

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA  
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# BODY AND SELF

PERFORMANCE ART IN AUSTRALIA 1969 - 92 | ANNE MARSH

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**SHIFTS AND CHANGES IN PERFORMANCE ART:  
SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS**

***Performance art questions the conventional relationship between artist and spectator and takes art beyond the museum, sometimes blurring the distinction between high and popular culture. Performance artists present a plurality of approaches for their audiences and many insist that art should become more democratic, that it should reach a wider audience. Performance also questions conventional paradigms of art by using different contexts and materials (video, film, computers). However, the use of new materials is not mandatory; many performance artists use found or poor materials or both. Apart from the example of Stelarc, there are no artists that value progress and technology for its own sake. Thus performance as a cross-disciplinary practice in the visual arts is an anti-formalist practice situated within a postmodern era.***

**H**owever, in the 1970s some performance artists were anxious to associate themselves with the concept of the avant-garde. The revolt against mainstream, late capitalist, bourgeois society was characteristic of much body art. The revolt of a younger generation, dissatisfied and disgusted by the society they had inherited, must be set in its historical context: it was part of the ethos of the 1960s and 1970s to rebel against society in an expressive and sometimes violent way. Such a strategy can be aligned with a modernist notion of the avant-garde, but as discussed in Chapter Two, the 'avant-garde' that attracted the attention of performance artists was not the late modernist avant-garde associated with Clement Greenberg and committed to an art that was autonomous and separate from society. Performance artists were more attracted to the generation of the 1910s and 1920s, to the irreverent practices of dada and surrealist interpretations of the dream.

Retrospectively artists and critics have recognised the difficulties associated with the avant-garde. Although much body art appears as a revolt of the sons against the fathers, it is also evident that the artists associated with body art expressed the position of a fragmented subject. In some instances the fragmented subject in body art expresses an existential position and the focus on the abject appears self-obsessive; in other examples a serious analysis of unconscious structures is presented to the audience. Body art is difficult to analyse because of the ways in which it assaults the body as a way of assaulting society: the issues become conflated so that body art appears to work against itself.

The existential self associated with body art tends to focus on aspects of a 'real', lived experience. The concept of the real as given, a site which is authentic in some respects at least, becomes problematic when one considers advances in theories of subjectivity which recognise the role that language plays in the constitution of the subject. This shift creates a crisis for performance art, especially those modes that rely on notions of an authentic self or experience attainable through catharsis, or both.

It is undoubtedly the case that ritual and body art represented the concerns of a specific period and generation. The focus on the self and on the personal interpretation of the world tended to concentrate on an abreactive response which was intended to release repression through catharsis.

The ideas of fragmentation, multi-layering and chance encounters which represent the radical edge of an earlier modernist project (dada, surrealism) — ideas which were incorporated into the happenings — were forgotten in the haste to establish an alternative culture and experience. The focus on individual experience tended to reinforce conventional ideas about individuality in the Western world. Although the search for alternatives associated with the counter-culture attempted to open a discourse on otherness, the pitfalls associated with such a programme were not addressed until the end of the decade.

The briefly celebrated return to figuration in painting in the 1980s is falsely constructed as a reaction against the 1970s, if one considers the dominance of the body in performance art.

Indeed, one could present a convincing argument that would establish body art and ritual as precursors of a return to narrative in the early 1980s. The existential subject of body art often expressed an apocalyptic theme; all memory was conceived in terms of the *angst* of the subject, a remembrance of a distant disturbance. The plight of the individual in an alien world is reasserted in neo-expressionist paintings; again the dream image is terrifying, the urban environment threatening, and doom encroaches on an organic life. The romantic heroism of the artist saturates the canvas in the same way as the gestures of the body artist erupted in time and space. The message is the same, although the media are different. Body art is a more immediate expression and it addresses the relationship between artist and audience; it actually puts the abject responses of the body into the museum it presents rather than represents the plight of the subject in the world.

To explain the prevalence of body art and ritual in the 1970s, one needs to address a much wider discourse, one that positions the expression of the individual as a paramount concern in humanist societies. The lone artist, lost and anguished within an alien world which threatens to engulf the subject, is a familiar theme and an idea which resonates in the spectator's mind. This romantic concept of the self has a wide acceptance; everyone considers themselves to be alone, and experiences the anguish associated with the lack of origin or authenticity. Expressive modes of art feed the anxiety of the spectator, creating an empathy with an imaginary vision. The fixations of the artist thus come to represent aspects of a collective unconscious.

Throughout this book an effort has been made to highlight the differences of approach to performance art. An analysis of body art (Chapter Three) has been juxtaposed with an analysis of the social construction of the body/self (Chapter Four). The return of the body in the late 1980s and 1990s had aspects in common with earlier body art. However, Linda Sproul and Karen Finley spoke out about the abuse of women. These works were autobiographical and in some instances cathartic but the reference to masochism was placed within a social context rather than privatised as it was in earlier works.

The self, the subject and the psyche are dominant themes in performance art; but they have not been read by artists in an exclusively humanist framework. It is apparent that artists have been grappling with ways in which to analyse the position of the subject in society and explore different aspects of subjectivity. An anti-humanist approach which began with Freud's recognition of the unconscious is apparent in much of this work.

The decentred nature of participatory works, initially pioneered by Allan Kaprow but evident throughout the 1970s; the ecological performance works which concerned themselves with the eco-system and 'man's' relationship to nature; conceptual and political works which focused on the social construction of the subject and conventional ways of knowing the world, all rejected the concept of a humanist subject-in-control. The idea that the artist was in a position of power was undermined by the means employed by the artist. Chance, play, and the fractured nature of identity were presented

by the artists in an attempt to destabilise the notion that 'man' is at the centre of the universe. Although some examples of body art and ritual tend to reinscribe convention by setting up a familiar binary opposition, it is apparent that the 'original intention' was to transgress a repressive cultural code or displace the power relations of an industrial corporate world. This was particularly evident in environmental and ecological works which contested the privileged position of Western knowledge systems. In retrospect one can point to the errors implicit in such works, since they tend to stress a position of 'other-ness' which has been easily absorbed. However, in the 1970s the utopianism of 'alternatives' was not considered as part of a greater system that relies on its other in order to maintain power. Thus early 'feminist' performance presented the biological difference of woman in a celebratory way; some ecological works valorised the difference of the East or Aboriginal culture without analysing the position of the Anglo-Celtic artist; and body art (re)presented the conflicts of a troubled psyche.

**The aim of this book has been to open up the discourse on performance art and to insist on various streams of practice. If one denies the dominance of a humanist desire to control, in both theory and practice, it is possible to produce a more complex interpretation. It is apparent in the late 1980s and 1990s that artists tried to break away from the strictures imposed by a structuralist thesis which insisted that the subject was already written. Here one encounters a renewed hope for resistance and a re-analysis of transgression. Subcultures became a focus of attention for some performance artists: Tsch Tsch Tsch entered the popular music scene with their deconstructions of disco; later, artists from the same group (Philip Brophy and Maria Kozic) continued to analyse trash culture and horror movies. In the late 1980s Jill Orr started to focus on cross-dressing and sexuality and Linda Sproul put sado-masochism and sexual exploitation on the agenda in a way that did not make moral denouncements. In a bid to find new places from which to speak Lyndal Jones incorporated the voices of many cultures into her performances. This was not the celebration of the other associated with earlier works, rather it was a way of insisting on the plurality within.**

**Practice and theory overlap in performance art, artists are not easily categorised, individual works shift and slide between the dominant themes, and one is left with a fractured picture where a both/and rather than an either/or thesis exists in various shades of grey. In short, there are no conclusive statements to be made; historical overviews of particular art practices are fraught with problems. I have attempted to analyse Australian performance art in an effort to tease apart the differences. The research suggests that the artists concerned have shifted significantly over the last two decades. Performance art has changed over the last twenty years, but major themes persist as artists continue to analyse aspects of the body and the self.**