

Jimmy Robert

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

Jimmy Robert subjects paper to a series of operations that read like an excerpt from Richard Serra's famous *Verb List*: to rip, to append, to curl, to stuff, to crumple, to fold, to hang, to lean, to drop. Sturdy ink-jet prints, various paper stocks, found posters, bits of fabric, masking tape, and drawn elements appear collaged together or isolated, in ways that invariably force attention to the sculptural qualities of what we would normally think of as two-dimensional surfaces. If paper hangs on the wall, as it did in Robert's recent installation of *Untitled (Mickael)*, 2006—part of "Vis-à-vis," the artist's first major museum show in the US—it curves or folds into space, departing from the vertical plane. In *Untitled (homage to the young boy...)*, 2007, the work was appended so low that it slid onto the floor, to meet several sheets of paper that were lying flat beneath it. Elsewhere, a handful of elaborately folded or rolled constructions had been propped up into fragile quasi-figurative sculptures (all untitled and dated 2010); that these featured photographs of the artist's own body only underscored that they were to be taken as surrogates. However, Robert's "paper objects" (perhaps a better description than "works on paper") are more than a compendium of materials and gestures. Frequently in his practice, an initial operation is photographed in its own right, as was the case with *Untitled*, 2005, which depicts the crumpling of a newspaper photograph of a pre-scandal Dominique Strauss-Kahn, thereby emphasizing the materiality (and sculptural potential) of the new, unblemished ink-jet print. Such a process yields a set of art objects that are also events—pieces that Robert sites between the "work on paper" and performance.



Curated by Naomi Beckwith, “Vis-à-vis” linked the paper objects of this Guadeloupe-born, Brussels-based artist to his many projects incorporating bodily movement—frequently his own. Relayed primarily through videos and films, these performances likewise nod to many artist forebears—Yoko Ono, Yvonne Rainer, Bas Jan Ader, and Lorna Simpson, among others—while also sampling dance, theater, and popular culture. In the video *Different Guise*, 2006, for example, the artist crumples pieces of paper, using them to stuff his T-shirt until the excess begins to slide out. At the opening, this was also evident in a reprise of the 2011 performance *Counter-relief (CCS Bard)*, with dancer Maria Hassabi. For this live piece, the two executed choreographed interactions using elements that had accrued during previous iterations: wooden slabs, a 16-mm film, and a text. By contrast, *Non-scene*, 2008, was not put to new use, but stood as a kind of relic: a brown fiberboard stage supporting a monitor displaying the recording of a performance (at Wiels Centre for Contemporary Art in Brussels four years earlier) in which the now-vacant platform had been used. Typical of Robert’s layered references, in the video we see a shirtless, androgynous performer drawing in rapid strokes on a vertical wall of the structure while another calmly recites a meandering reflection on May 1968.

If Robert “reconsiders identity politics,” as argued by the curator in the catalogue, he does so drastically, with almost no trace of the confrontational performance art of the 1990s. Instead, “politics” occurs on the most intimate and minuscule register of specific bodies set in relation to their immediate environments. He also implies, in the spirit of political theorist Jane Bennett, the ascription of agency to that which used to be understood as the artist’s “materials” or “media.” In Robert’s video *Untitled (Folding 2)*, 2012, two hands fold, unfold, and refold a photograph of the artist into a work of origami. The traditional folding technique is not an end, however, but a means; there is no finished product. A perpetual dynamism is outlined between the body and the malleable objects around it: Each acts upon, and is acted upon by, the other.

—Daniel Quiles