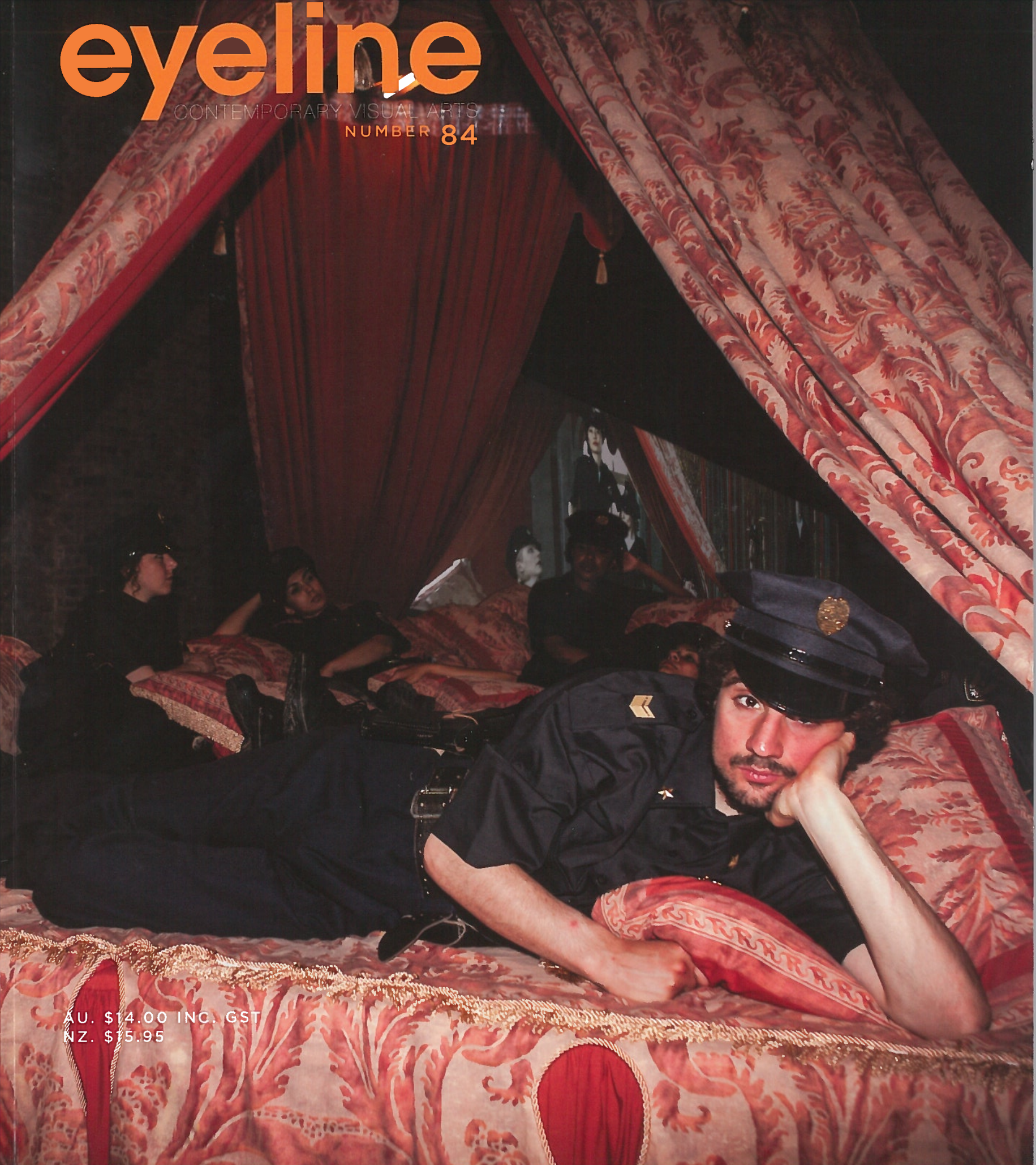


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A Working Script in Shorthand: Leigh-Ann Pahapill
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Expectation is principally a matter of norms rooted in experience, whether taken from art or life: what is conventionally said and done in the circumstances; how things are supposed to happen.¹

Leigh-Ann Pahapill's video work *A Working Script in Shorthand*, recently exhibited at Screen Space (Melbourne),² consists of a pair of actors reading to camera. The text being spoken is not a play, or some other literary form, but a chapter from Martin Meisel's book *How Plays Work*, which concerns the structural condition of the audience within theatrical production. Pahapill's work plays between several different genres or forms of address—the spoken monologue, the critical commentary, the video installation, the reading group, the theatre workshop—each of which call into being a certain idea of an audience. The work develops, in an overt manner, on the performative nature of artistic production and reception, and the articulation of spaces, actual and virtual, within this process; concerns which seem to be ongoing in Pahapill's practice.³

The actors voice Meisel's words as if they are giving a preliminary reading of a script, as is also



Leigh-Ann Pahapill, *A Working Script in Shorthand*. Installation view, Screen Space, Melbourne. Photograph Kyle Weise. Courtesy the artist.

implied in the work's title. This reading, or rehearsal, seems to be about hearing, or listening to, the text. It appears uncertain what will happen to it when it is read aloud. Indeed the actors do not manage to render Meisel's lines with sufficient ease to suggest that they are in a position of mastery in relation to his arguments, but rather follow the exposition with a degree of trepidation, or an uncertainty as to where it is taking them. The labour of translating the academic text into spoken form is underlined by the moments in which lines from existent plays are quoted by the

author, prompting the speakers to modify their delivery. The benches in the gallery space, which seem to match those which are occupied in the video, clearly demarcate a space in which the visitor will take up the position of audience. The viewer becomes both an audience to the actors' reading, and a co-audience (with the actors) to Meisel's words.

Meisel's text is concerned with the process, and politics, of the identification of the audience as a necessary protagonist within the system of theatre. This identification relies upon, and is always implicit in, the partitioning of the *mise-en-scène*, and is explicitly reflected upon within certain theatrical examples. This occurs sometimes through an expansion of the space of the representation, to include the auditorium and the spectators which fill it.⁴ This sort of gesture of inclusion is suggested in Pahapill's work through the actors' direct address to camera, and in terms of complementarity between the performing and viewing spaces. But it is simultaneously undermined by the interruption in space and time implied by the video medium. This subtly picks at the fact that, while in some sense the audience's 'presence' is a necessary condition of the artwork, at the same time their presence in its particularity is a matter of indifference. The audience is therefore manifested as a number of possible phantasms or silhouettes, multiplied by the various modes of address noted above. Pahapill's installation forces us to consider the audience as something in the fabric of the genre which we are lured towards,

but which ultimately we cannot identify with as a stable condition; what we might call the 'audience-function'.⁵

Meisel suggests that for a theatrical production to succeed it must pull together its potentially heterogeneous audience to function as a single body.⁶ In contrast Pahapill's work complicates this logic by suggesting a coexistence of audiences, from Meisel himself as the first 'reader', to the performers, and beyond. These audiences do not simply remain part of the text's past, but are spectres which are projected into the space of viewing, in the context of another possible audience. In watching Pahapill's work we are at once subject to the same sort of seduction elaborated by Meisel—to identify with the audience as is implied by the performed text—and pushed into awareness

of the pretence of this gesture. To this end Pahapill's video points neither to the simple passivity, or possible mobilisation, of the audience, as has been striven for in modern theatre,⁷ but rather to the audience as a point of complexity and continuous instability.

Stephen Palmer

Notes

1. Martin Meisel, *How Plays Work*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007, p.114.
2. Leigh-Ann Pahapill is an artist who lives in Toronto, and is Associate Professor of Art at Bowling Green State University, Ohio.
3. Of particular note in this regard is Pahapill's exhibition *Likewise, as technical experts, but not (at all) by way of culture*, first exhibited at Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Florida, 2012.
4. For example, Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* in which the audi-

ence occupies the part of the Paris have come to the asylum to view S 5. Here I am evoking what Foucault the authorial figure projected by same thing as the life of the empiri text is attributed. See Michel Fou in *Language, counter-memory, p* Press, New York, 1977, pp.113-138

6. Meisel, op. cit., p.128.

7. The complicity or passivity of gets of two well known attempts to Western theatrical tradition: Artau Brecht's Epic Theatre. Jacques Rar audience passivity which is assume some extent in Meisel's text) in *Jacipated Spectator*, Verso, London,