

RESTAGING POTENTIALITY

On Sandy Gibbs' *The paradox of failure: sport, competition and contemporary art*



Sandy Gibbs, *The Swimming Race (Mexico City)* 2018. 4min 10sec Duration. Single channel Digital Video / Sound

As a child, Sandy Gibbs dreamed of being an Olympic swimmer. When fellow Cantabrian Tui Shipston was selected to represent New Zealand at the 1968 Mexico Olympics, Sandy saw her as a hero – even convincing her mum to buy her togs that matched Tui's. When the results came in, Tui had come seventh (out of eight), and it hit Sandy hard. To her, it seemed “as if my own failure had also been acted out in that swimming pool”.¹ After the race, Gibbs' hero-worship of Shipston soon faltered, as did her own fantasy of Olympic glory. Gibbs' exhibition at RM gallery, staged in April of 2021, is the culmination of a project focusing largely on attempts to restage the 1968 Mexico Olympics women's 400 metres individual medley final with all the original contenders, giving Sandy's childhood hero another chance at the gold.

Disaster struck early on: when Sandy rang Tui, she was met with a quick dismissal. More than that, Tui was unwilling even to hear Gibbs' proposal, responding to her introduction with “I don't do that sort of thing”. For Gibbs at the time, this was a devastating realisation: that there was no hope of restaging the race with Tui. Although this initial rejection seemed to have undone the project before it had even begun, it instead opened up the project's potential, catalysing it through failure. Sent spinning by the realisation that her original idea couldn't go ahead as planned, Gibbs improvised and videoed herself restaging the call a month later. The work that results is a slightly out-of-focus video of Gibbs as she forces herself to relive the moment of rejection over and over, each time changing her wording slightly or critiquing her tone and awkwardness. She wanted to create a document of that call; however, as she tried to recall what was said, she couldn't find the words.

“Suddenly it was gone, as absent and elusive as Tui had been.”²

1 Sandy Gibbs, ‘The Paradox of Failure: Sport, Competition, and Contemporary Art’ (P.H.D Thesis, Melbourne, Deakin University, 2021), 6.

2 Ibid., 53.

The video is somehow both a restaging of that call and a rehearsal. As Sandy goes over what was said, what might have been said, and what could have been said, the call shifts from a document to an artist trying to come to terms with rejection. Through repetition and repositioning of wording and approach, Sandy holds that space open until it “builds to a denouement of sorts”, and we realise alongside Sandy that the outcome of the call won’t change. Tui would never say ‘yes’. Sandy writes about Recalling Tui:

My disappointment and failure of never having made it as an Olympic swimmer and now the double dismay of not being able to enlist my childhood hero is etched on my face. And in a further indignity, it is seen by the audience as being absolutely hilarious.³



Sandy Gibbs, *Recalling Tui* 2016. 10min Duration. Single channel Digital Video / Sound

The humour in this work is intentionally bathetic; there is no resolution to the call – Tui never picks up.⁴ Speaking in the present tense, Sandy displaces us into an anxious space of waiting. It’s strangely familiar, that weird kind of deferred optimism mixed in with dismay – maybe if I find the right words, I could call her back.

This moment marked a turning point in the project, as it went from “being about failure” to being “constituted by failure”. Despite seemingly falling at the first hurdle, Gibbs never abandoned the idea to restage the swimming race. Instead, she explores how this rejection could open things up, and redefine the idea’s potentiality in failure. Following on from *Recalling Tui*, she embarked on a quest to track down and enlist the other original competitors. This took the project to Germany, the UK, and Mexico, where all the original swimmers either declined to participate or proved to be elusive. Two possible leads dissolved when a private investigator Gibbs hired to find Marianne Seydel and Sabine Steinbach eventually wrote to say that neither swimmer wanted to be contacted, and that he couldn’t pass on their details due to German privacy laws. No further attempts at convincing other swimmers to participate in the race were successful: the eight swimmers are present in the project only through their absence. Gibbs’ failed attempts

3 Ibid., 55.

4 *Bathos* can be described as an anticlimax, normal when shifting from a lofty or grand style to an overtly silly or ridiculous one. In *Recalling Tui* and other works in *The Paradox of Failure*, the anticlimax occurs through a repetition of actions that reveal their absurd nature.

to make contact revealed new pathways and strategies fell outside the purview of a simple re-enactment. This is the specific potential of the work: the potential to fall apart at any moment. For potential is not just about what can happen, but what cannot.⁵ As the paths towards the realisation of her initial idea closed in, other paths appeared, allowing the project to contort and shift in its response.

The works in *The Paradox of Failure...* are a series of sometimes tangential, oftentimes humorous investigations that “embody the critical potential of failure”.⁶ Gibbs frames these works as restaged events for a camera (as opposed to a live audience). For Gibbs restaging differs significantly from re-enactment or reperformance. Re-enactments/reperformances deal in the observation and reconstruction of historical events and, as such, follow a predetermined script that narrativise and reaffirm specific outcomes as being historical. In a re-enactment, traces of the past are remade in the present, and in a suspension of disbelief past and present events become displaced in time. Re-enactments are opportunities to revisit and redefine aspects of the past, linking them into the present. As a re-enactment unfolds, specific actions and situations can be reassessed from the vantage point of history; we know how this will end. Restaging, however, is somewhat looser, more akin to a rematch. Here, a past event is held in memory (remade) and, as the basis for a new set of actions and events, a restaging might have wildly different consequences.

For Gibbs, the strategy to restage events allows for a more undetermined outcome. Instead of a “faithful” re-creation of the events that unfolded in that swimming pool fifty years ago, Gibbs’ idea was to offer a re-match – a chance to settle the score. This language has more crossover with sport than performance art, and as such is limber enough to allow for more surprising results. Gibbs invites reinterpretation, inauthenticity, and ‘not quite rightness’ in her restaging of the event.

Through her sometimes homespun recreations of uniforms, togs, costumes, and props, Gibbs nods to the 1968 Olympic games whilst making no claims for exacting historical accuracy. The costumes and props in the videos *Space Girl Dance*, *Lighting an Old Flame*, and *How to Wear a Disguise* have a makeshift quality, which Sandy describes in terms of amateur theatrics.⁷ In *Lighting an Old Flame*, Gibbs runs triumphantly up a steep Wellington walkway holding a cardboard torch aloft. Upon reaching a small landing, she positions the torch towards a cauldron (also cardboard), causing cardboard flames to appear after a jump cut. With a shift in footing, a few helium balloons are released in celebration. Although knowing, hammed up and hilarious, this work doesn’t feel ironic or cynical. Instead, it has the sincerity of cosplay, a loving recreation by a superfan. These restagings open up sites of exception, in which the ‘normal’ world becomes a precarious mirror to Gibbs’ childhood fandom of Tui Shipston and dreams of Olympic Glory.⁸

The swimming costumes in *The Swimming Race* and Tui’s Olympic outfit seen in *Stadium Walk* were made specifically for the project and based on blurry photographs and footage.⁹ These costumes feel somehow different from those in *Lighting an Old Flame* or *Space Girl Dance*, more like exacting reproductions. Perhaps this is because they feel less like a costume and more like a uniform. When we see Gibbs in these costumes, she is more serious and subdued than in the other works. In a way she is closer to *Recalling Tui* in these moments, back at the beginning of the project, in that indeterminate space between success and failure. When Gibbs wears these costumes in the Olympic stadium and at the pool in Mexico City, she steps beyond the fourth wall and into a different place and time. In these videos, Gibbs almost becomes Tui Shipston, taking her place as contender and, in doing so, rewrites herself into the history of the race. In donning these uniforms Gibbs shifts from putting on a disguise to embodying her childhood hero.

5 Giorgio Agamben, ‘On Potentiality’, in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999), 177.

6 Sandy Gibbs, ‘The Paradox of Failure’, 3.

7 Ibid., 60.

8 Ibid., 62.

9 These video works are projected onto perpendicular walls of RM Gallery and play simultaneously, their soundtracks bleeding over one another. In this arrangement and in their production quality, they have a different, more cinematic quality to the other videos that play on screens mounted around the edge of the space.

In 2018, after much planning and preparation, Gibbs travelled to Mexico City to the site of the swimming race. Eight swimmers in their late 50s, 60s and 70s (including Gibbs) donned replica togs and stepped up to the starting blocks in the same order as the 1968 race.

In a text accompanying the exhibition, the scene is set: It's early in the morning, and she waits on a corner across from her hotel. "Slow-moving convoys of armed police cars" cruise by as she waits for a car to take her and her small production crew to Alberca Olímpica Francisco Márquez – the Olympic swimming pool where Tui Shipston raced in the 1968 Mexico Olympics. "In this interminable wait, time had slowed down: a minute felt like an hour."¹⁰ We see people waiting only once in any of Gibbs' video works: when the swimmers wait for the starting gun before *The Swimming Race*. However, this time of waiting seems to inform the entire project. Perhaps in these moments before a race, things feel the most uncertain. In the moments before a race, you submit yourself to the real potential of failure.

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