

# KATE WERBLE GALLERY

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## ***At the New Museum, An Unexpected Spin on the Pole***

**By Julie Baumgardner**

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"I don't think we would have made this project even a year ago — we would have been afraid to," admits Ryan Kelly, who along with his artistic partner Brennan Gerard makes up the performance art duo known as Gerard & Kelly. Beginning today at the New Museum is a two-week exhibition, "P.O.L.E. (People, Objects, Language, Exchange)," the final culmination of a six-month residency at the downtown institution that the artists have used to explore the subject of pole dancing. "We weren't so interested in the ways the spectacle of sexuality becomes the object of commerce," Kelly explains, "but rather, in how the pole is appropriated in subways, the queer underground and exercise culture."

For the show, Kelly and Gerard installed two 16-foot copper dancing poles in the museum's lobby, even removing the ceiling panels to reveal a skylight that illuminates the exhibition. "P.O.L.E." in its finished presentation, will include three live performances each afternoon, titled "Two Brothers," during which two dancers will take to the pole. Gerard & Kelly have enlisted eight dancers: two sets of subway crews known as the Chosen Ones and We Live This, as well as contemporary artistic dancers and pole-dance instructors and even the founder of Dangerous Curves, the only plus-size pole-dancing competition in the country. All eight use dance to explore, in a variety of ways, the duo's central question of intimacy in the contemporary world.

"P.O.L.E." also includes plywood sculptures and a multichannel video work, as well as the artistic collective Gran Fury's "Silence=Death" neon sculpture created for ACT UP's New Museum installation in 1987, which remains one of only a few works in the museum's permanent collection. "We are part of a second generation of the civil rights movement that's using the strategies of direct action and non-violent protest that were perfected by ACT UP," Gerard says. "For us, the inclusion of the 'Silence=Death' neon sign is an attempt to bring a light from the past to the present moment." When the duo started their residency, they didn't anticipate the direction it would end up taking — particularly its emphasis on race. "We thought we were going to make work about queer and feminist appropriations of pole dancing," Kelly says. "A lot happened this fall, and people in art and beyond are thinking about what matters and what are the issues that stick. There's always a risk when you work outside of your so-called identity."

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