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## Jimmy Robert: Draw the line

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flourished. Perhaps the most peculiar characteristic of artistic labour is the surprise of success.

Once clear, the line between work and non-work has become tenuous, and it is all too easy to take a dim view of it in the context of artistic production, leading to the kind of thinking that declares that your kid could do that, or despairing that your tax dollars are going to waste. But at the same time, those of us with a vested interest are often ready to valorize these efforts on principle. Are we fully honest when declaring that professional artists *work* “in order to bring about meaningful and critical discourse,” as Higashino concludes, when the industry still turns so abruptly on cool factor, and when the feedback loop of eyes and screens is the closest it has ever been? That the pursuit of art can be dreary does not preclude its potential to be sexy. An artist’s choice of action is not reducible to the act, especially when the product aligns so well with the zeitgeist.

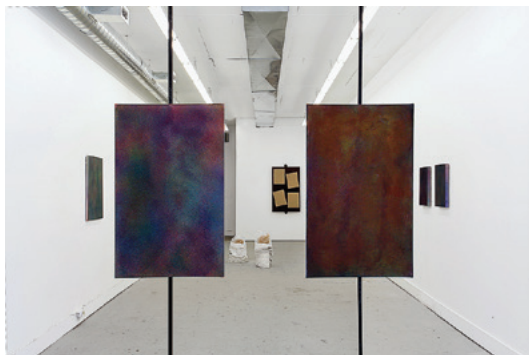
But Knowles seems above all to be honest — honest in his self-criticism, his complicity, even in his insincerity. The exhibition feels risky. Its punny title suggests a joke, but if one exists, it’s the kind that cuts a bit close to the quick. It may not be possible to produce discourse without also producing a commodity — the experience economy subsumes artistic endeavours with the same alacrity, be you professional or amateur — but Knowles’ deep engagement with that process remains astoundingly informative. ×

**Benjamin Bruneau** is an artist and critic based in Toronto.

## Jimmy Robert: *Draw the Line* The Power Plant, Toronto Jun. 22 – Sept. 2, 2013 by Milena Tomic

Jimmy Robert’s *Draw the Line*, an exhibition and one-time performance specially commissioned by The Power Plant in Toronto, is an exercise in withholding. *Untitled (Reprise)* (2010), the first work on show, offers glimpses of a Japanese dancer whose cream-coloured jacket, black hair and pants, and white scarf are visually juxtaposed with a vivid outdoor setting. Of the five archival inkjet prints that feature the dancer in different poses, however, none afford a clear view: four of the narrow photographs have been slipped through slits in two conjoined fibreboard tables, while the fifth is draped over the edge of one table in the manner of a post-minimalist sculpture. Underneath the table, white A4 paper spills on the floor, every page blank. In contrast to the flatness of these pages, the inkjet prints become dynamic, dance-like shapes, bending and curving the images beyond legibility, thus emphasizing the medium’s limitations. Just as the dancer’s exact pose cannot be seen when the images acquire a sculptural dimension, the dance itself eludes capture by a camera that destroys the continuity of the durational event, cleaving one moment from the next.

Turning the bend of the L-shaped upstairs gallery, visitors could hear the soft sound of pencil lead being drawn across a page emanating from two speakers in the upper-left and upper-right corners of the room. Just as Robert withholds the visual result of that activity, little remained of *Draw the Line* (2013), a 20-minute performance that saw him using a single roll of paper to determine the form of his graceful movements. Rolled up, the paper functioned as a prop in the dance; unrolled and taped to the floor, it provided a surface upon which to trace his movements. For anyone experiencing the exhibition for the first time after its end at 7:20 pm on June 27, the initial impression was one of arriving too late on the scene. In a practice where the canon of body and performance art is constantly present, Robert cultivates precisely this effect. Having spent the last few years mining such classics of contemporary dance and performance as Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A* (1966) and Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* (1964), the Guadelupe-born, Brussels-based artist now turns to Carolee Schneemann’s *Up To and Including Her Limits* (1973–76), a performance series that saw Schneemann strapping herself into a leather harness hung from the ceiling by manila rope. Prosthetically extending her arms with



Jon Knowles, *I'm only in it for the Manet*, installation view (foreground left): *Roman & Williams #1*, 2013, acrylic polymer on raw canvas [50.8 x 121.9 cm], steel gasoline pipe & components; foreground right: *Roman & Williams #2*, 2013, acrylic polymer on gessoed canvas (50.8 x 121.9 cm), steel gasoline pipe & components). PHOTO: JIMMY LIMIT; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST



Jimmy Robert, *Untitled (Reprise)*, installation view, 2010, archival inkjet prints, sheets of A4 paper, and medium-density fiberboard table with beech veneer. PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE DIANA STIGTER

crayons to accumulate marks on the floor-to-wall canvases, Schneemann answered Jackson Pollock's masculinist flinging of paint with a feminist surrender of control, an unmooring of the body in space. Where a clothed Pollock stood upright, the nude Schneemann floated in the air, her whole body a purveyor of traces. As expected, Robert did not re-enact her "score" in any recognizable way. Rather, he manipulated the score like a sculptural material, building on its foundation both formally and thematically.

Everywhere the textual and the corporeal commingled. Near the centre of the gallery space, *Draw the Line*'s prop and dancing surface remained for the duration of the show, secured to the floor with red-and-white barricade tape. In place of any trace of Robert's movements, scuff marks eventually covered the once-pristine white paper—the surface "overwritten" by the anonymous movements made by visitors through the gallery space. Likewise, rather than a video recording of Schneemann's original performances, a reproduced drawing of them was tacked to the wall, a product of Robert's collaboration with Glasgow-based artist Kate Davis for which they rendered a well-known performance document in pencil. However, Davis and Robert subtracted most of the accumulated marks and, ironically, every vestige of written language visible in Henrik Gaard's photograph of Schneemann in action (phrases like "I am hungry," "out of sync," et cetera). They also added two bolts of red tape emanating from her crayons.

Like the barricade tape in *Draw the Line*, this brightly coloured detail might signal a barrier, a limit, an entreaty to stop. However, because the play of signification does *not* stop, Robert has admitted to feeling apprehensive about the role of language in defining his work, about the "necessity of returning to language in order to define a practice that highlights a lack of thereof..."<sup>1</sup> After all, the blank A4 sheets strewn under the tables in *Untitled (Reprise)* are not *really* blank; their emptiness is already a textual plenitude. Throughout the exhibition, referential depth was coupled with constant entreaties to return to the *surface*. Here, surface could be the white paper primed to receive marks, the glossy exterior of the photograph-turned-sculptural material, or even the exterior of the body, skin, that superficial yet inescapable marker of identity.

Indeed, Robert's art can be spoken about in terms of several contemporary concerns: first, the resurgent interest in the use of formalized scores and instructions in 1960s and '70s art; second, the increasing anxiety over how ephemeral, time-based practices are entering history and being claimed institutionally; third, the continuing importance of gender and identity politics in these discussions; and fourth, the prevalence of *repeat performance* in a culture where gestures and phrases are as commodi-

fied as consumer objects. These threads all converge in a practice that sees re-enactment as less about rote reproduction than embodied incorporation that is simultaneously an attempt at reduction. During his 20-minute performance on June 27, Robert recited in a very modified form Schneemann's stated intention to strip away the 10 "forms and dimensions" found in her earlier work, including "performance," "a fixed audience," "rehearsals," "performers," "fixed durations," "sequences," "conscious intentions," "improvisations," "technical cues," and "a central metaphor of theme." "No to appropriation, no to re-enactment," Robert announced—somewhat ironically, considering that he himself works in this paradigm—in the flyer visitors were invited to take. In this sense, Robert re-posed Schneemann's final question in today's terms, as if reflecting upon the impossibility of stripping away all lingering traces of text and signification: *What's left?*×

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## Mana Rouholamini: *Marcher le texte/Walking the Text* Ottawa School of Art Gallery, Orleans Campus, Ottawa Apr. 26–May 26, 2013 by Petra Halkes

The suave display of Mana Rouholamini's text-based exhibition gives at first an impression of professional correctness reminiscent of a library or archive. This sense of order is soon halted by the realization that languages, books, sentences, words and pictures have all been rearranged here. Working from written notes and photocopies, the Ottawa-based artist unravelled a series of books in French, English and Persian by "freeing" a number of words and sentences from their pages. After enlarging, transforming and recombining snippets of texts, Rouholamini printed her assemblages in horizontal strips, which she then attached to a long, painted band on a wall. This stripe became an invitation to walk along her path of words. Adding to the idea of an urban



Jimmy Robert,  
*Draw the Line*,  
2013. Live  
performance.  
PHOTO: HENRY  
CHAN. IMAGE  
COURTESY OF  
THE POWER  
PLANT

1 Stefania Palumbo, "System of Touch [Interview with Jimmy Robert]," *Mousse*, no. 19 (June 2009). <http://www.mousse magazine.it/articolo.mm?id=93> [date accessed September 1, 2013].

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