening night performances of the 1998 *Feast* festival that took place at the Lion Artspace in the forecourt of the University of South Australia. She recounts the wild excitement of the crowd as they watched drag king: Ben Dover and His Beautiful Boys. Crowley notes that the audience were seduced by the explosive and vertiginous admixture of the convincing and teasingly unconvincing. According to Crowley this performance offered the 'kind of moment Judith Halberstam and others relate and capture as wildly ecstatic engagement between audience and Drag King performers' (Vicki Crowley, 2002: 287).

In Melbourne the first drag king events were started by King Victoria drag kings at Collingwood's Salon Kitty nightclub in 2000. "Bumpy", the founder of King Victoria continues to host drag king events and competitions every Friday night at the Opium Den, on Hoddle Street in the city, which now claims the title of the world's longest-running weekly drag king night. The events are a type of cabaret night featuring a plethora of drag king styles: from boy bands, duos and rappers to crooners and cowboys. Bumpy notes that the performers range from 'parody types to the handsome tribute type' however, the most common is 'someone reinterpreting music with a real sexy vibe to it.' She also suggests that unlike drag queens, drag kings seem destined to remain underground, 'people don't seem to be able to wrap their heads around the concept of women dressing up as men' (Bumpy, in Fiona Scott-Norman, 2008). Crowley also makes a similar point that kinging, 'has not been uniformly embraced or celebrated in Adelaide and other Australian cities' (Crowley, 2002: 288).

In Sydney the first wave of drag king events and competition also emerged in a range of queer nightclubs in the early 2000s with the DKSJ competitions. These competitions were held in a variety of clubs in which drag kings would compete against each other for the best performance: imagine serious gender subversion, convincing air guitar and choreographed moves to cheesy tracks. It was amidst this exciting, underground culture that The Kingpins began their first performative explorations. As curator Alexie Glass notes:

The Kingpins were initially inspired by the performative energy of the drag king scene in Sydney in 2000- night club events with rowdy spectators of every persuasion voting for the most compelling spin on drag with a cash prize. (2005: 59)

The Kingpins' early drag shows were performed to an environment of screaming fans, flashing strobe lights and booming music reminiscent of a live music concert. One of their first performances on the drag king circuit was a Guns N' Roses show entitled *Pussy Whipped* (2000), in which Técha and Emma performed as the male

leads of Axel Rose and Slash in tight leather pants and black t-shirts. They thrashed around the stage playing air guitar, crowd surfing and lip-synching to the songs. Katie and Angelica posed as the trashy back up dancers wearing skintight acid wash jeans, red sequenced backless tops and excessively teased manes. They performed a strict choreography routine, which involved thrusting around the stage and rubbing themselves all over “Axel” and “Slash”. *Evil Dick* (2001) was their next creation, which was a mash-up of offensive and misogynistic gangsta rap. This work followed a similar formula to *Pussy Whipped*: Técha and Emma posed as the male rappers in suitably baggy pants and gold chains, whilst Katie and Angelica were the two “booty bitches.” The intense performative energy of The Kingpins earned them an infamous status in the queer scene, a status confirmed by their winning the 2001 DKSY championship at Sydney’s Oxford Street nightclub, Arc.

### *Making the Mediated “Real”*

The Kingpins continued to develop their live drag shows based on a shared visual and verbal language acquired from the experience of growing up watching MTV. As Mesiti from the group explained:

We had a shared obsession with video clips from our younger years and mined those old clips for choreography, costume, posturing. We naturally gravitated to the music we listened to growing up and the first performances were a kind of vicarious re-living of those music clips.

This is certainly evident in the choreography, costumes and posturing of *Evil Dick* and *Pussy Whipped*. These works were a pastiche of a range of iconic music video clips edited together into a live mash up. Through this cut and paste application The Kingpins were essentially creating a parody of the hyper masculine and feminine identity paraded in video clip culture. There is a particular type of performance, style and language that is constructed in these video clips that The Kingpins use as their model:

We always constructed live shows using video clips as our template. We didn't ever look at say Madonna on stage for cues but rather the *Thriller* clip or *Bohemian Rhapsody*. We constructed a lot of moments around iconic video frames lifted from music videos. Those shots that are burnt into a popular consciousness so that when they're revived on stage they provide a trigger to the video image. (Mesiti, 2007)

This comment is particularly interesting as it infers that the traditional perspective that suggests that the live event is the original event and precedes the mediated event has been reversed. In the case of The Kingpins, the mediated representations of video clips have become the point of reference for the live performance. The mediated therefore precedes the live and the live event becomes a trigger to the original mediated performance. This can be linked to Auslander's perspective that live events are often modelled on mediated performances:

Initially, mediated events were modelled on live ones. The subsequent cultural dominance of mediation has had the ironic result that live events are now frequently modelled on the very mediated representations that once took the self same live events as their models. (Auslander, 1999: 10-11)

This is certainly apparent in The Kingpins' live shows, which are based on the mediated representations located in video clips. As Mesiti suggests, these works were a 'live enactment of the images on screen' and were a process of '(m)aking the mediated real' (Mesiti, 2007). What is particularly interesting is that the video clips that The Kingpins' appropriated were often based on live music concerts. This is predicated on the fact that music video clips often attempt to recreate the immediacy and liveness of a music concert. This is a point that Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin suggest in *Remediation: Understanding New Media*:

Directors of music videos rely on multiple media and elaborate editing to create an immediate and apparently spontaneous style; they take great pains to achieve the sense of "liveness" that characterizes rock music. The desire



for immediacy leads digital media to borrow avidly from each other as well as from their analogue predecessors such as film, television, and photography. (Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, 1999: 9)

The sense of immediacy or close proximity once experienced between performer and spectator at a live music concert is simulated on screen through the fast-paced editing techniques and spontaneous style that have become the language of liveness. In the case of The Kingpins, live shows are constructed by appropriating iconic elements from music video clips in the attempt to achieve the immediacy of the music video clip, which is of course premised on the live music concert. In The Kingpins' live shows the sense of immediacy is created by their energetic live stage presence, however, this live presence is constructed through the language that has developed through video clip culture.

In The Kingpins' subsequent video works such as *This is My Remix Baby*, (2001) *Men's Club* (2001) and *Versus* (2002) great pains have been taken to achieve the sense of liveness that was evident in their live drag performances. Similarly to their stage shows these video works recreate popular video clips from artists such as Boyz 2 Men and Run DMC. The Kingpins' appropriate the language of the video clip that takes its influence from the live music concert, which further perpetuates the endless cycle of borrowing and remixing. This complex shifting between live and recorded performance is inevitably linked to achieving the sense of "liveness" that Bolter and Grusin discuss.

### *"Dragging" the Video Clip Model*

The way in which The Kingpins adopt and refashion the video clip model can also be aligned with the way that they "drag" gender. The Kingpins drag the aesthetics, language and structure of music video clips to create their various performative incarnations, enabling them to critique established codes of representation. This is a point that Mesiti noted in a recent interview:

When we started making video works we talked a lot about the notion of drag applied to the video clip format. We became interested in this idea of “dragging” the medium of the video clip the same way we “dragged” gender (Mesiti, 2007).

The notion of drag put simply refers to the way that one gender adopts another, usually through clothing. As Gary Carsley notes drag, is derived from the Dutch word ‘dragen’, a verb meaning to wear or carry, ‘a connotation that goes a long way to explain its traditional association, at least in English, with clothing’ (Gary Carsley: 2006/2007: 48). In Judith Butler’s influential theory of gender trouble she suggests that drag parodies ‘the notion of an original and primary gender identity’ (Judith Butler, 1990: 140). It would seem that in the here and now the concept of “drag” or “dragging” has been repositioned and opened up to encompass new possibilities that are not only specifically related to gender. For many artists such as The Kingpins dragging has also become a tool to challenge the notion of an original artwork or idea, enabling the “dragger” to rewrite the established codes for representing the conventions of received history.

In many ways this has enabled The Kingpins to leverage themselves from the sub cultural orbit of drag king contests into the trajectory of a fine arts practice. The Kingpins have recently been catapulted into art world success and are now represented by Kaliman Gallery in Sydney and have featured in a range of international arts festivals and exhibitions, most recently at the Fiac Art Fair, Paris. In their most recent exhibition, *The Great Undead* at Kaliman Gallery (5 October-27 October 2007) Judith Halberstam noted in the accompanying catalogue essay that The Kingpins have taken ‘drag into the next epoch’:

The Drag King cultures that emerged in the 1990’s are remixed in The Kingpins performances and transformed from mock-earnest tribute bands into mock-punk, mock-metal, mock-mock mythology, a brave new world of big hair, shiny clothes, biker chicks, monstrous forms and conceptual art. (Halberstam, 2007)

It would seem that The Kingpins have merged fine arts aesthetics with the traditions of drag king culture to create a hybrid practice that exists in an art world framework. They have been able to take 'drag into the next epoch' by utilising drag as an instrument to subvert not only dominant gender stereotypes but also a range of received cultural values and ideologies.

Carsley extends this notion of dragging and suggests that The Kingpins' practice is a form of "drag/mash", which he defines as: 'The collapse of quotation, derivation and mimicry into a singular strategy that accommodates the essentially performative nature of highly reflexive practices at the present time' (Carsley, 2006). Drag/mash is characterised by a synthesis of disparate techniques, active use of illusion, reliance on text, and articulation through performance-based methodologies. Carsley notes that The Kingpins have developed drag/mash 'as an instrument of rhetoric: an ideologically determined *in character* challenge to received values' (Carsley, 2006).

The way in which The Kingpins utilise the strategies of drag/mash can be linked to a range of fine art practices that can be traced back to the "readymade" in conceptual art and can be also aligned with local drag king and drag queen subcultures. In particular a connection can be made with the performances of Sydney drag queens: Claire de Lune and Verushka Darling, which combine a synthesis of cinema classics, pop music video and TV comedy, which they developed in the mid 1990s. For instance in their playlets such as *Whatever Happened to Cho Cho San?* which first played at Annie's Bar at the Carrington Hotel from late 1999 through to mid 2000 borrows from a range of sources including *Madame Butterfly*, *The Mikado* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* Carol Langley notes that their unique brand of 'anti-drag' combined 'original and complete stories constructed from a pastiche of lines and songs borrowed from opera, film, television and popular music' (Carol Langley, 2006:221).

This notion of "drag/mash" or "anti-drag" can be linked to Bolter and Grusin's discussion of remediation, which they define as the 'representation of one medium in

another' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 59). Drag/mash can also be defined as the representation of one medium in another as it refers to a convergence of remixing, sampling and restaging of existing cultural forms. In the case of *The Kingpins* we see the representation of the video clip and cinematic references in live performance and in the medium of video art. Whilst Bolter and Grusin's analysis focuses on the way that new media refashions previous media forms, it is not necessarily limited to digital media:

Remediation did not begin with the introduction of digital media. We can identify the same process throughout the last several hundred years of Western visual representation. A painting by the seventeenth-century artist Pieter Saenredam, a photography by Edward Weston, and a computer system for virtual reality are different in many ways, but they are all attempts to achieve immediacy by ignoring or denying the presence of the medium and the act of mediation. All of them seek to put the viewer in the same space as the objects. (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 59)

This passage is significant as it suggests that the defining feature of remediation is the attempt to bring the viewer and subject together, thereby creating a sense of immediacy between viewer and object. This infers that through dragging the template of the music video clip *The Kingpins* are able to place the viewer in the same space as the object: that being the place in which the performance unfolds.

### *Versus* (2002)

*Versus* was first screened at the *Cerebellum* exhibition, curated by Gary Carsley, at Performance Space, Sydney in 2002. In this work *The Kingpins*' attempt to communicate the live experience through re-staging in drag the 1986 music video clip, *Walk this Way*, by Run DMC. They drag the original music video, performing to the camera and lip-synching to the words of the song. They also recreate the racy editing and shaky camera techniques to evoke the spontaneous energy of the original clip. *Walk this Way* was an iconic song and video clip of the 1980s as it

brought together the opposing musical genres of hip-hop and soft rock and more importantly black and white recording artists. Aerosmith had first recorded this song in 1975 and in 1986 the rap group Run DMC performed a cover of the song with Steve Tyler and Joe Perry from Aerosmith guesting on vocals. The 1986 video clip symbolically placed Aerosmith and Run DMC in a musical duel.

The title of *Versus* underscores the battle that is played out between the opposing musical genres. The Kingpins enact this difference through drag, combining hyper-stylised versions of hip-hop with Run DMC and soft rock with Aerosmith. The Run DMC characters perform in a bright white studio dressed in shiny gold suits with heavy chains and suitably fresh wounds on their faces. Their gold teeth sparkle in the light as they look at the camera and lip-synch to the Run DMC track. Their bearded women are dressed in gold bras and hot pants and shake their booty around the screen. On the other side of town the Aerosmith characters perform in a dark garage with graffiti covering the brick walls. Dressed in leather pants and acid-wash denim jackets they also perform for the camera, straddling microphones as they lip-synch to the Aerosmith vocals. Their harem of girls thrust around the space and climb over scaffolding in their ripped stockings and mini skirts amidst rising puffs of smoke.

In *Versus* The Kingpins also drag another remediated element into the structure of the work. In their Run DMC studio the back wall of monitors plays footage from a video clip made by the performance group Raw Sewerage, founded by the iconic Australian artist Leigh Bowery. The same footage also plays in the Aerosmith quarter on several small monitors placed on the scaffolding. This clip features Bowery and the other members of Raw Sewerage also re-staging the Run DMC *Walk This Way* film clip, made in a karaoke style 'make your own pop video' booth in London in the early 1990s. In viewing *Versus* it is difficult to keep track of the endless mashing, referencing and restaging of live and mediated representations. This work questions the role of the original and challenges the position of the "real" live experience, highlighting Bolter and Grusin's theory about the continuous borrowing and reworking of cultural products in a society dominated by mass media.

*Welcome to the Jingle* (2003)

*Welcome to the Jingle* was first screened at Primavera, the annual exhibition of young artists, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 2003. The Kingpins' drag the template of the music video clip and extend this to incorporate a multi-screen video installation. Walking into the dark room the audience was immediately caught in the middle of two imposing screens. On one screen a team of four pimply-faced athletes raided a series of Starbucks restaurants whilst on the other four death metal rockers thrashed around in fluorescent lycra costumes. The editing, camera techniques and the performers' intimate relationship with the camera also evoke the familiar formal devices of music video clips. However, this is taken to another level as the performers on opposing screens interact with each other in a type of musical duel/duet that creates an active viewing experience.

On one screen, four glam rockers fight each other and thrash around a darkened studio space in between lip-syncing to the words of a familiar but undefinable death metal song. In their excessively adorned costumes complete with tight fluorescent lycra pants and crimped hair they are reminiscent of various 80s rock bands, namely Kiss and Alice Cooper, as well as the satirical thrash metal, hardcore punk band GWAR. On the second screen four highly stylised androgenous athletes in green training tracksuits descend the city streets. Sporting fake blonde wigs and moustaches they complete a series of choreographed dance moves toward the elusive capitalist elixir: Starbucks. The fast paced editing and shaky handheld camera moves are suggestive of the style evident in video clips and create a spontaneous edge to the work. The Kingpins enter a variety of Starbucks restaurants throughout the city in single file and perform the routine that they have been rehearsing. Once they reach their destination the similarities between their uniform and the green, signature twin tailed logo of Starbucks becomes paramount. These blonde androids are the warriors of the homogenised world that places Starbucks at the top of the food chain. In the capitalist culture of multinational corporations the

soldiers have become the pimply-faced kids who are usually behind the counter taking your decaf skim frappuccino order.

The relationship between the two screens develops through the death metal song that accompanies the video. The death rockers begin to mouth the words of the song and it becomes apparent that these are instructions for the athletes. The lyrics begin with a close up of one of the rockers looking at the camera, who says: 'Oi boy, I'll meet you down the track, you know, the Olympic track'. These words seem to correspond with the training of the athletes on their journey towards their destination of Starbucks. The lyrics develop into a type of perverse duet in which the rockers sing: 'How fast can you run?' and the athletes respond: 'As fast as a leopard'. This is repeated several times with a variety of lyrics in a type of rock anthem.

The song's lyrics are taken from the classic Australian film *Gallipoli*, (1981) directed by Peter Weir. The film follows the lives of several young men who enlist in the Australian Imperial Forces during WWI. A prevailing subtext within the film is that war is a game, which stems in part from the fact, that the two main characters: Archie Hamilton (Mark Lee) and Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson) are athletic sprinters who meet at an athletics carnival. Archie's Uncle Jack trains him to be a sprinter and teaches him a mantra that he recites every time he hits the racetrack and subsequently the battlefield. This mantra is a central focus of the film being the opening lines, and the last words that Archie utters before he is tragically slaughtered on the battlefield. It is this same mantra that the Kingpins have borrowed for the lyrics in *Welcome to the Jingle*.

In this context, the dialogue between the rockers and the athletes can be seen as a parallel to the relationship between Archie and Jack in *Gallipoli*. The rockers are the perverted alter ego and trainers of the new heroes of the city. The new enemy is capitalism and globalisation, which is symbolised in the site of the multinational company Starbucks. This is the headquarters of the American empire and references the Americanisation of Australian identity. The message is clear: during WWI and in Gallipoli Australia fought for England and now we fight for America.

In *Welcome to the Jingle* the Kingpins' combine elements of live and mediated performance to probe the limits of what can be defined as live performance. In this hybrid work they drag the structure and language of music video clips and combine this with the live Starbucks performances and the studio footage of the death metal warriors. They also utilise the framework of video installation to enhance the theatrical staging and emphasise the dialogue between the two screens. This positions the viewer at the centre of the action and in between a perverse musical duel. The incorporation of elements from film and popular culture add to the visual and thematic effect, which also emphasises the continuous borrowing and reworking of cultural products in a mediated culture.

#### *Rhapsody Happens* (2005)

The live experience is also evident in The Kingpins' highly theatrical video installation *Rhapsody Happens*. This work is staged like a live music concert and is broken into a series of short songs or video clips that are original tracks developed by The Kingpins. The three screens provide a framework that recalls a theatrical stage space in which the bearded dancing girls and bikers can perform upon. As Craig Judd suggested in his review of this exhibition: 'The Kingpins have brought to bear their extensive live performance experience by creating a complex theatrical and sculptural environment' (Craig Judd, 2005: 126). The Kingpins also utilise the same structure of their earlier drag shows with the two male performers posing as the lead singers and the two female performers as the back up booty dancers. This is perhaps why Phillip Brophy separated the paragraphs in his catalogue essay into 8 "Tracks" (Phillip Brophy, 2005). In musical terms a rhapsody is a one-movement work that is episodic yet integrated, has a free flowing structure and features a range of highly constructed moods. In *Rhapsody Happens* this is evident in the different moods that are created through the variety of images, sounds and music that are employed.



The opening sound of a frenetic drum beat links the spinning back wheels of the BMX bikes with the shuffling feet of the bearded dancing girls. This follows with the atmospheric electronic sounds that evoke an outer galactic space adventure, with puffs of smoke adding to this obvious illusion. The first songs: *Night Dust* and *Lady of the Night* are a strange mixture of styles and genres combining elements of soft rock and funk. The bikers lip-sync and perform choreographed hand gestures to both of these songs as they ride on an extreme angle up towards the sky. On closer inspection it appears that the bikers are a strange hybrid of two bodies. One body sits on the bike and moves its hands, whilst an upside down mouth sings grotesquely and a set of human elbows are arranged as bunny ears.

The biker's costumes are excessively adorned with overtly masculine paraphernalia from breastplates to hairy wrist adornments and rubber snakes in place of shoulder pads. These kitsch tokens of machismo that one might find in a costume or novelty store suggest the constructed nature of gender and the performative roles that are enacted through the biker genre. These masculine signifiers are offset by the feminised BMX bikes coated in sparkling silver glitter and purple tinsel. The influence of cult biker movies are evident, from the low budget 1970s Australian classics such as *Stone* (1974) and *Cosy Cool* (1977), which were inspired by the American classics such as *Wild Angels* (1966) and *Easy Rider* (1966) to the *Mad Max* trilogy of the 1980s.

The stationary image of the bikers is contrasted with the intense energy of the bearded dancing girls on the central screen. The first track begins with a close up of one of the dancer's bejewelled crutch frenetically gyrating. Her matted brown hair is reminiscent of Tina Turner's infamous lion mane complete with silver strands and glitter. A defining feature of this image is the black T-shirt that the dancer wears over her bikini emblazoned with the slogan, "white girls can't hump". This is of course a play on the film *White Men Can't Jump* (1992) as well as an explicit reference to the artist Richard Bell who donned this same T-shirt when he accepted the prize for his painting *Scientia E. Metaphysica* at the 2003 Telstra Indigenous Art Awards ceremony. This presents a commentary on the Australian art industry and certainly

suggests that cultural products are up for grabs and can be used and reused in multiple contexts.

In the last track the tempo changes completely into a death metal rock verse. The camera zooms in on a close up of the biker's grotesque faces as they lip synch to the words. The relationship between heavy metal music and biker culture is significant as the first mention of "heavy metal" occurred in the classic biker film *Born To Be Wild* (1968). The "heavy metal thunder" refers to the roar of the Harley and heavy metal music has become the abject sound of bikerdom (Brophy, 2005). Once this track finishes the image of the single bearded dancer reappears and begins screaming to a soundtrack we can't hear before she collapses onto the ground. As she screams in anguish the image of her face moves from the centre screen across the left hand side and then shoots through the right hand side wiping out the two images of the bikers and ending the performance.

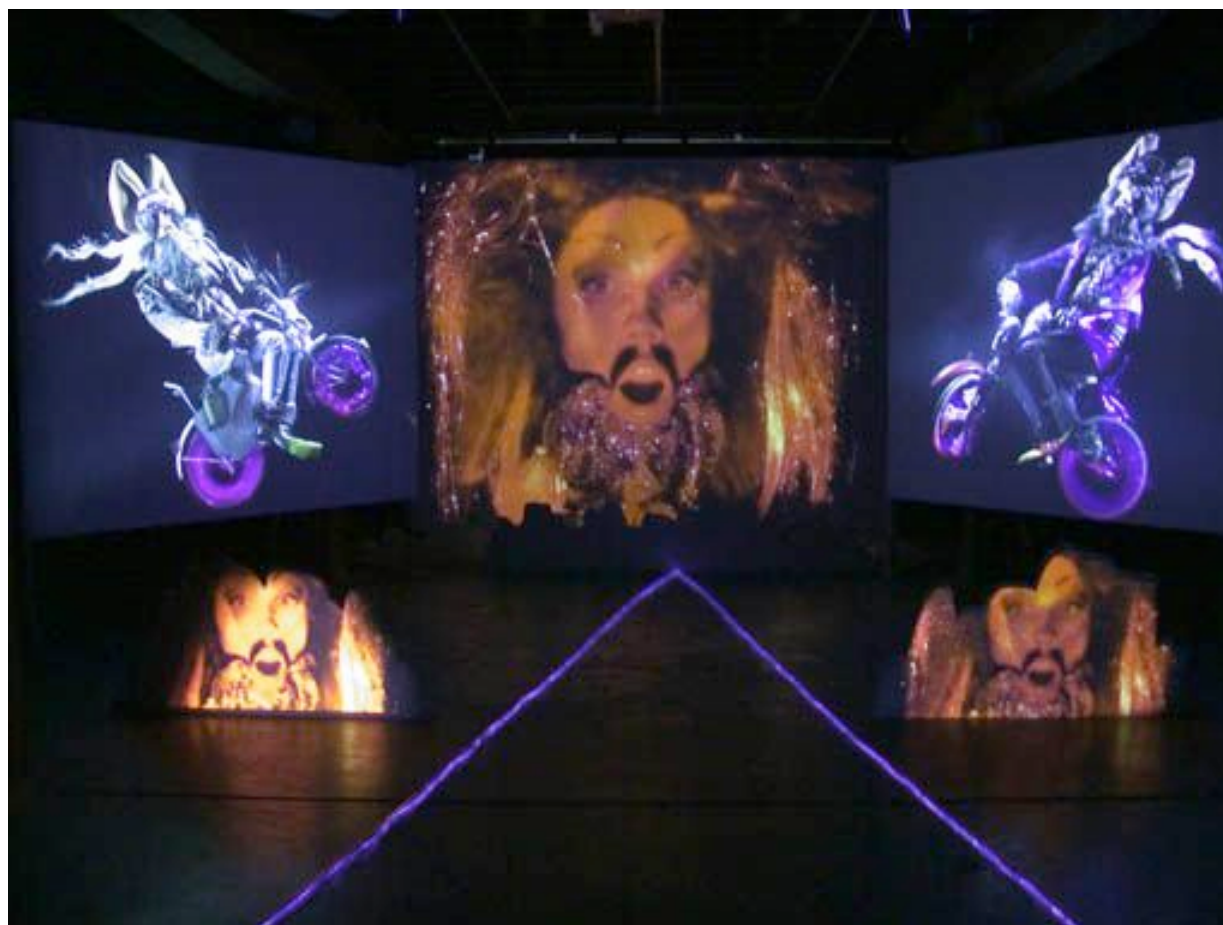
*Rhapsody Happens* is by far the most complex instalment from *The Kingpins* to date, luring the audience into the seedy but also overtly theatrical underworld of bikers and go-go dancers. Elements of popular culture, cinema and biker culture merge into a lurid subversion of gender in which the world of the biker is invoked and explored as a form of drag. The Kingpins are attracted to the grand myth of the hirsute biker robed in his tokens of machismo because he is so specifically and unmistakably male. But perhaps, as Philip Brophy, suggests: 'ultimately, bikers are drag artists. Like any mythology hanging on its heralded costumery, it has to don and put on in order to become' (Brophy, 2005). In *Rhapsody Happens*, *The Kingpins* have donned the robes of bikerdom in an endless strip of references in order to critique and challenge gender roles and cultural iconography. This work reveals the mutual dependence of live and mediated performance in a society that is dominated by mass media, and pushes the boundaries of liveness through the continual reworking and remixing of cultural products.

*Conclusion*

The artistic career of The Kingpins can be defined by the transposition of the different elements of the performative and the theatrical as well as the cinematic and the televisual. They began their performative career in the sub cultural setting of drag king competitions at queer nightclubs where they restaged iconic music video clips. Their subsequent video performances drag the conventions of gender along with the language and structure of music video clips to reproduce the effect of their previous live works. This process of dragging the spontaneous style of the music video clip simulated an immediate experience that brought the viewer spatially closer to the performers. This is particularly evident in *Versus* as the viewer is positioned in the space of the music video clip and its own remediated performance of the rock or hip-hop star. This is significant since the development of the music video has itself been predicated on achieving the sense of “liveness” that defines rock music. Bolter and Grusin suggest that this kind of remediated object is ultimately based on a ‘desire for immediacy’ (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 9).

In *Welcome to the Jingle* and *Rhapsody Happens* this desire for immediacy and sense of liveness is again produced as an effect of dragging the video clip. The live experience is further extended as the viewer is placed at the centre of the action in an immersive installation. In *Welcome to the Jingle* the viewer is placed in between the two screens and becomes an active participant in the duel between the green suited athletes and the brightly clad rockers; while in *Rhapsody Happens* the viewer experiences the performance via the three life size screens that are reminiscent of a proscenium arch or a stage for a live music concert. It would seem that whilst these works engage with a number of cinematic and televisual references they are also directed at a physical and sensorial mode of spectatorship, which is most closely related to theatre. The work of The Kingpins is testament to the mutual dependence of live and mediatised performance and pushes the boundaries of what constitutes a “live” performance in the age of information.

## Images



1. *Rhapsody Happens*, The Kingpins, 2005, installation view Artspace, Sydney. Courtesy the artists, Artspace and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney.



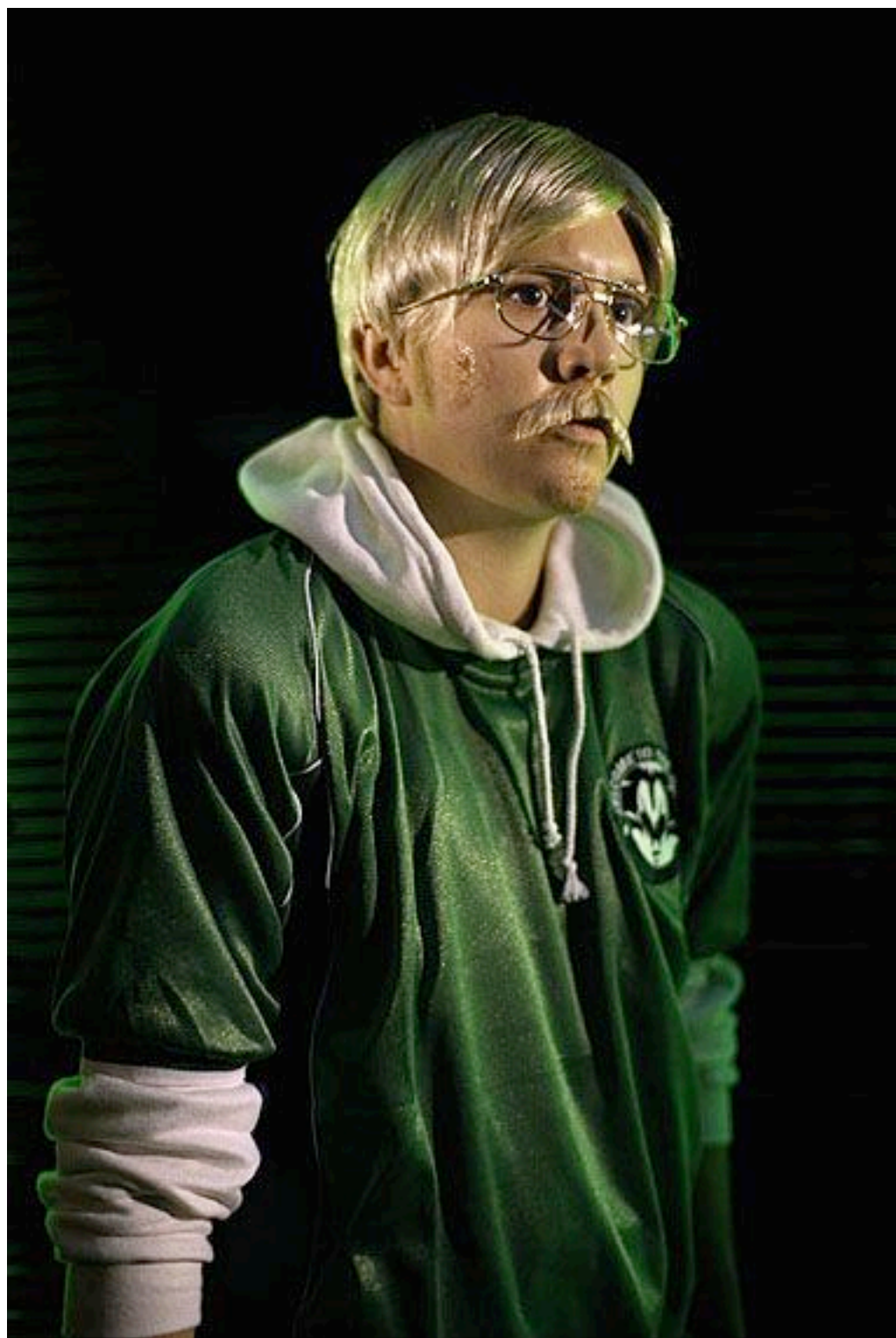
2. *Versus* (production still), The Kingpins 2002. Digital video transferred to DVD. Courtesy the artists and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney.



3. *Versus* (production still), The Kingpins 2002. Digital video transferred to DVD. Courtesy the artists and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney.



4. *Welcome to the Jingle* (production still), The Kingpins 2003. 2 channel digital video transferred to DVD. Courtesy the artists and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney.

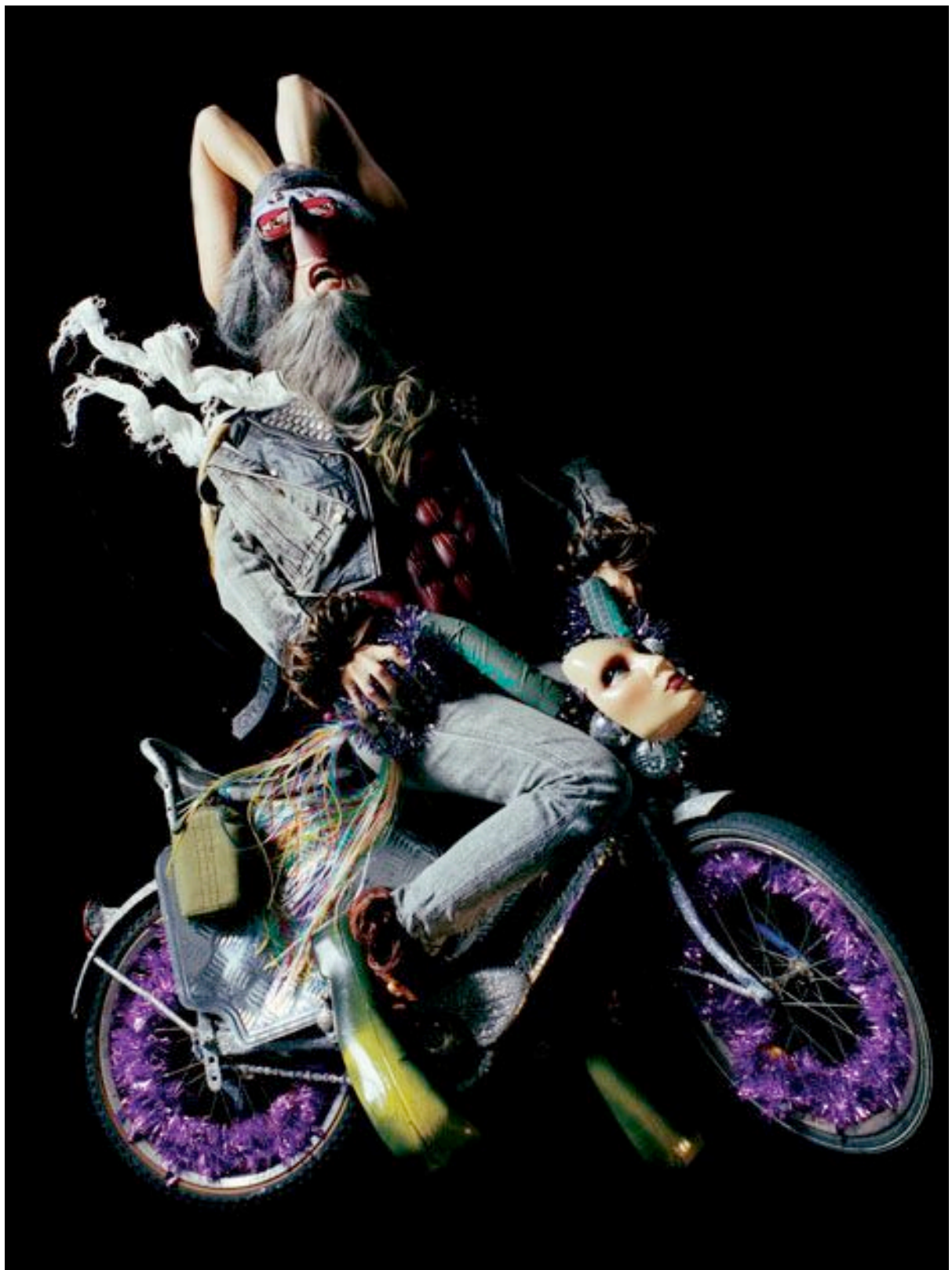


5. *Welcome to the Jingle* (production still), *The Kingpins* 2003. 2 channel digital video transferred to DVD. Courtesy the artists and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney.





6. *Rhapsody Happens* (production still), The Kingpins, 2005, photo, Liz Ham. 5 channel digital video transferred to DVD. Courtesy the artists and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney.



7. *Rhapsody Happens* (production still), The Kingpins, 2005, photo, Liz Ham. 5 channel digital video transferred to DVD. Courtesy the artists and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney.

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