

Along white lines

Sylvia Schwenk

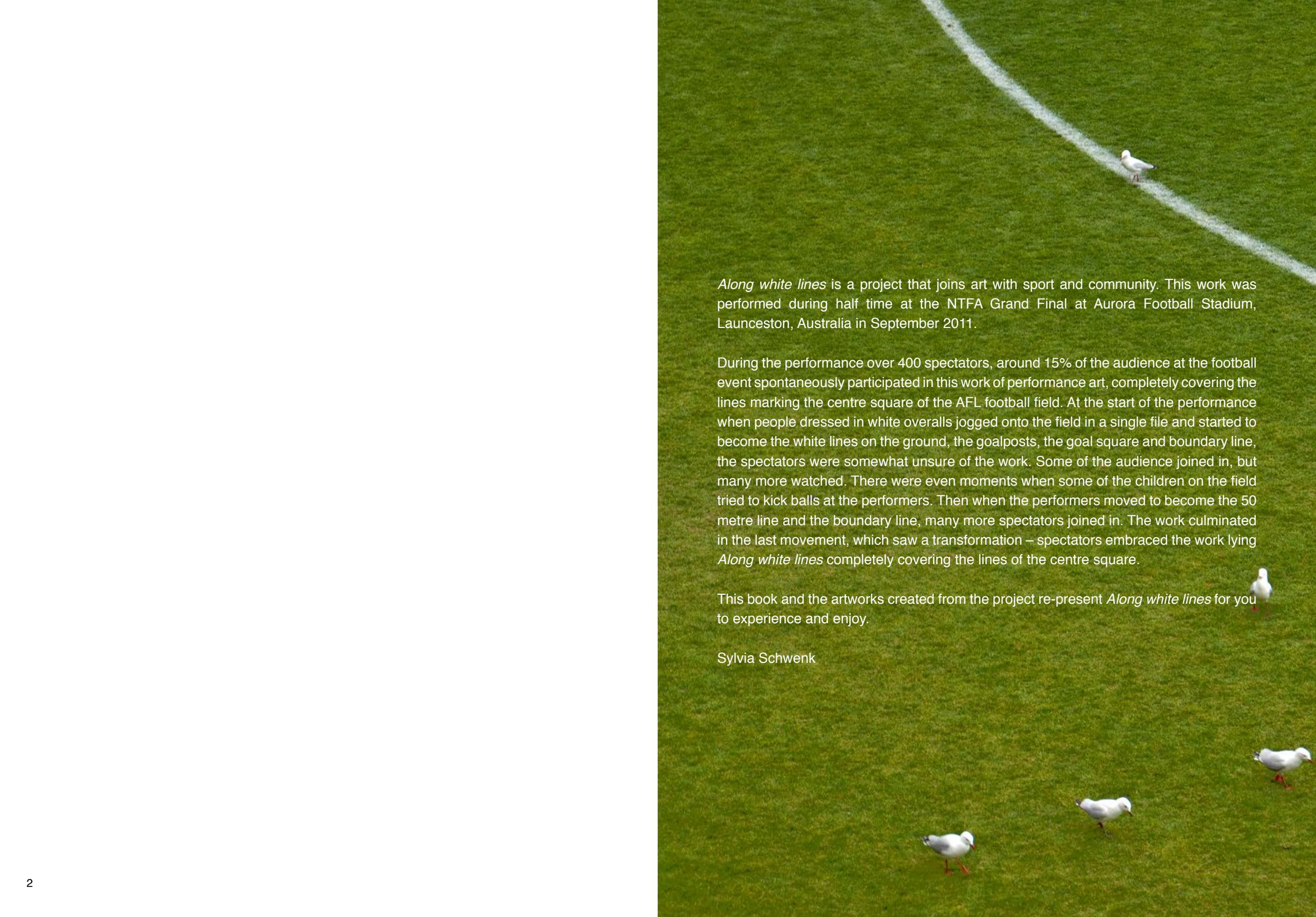


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Sylvia Schwenk



with an essay by Andrew Frost

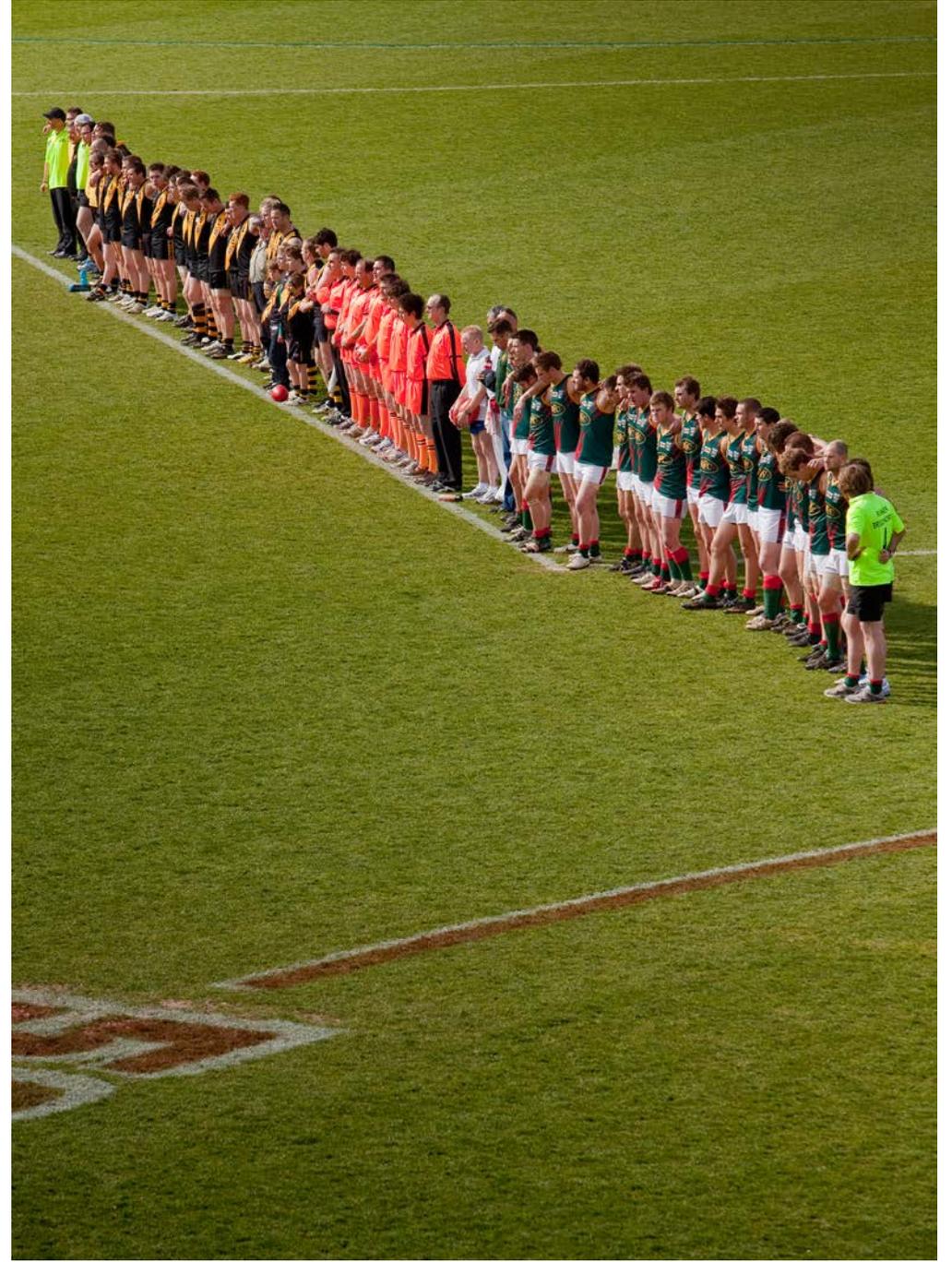


Along white lines is a project that joins art with sport and community. This work was performed during half time at the NTFA Grand Final at Aurora Football Stadium, Launceston, Australia in September 2011.

During the performance over 400 spectators, around 15% of the audience at the football event spontaneously participated in this work of performance art, completely covering the lines marking the centre square of the AFL football field. At the start of the performance when people dressed in white overalls jogged onto the field in a single file and started to become the white lines on the ground, the goalposts, the goal square and boundary line, the spectators were somewhat unsure of the work. Some of the audience joined in, but many more watched. There were even moments when some of the children on the field tried to kick balls at the performers. Then when the performers moved to become the 50 metre line and the boundary line, many more spectators joined in. The work culminated in the last movement, which saw a transformation – spectators embraced the work lying *Along white lines* completely covering the lines of the centre square.

This book and the artworks created from the project re-present *Along white lines* for you to experience and enjoy.

Sylvia Schwenk











Engage, explore & evolve.

In Launceston in late 2011 the public was allowed on to the field at half time during the regional Aussie Rules grand final. Kids kicked balls, little children and parents wandered around taking in the scene. Then something odd happened. Men, women and children dressed head-to-toe in white overalls jogged single file on to the grass. There was something disconcerting about their appearance, as though their costume was related to an emergency - a toxic spill, bomb threat or radiation leak - but their behavior was reassuringly playful. The white suited figures broke into groups and occupied different parts of the field, using their prone bodies to outline the markings for the goal square and goal posts. Beguiled by the performance kids and adults joined in. Eventually the white-suited performers occupied the centre square and, with the help of hundreds of onlookers, completely covered the white lines marking its boundary.

Along White Lines was a performance staged by Sylvia Schwenk at Aurora Stadium during half time at the Northern Tasmanian Football Association Grand Final. Watching the video of the event one is struck by the good will of the crowd – as these odd, white-suited figures take their places and begin to form lines, bemusement turns to fascination - and then to participation. The low-key nature of the work seems to attract this good will and there is a festive air to proceedings. The relationship between the artist's crew of 30 volunteer performers and the public becomes collaborative, the innocent action of lying on the ground one of definition. The football field is a codified space described by lines, distances and boundaries that, without the football teams, becomes a delimited space of possibility. *Along White Lines* subtly reminds us of the structure of social relationships between artist, audience and setting but, more importantly, the work underscores the consensual nature of those relationships.



The public road is, like the football field, a space circumscribed by a social compact that determines interaction. But where the rules of the road are thought to be inviolable, Schwenk's work *X Performances* humanises that space with a vulnerability that delays the enforcement of pure will or the law. *X Performances* was a series of performances that began in 2007. Colourfully costumed performers lay on the ground, solo or in groups, making a cross or 'x' with their bodies – but the space for this action was typically a busy city street momentarily vacated of traffic when oncoming cars, buses and trucks were stopped by traffic lights. Before the lights changed, the performers got up and moved quickly off the road. Schwenk staged this action in the middle of Saigon [2007], in Sydney's busy central

business district and outside Redfern railway station [2007], in Cologne in Germany [2008] and in Dunedin in New Zealand [2009]. Although these performances are typically fleeting the safety of the performers was ultimately in the hands of inconvenienced drivers and, like the football field of *Along White Lines*, *X Performances* utilised public space as a place of dialogue and negotiation. The outcome of this is what Schwenk calls *performosis* a process where “everyday people become performers in a participatory performance art, and spectators and passers-by performing their everyday activities become active parts in the performance that is being performed in public spaces [and which] can be used to build relationships and have social outcomes.”¹

Schwenk’s works also have a sense of play. Her 2011 *In silence and movement you can show the reflection of people*, which took its name from a quote by famed mime artist Marcel Marceau, re-staged one of the most famous of all sight gags. Wearing bright yellow overalls with hardhats and suction pads, Schwenk’s performers moved large panes of nonexistent glass back and forth among the milling crowds outside Sydney’s Museum of Contemporary Art. Like “walking against the wind” or “trapped in an invisible box” this mime is so well known that it’s almost negated by its clichéd nature, but what Schwenk had engaged was more the recognition of a public audience of the conceit of the illusion, one that could only succeed through the assent of the audience, *performosis* in action. The 2010 performance *Life takes place on foot*, where teams of colour-coded performers rolled car wheels in sets of four through city streets – as though the car body had disappeared – provoked a similar degree of recognition among onlookers. For Schwenk, the democratic participation of the audience



is of paramount importance. Complex relationships, such as economic, racial and national identities, came into play in *One Day I Think I’ll Lend a Hand But Right Now I Need a Plasma TV* a 2009-10 work that brought together German and immigrant workers united by a co-operative spirit that enabled the performance to take place. Schwenk’s work, which had the group follow her in an exercise routine relayed to them via a plasma screen TV, again foregrounded the relationship between artist, performers and audience, subtly reconfiguring the mixed race group from one of potential conflict to cooperative participation.

Schwenk’s engagement of audiences is a method of completion and evolution; the works cannot exist without performers/audience, nor can they grow. In this regard, Schwenk’s art shares the spirit of a number of contemporary artists concerned with exploring their practice via subject and performance. Like Belgian artist Francis Alÿs, with whose work Schwenk strongly identifies, her emphasis is on process over a ready conclusion; Schwenk’s works exist first as a plan, then as a performance, then a gallery showing – which often involves performers and audience intermingling for a viewing – then to later exist as artworks such as videos and photographs, which may well prompt another iteration of the idea in a new performance.

The evolution of performance art over the last 50 years has seen a continual reassessment of the relationship between action and outcome, moving from an emphasis on live performance as the centre of the experience – say the ‘happenings’ of the 1960s – through to more recent developments of the last decade where video has given rise to a hybrid performance style that highlights questions of personal



identity and estranged intimacies with the voyeuristic gaze of an audience distanced from the action. Schwenk's work, by contrast, is a democratic experience where every step of her process is open to the audience to engage, interact and direct the outcome.

Andrew Frost

Andrew Frost is an art critic, writer and television broadcaster.



Footnotes:
1. Sylvia Schwenk, *'Performosis' and the expanded field of performance art*, Doctoral Thesis Abstract, 2011 (University of Sydney)

Date: 7 February 2012 12:04:33 PM AEDT
From: Sonya Brough
Subject: Hi

Hello Sylvia

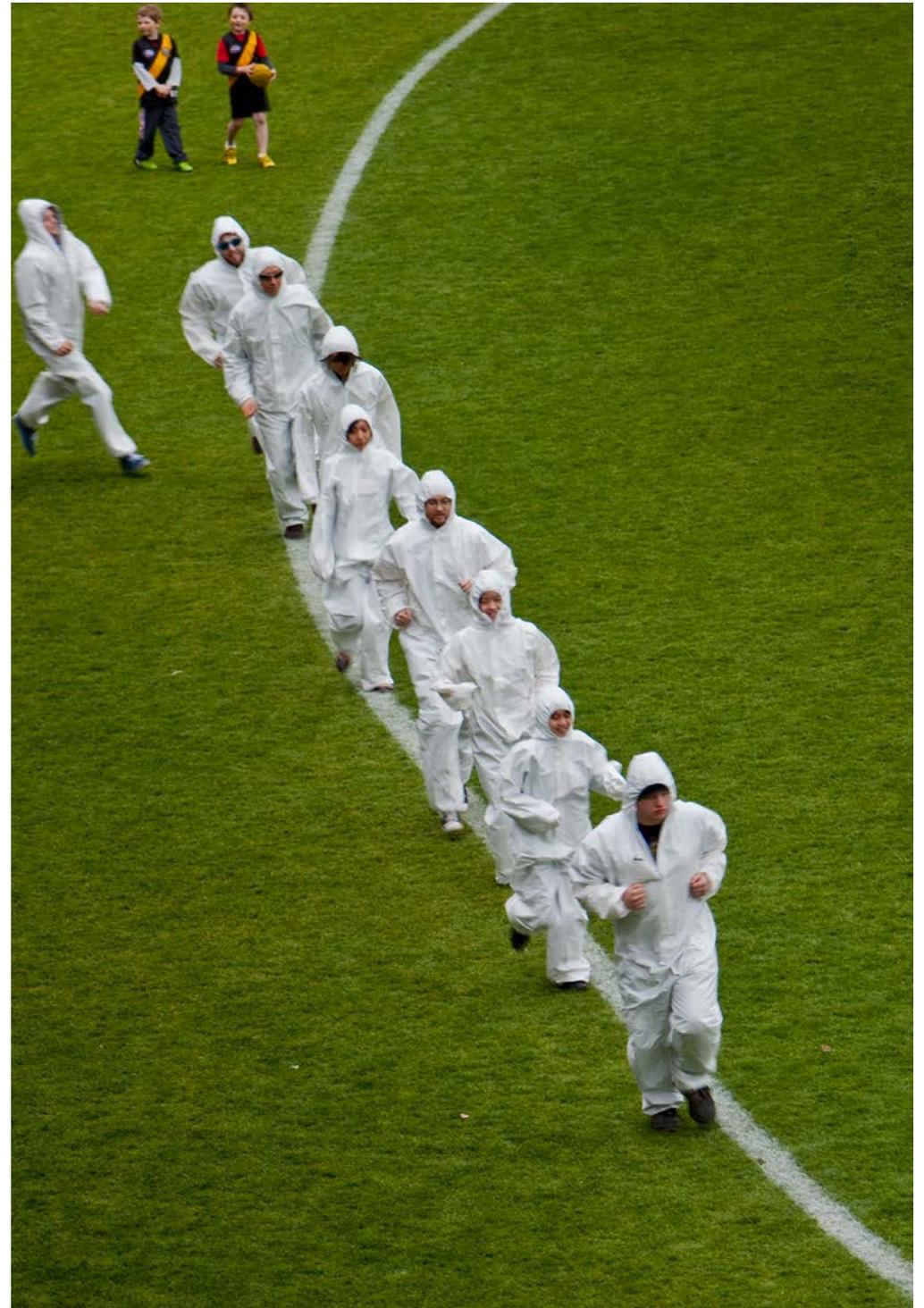
Just a quick note to say hi and that I often think of you and your residency here at the School of Visual and Performing arts. My family love talking about laying down on white lines at the football match. Alex said he was thinking of giving it ago [at a match] in Longford in the up and coming season.

Cheers
Sonya

(Performer from Along white lines)



Alex at rehearsal



















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Along white lines was performed on 17 September 2011 during half time at the NTFA Grand Final at Aurora Stadium, Launceston, Australia.

Special thanks to all those involved.

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