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## Rules of Engagement: Keeping One's Feet On the (Common) Ground

According to the official royal wedding website, she answers to both names and has never expressed a preference. She grew up using Catherine with her family, but goes by Kate in her working life. "Her name's Catherine, and I think we've got to get used to the idea," Dickie Arbiter, former press secretary to the queen, tells ABC. "Let's make it regal now. Kate's a bit rough, isn't it?"  
— Ashley Peskoe, *Is It Kate Or Catherine?* ABC News, 8 March 2011

Catherine or Kate, the artist(s) formerly known as Catherine Sagin (*née* Fiona Mail) would seem to be embracing an identity crisis. Having undergone more name-changes than a high school garage band trying to hook their first paid gig, the duo have shown a blatant disregard for branding consistency and instead have opted to keep internet search engines on their toes.

These restless naming revisions, each an alias for the collaborative practice of Kate Woodcroft and Catherine Sagin, are part of the duo's broader strategy for deliberately disrupting the distinctions between individual and shared performative identities. By constantly reframing and refocusing the dynamics of their partnership, Woodcroft and Sagin also engage in an ongoing reassessment of the popular paradigms of creative collaboration, and the basic tenets upon which these collaborations are founded.

A core strategy for the duo is to orchestrate activities or situations that allow them to enact unscripted scenes of tension and transference. This tactic was perhaps most flamboyantly deployed in *Duel* (2010), a live fencing performance staged outside Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art, accompanied by a selection of sinister sparring videos in which the violent, jarring rhythm of clashing and drawing back, heightened by scabbling sounds of attack, is seen from multiple perspectives. Sagin won the live match 10–8, her prize the naming rights to the collaboration for a period of one year.

Such cycles of victory and loss are recurrently played out within Catherine or Kate's practice: as each success requires a corresponding failure, the pair's roles are necessarily both competitive and complementary. The emergence of a winner underscores the interchangeability of roles within the partnership — each conquest is implicitly accompanied by the disclaimer "on this occasion..." — and ensures that this struggle for dominance is manifested internally, so that the surplus values of success and failure are absorbed by the whole, cementing its cohesion and survival as a unit. This Darwinian strategy pulls the duo together as they repeatedly enact the ritual of splitting apart.

*Survey* (2011) retains the competitive structure of *Duel*, but abandons skill-based conflict in favour of a makeshift beauty contest arbitrated according to the personal tastes of a series of service station attendants. During a residency in Iceland, twenty attendants were approached by the duo and asked to choose which of the two they considered the most physically attractive. The choice of location for this performance is significant, as service stations are points of intersection and transit: a brief encounter; a necessary transaction; a site of familiar routine. Their placement marks the traffic and movement of peoples: more than that, the points at which they are estimated to run out of fuel, or become hungry or tired. If the journey "describes a basic situation, perhaps the basic situation, of man in the world," the service station is representative of a performative space in which motion is ceased in order to recalculate one's progress and context. (1)

The quest to determine the 'better looking' of the pair is both absurd and heartbreakingly personal: like most incidents of deadpan or slapstick humour, this ostensibly harmless question masks an underlying cruelty in its latent potential for public humiliation or rejection. In casually voicing such an awkward request, Catherine or Kate manipulate a fundamental human anxiety — the need to feel desired — to demonstrate the arbitrary and futile ways by which we attempt to define ourselves and others.

Yet instead of dismissing these failed and incomplete systems of identification, Catherine or Kate champion them as valid working methodologies. With a tongue-in-cheek nod to the dominant role of social theory in redefining cultural studies in the twentieth century, the duo undertake social 'experiments' that embrace spontaneity and chance, while lacking any firm parameters or concerted means of scientific control. Traces of their performances are then filtered into the gallery by various means — photography, video, sound, text — and the avoidance of a fixed documentary procedure complements the nomadic nature of the pair's practice.

These records often assume the guise of disinterested documentation, but in fact are full of gaps and potential misreadings. Represented by a series of twin-framed photographs with an accompanying text tallying the results, *Survey* bears little resemblance to a textbook sociological study and instead reads like a Nordic parody of Ruscha's 'road works', with a slice of heavily sanitised Kinsey Report on the side. By collapsing documentation's impossible claim to objectivity, Catherine or Kate redeem its status as performative space in its own right.

In addition to corrupting the documentary form, Catherine or Kate interfere with the legacies of Performance Art and Conceptualism through the tropes of humour and romanticism. They have been known to forge the public personae of creative double acts such as Harrison and Wood and, to a lesser extent, Gilbert and George; and the deadpan delivery of their performances are often offset by a charismatic or romantic element that distances their work from the morbid dryness of orthodox Conceptual Art, and aligns it more closely with the practices of artists such as Bas Jan Ader. These elements are usually an inherent component of the chosen action, or the performance site itself: a fencing duel; lone gas stations; the Icelandic wilderness; even, in an earlier work, the awkward pathos of art world networking (basically speed dating without the luxury of furniture).

Attacking closer to home, the duo also appropriate the much-prized and mythologised Australian values of 'mateship', 'fairness' and 'larrikinism' for their own personal ends. *Gorillas in the Mist* (2011) taps into this latter characteristic: a fixed-camera view stares blankly at a desolate panorama, until some throaty yells announce the passing of a mostly-nude Catherine (or Kate) as she crashes across the empty, freezing wilderness, channelling all the brevity and confusion of a Yeti sighting.

A boisterous play on the tradition of the nude framed by the landscape, *Gorillas in the Mist* employs shock and amusement to parody the archetype of the masculine artist-hero who endures physical suffering in the service of his craft, recasting this supposedly noble, selfless gesture as an exhibitionist prank. Catherine or Kate regularly utilise humour — particularly slapstick, hoaxes and pranks — to undercut the viewer's expectations of classical Performance Art and reinforce their visual and linguistic games. As a collaborative pair, they invite deliberate comparison to the well-established model of the comedy double act comprised of a straight man and a foil. Accordingly, the tension between victory and loss previously described can also be understood through the interlocking motifs of the set-up and the fall.

In its most basic composition, the set-up forces a certain temporary situation, which by its unstable nature cannot be sustained and is therefore resolved by a fall. Meaning is generated from the interplay between the straight man and the foil — each role played interchangeably by Catherine or Kate — who provide pressure and relief by turn. Through this structure, works such as *Survey* and *Gorillas in the Mist* bring to the fore the fusion of regulation, ritual and spontaneity that characterises all human activity, and also maintain the formula for the performances' social dimension: the artist's role is to stage an opportunity, which the viewer or participant then takes active responsibility for completing. The social function of art is thus made integral to the work, as the work is explicitly unable to function without some form of public context or participation: we are always complicit.

The double act's tactics of convergence and divergence, of "camouflage, conspiracy, and mimicry," are intended to not only challenge notions of shared identity, but also divert our attention from our complicity.(2) The roles allocated to the public seem inviting and nonrestrictive, but are in fact carefully sabotaged: the fencing audience is witness to an obscure sport about which they likely have no specialist knowledge; the service station attendants are drawn out of their comfort zone by an overly familiar request from a stranger; the drive-by viewers of *Gorillas in the Mist* are denied not only the context of the act, but also the act itself, which gains its full value from being performed live. As audience or participants, our amusement — our entertainment — can never be entirely comfortable. We are being set up to fall right alongside Catherine or Kate.

### Marianne Templeton

- (1) O. F. Bollnow, *Human Space*, Hyphen Press, London, 2011, 52. Transl. Christine Shuttleworth.
- (2) Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in art from conceptualism to postmodernism*, 2001, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 199.

Catherine or Kate would like to thank Mark Webb, Charles Robb, Joseph (Josephine Break-yours) Breikers, Mike Riddle, Channon Goodwin, Skaffell Centre for Visual Art and participating service station attendants for their help in the lead up to this exhibition.



This project has received financial assistance from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.



This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.