BODYANDSELF

PERFORMANCE ART IN AUSTRALIA 1969-92 | ANNE MARSH

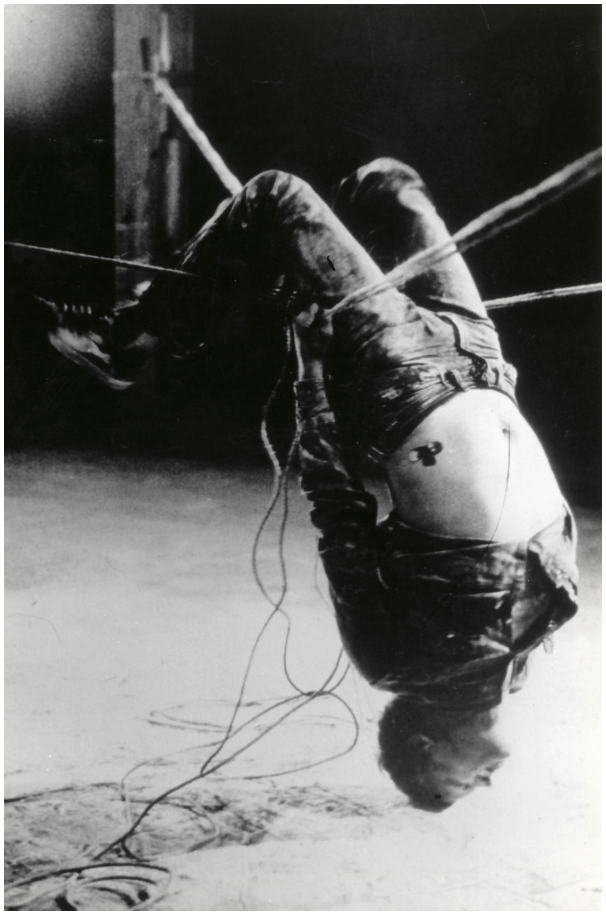
CHAPTER TWO

EXPERIMENTAL PERFORMANCE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CONCEPTUAL, POST-OBJECT AND AVANT-GARDE ART

Alternative art spaces such as Inhibodress were important for performance artists during the 1970s providing supportive venues in which works could be shown. However, such spaces, run by artists, tended to be short-lived because they could not attract enough funding to sustain their activities. This situation changed in 1974 when the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in Adelaide, with the support of Donald Brook, managed to attract financial support from the Australia Council. In its early years (1974-79), under the directorship of Noel Sheridan, the Foundation provided a venue and a critical forum within which experimental art could develop. For Donald Brook the EAF provided a kind of theoretical laboratory within which he could test out his theory of experimental art. In the analysis of performance art, this chapter concentrates on the theory of post-object art, as developed by Brook, and activities at the Experimental Art Foundation.

Performance art at the Experimental Art Foundation was multifarious. Sheridan was committed to the idea of international networking and brought a library of American and European documentation with him. Government funding also meant that Sheridan could host many artists from interstate and overseas. Mike Parr, Jill Orr, Peter Tyndal, Dale Frank, Ian Burn, Terry Smith, Jim Allen, Les Levine, Reindeer Werk, Merc Cunningham, Germano Celant, Jack Burnham and Joseph Beuys were amongst the better known performance and conceptual artists and critics whose work was shown at the EAF.

The British artist, Stuart Brisely, was in residence at the EAF in 1976. He had performed in the 2nd Biennale of Sydney: Recent International Forms in Art (1976), and, with the assistance of a British Council grant, was touring Australia. During the Biennale Brisley built a cage in Hyde Park in which he spent several days before breaking out of his self-made confinement. Brisley was well known for his earlier cathartic rituals presented in Britain, many of which involved vomiting and excrement. In Adelaide he presented a twenty-six hour endurance piece: he roped off an area between four columns in the basement of the EAF and covered the floor with white powder. This became a kind of canvas on which he drew arcs with his body, producing a ghostly white figure. Finally the artist cut off his clothing while walking rapidly around in a circular motion and had a bucket of black paint thrown over him.[1] Brisley's work addressed the position of the individual in society by



Stuart Brisley, 26 Hour Endurance Piece, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1976.

Photograph from the Experimental Art Foundation collection.

concentrating on images of confinement and release, the abject eruption of bodily fluid and the expression of psychological states were clearly reminiscent of much European body art in the 1970s.

The difference between conceptual performance and body art and ritual performance is often foregrounded by critics seeking to explain different approaches to performance art. In pragmatic terms body art focuses on the body and psychological states experienced by the artist. Ritual performances tend to concentrate on the relationship between the body and the environment; they are often set in the landscape and use natural materials such as earth, fire and water. Both practices draw on myth and ancient rites as alternatives to Western culture, although body artists tend to combine these with various psychological theories such as Sigmund Freud's interpretation of the Oedipal myth. Conceptual performance, like conceptual art, analyses what art is. It tends to be concerned primarily with intellectual ideas about art: art and its theories.

Although it is useful to make distinctions between approaches when considering the development of performance art, it is inadvisable to construct definitive categories of practice since many artists moved freely between approaches. Writing about the performance art of Imants Tillers, Donald Brook emphasised the role of intelligence and imagination in a way that explains the meeting of conceptual and ritual practices:

I mean by "intelligence" the capacity to relate domains in an artistic construct: to revise an entire aesthetic epistemology, thinking about information instead of sense-impressions; to connect art with biology, with life and with the environment; to speculate that systems are more significant than relationships — in art as well as in life. I do not mean by "intelligence" the capacity to pass competitive examinations of a bookish sort . . . I mean the power of invention that continuously enlists imagery of every sort, even from such academically discreditable sources as the occult and magical, in the service of new constructs and analogies; and by 'imagination' I mean the capacity to think these themes through in concrete terms and to manifest them in the public forms of art.[2]

The idea that artists could draw from life to investigate living structures and processes opened up new possibilities and different means of representation as artists created works of art as moments in life. A temporal aspect was often stressed through ephemeral modes as a way of underlining the indeterminate nature of life. However, it must be acknowledged that it was the means of representation that changed: the way in which artists presented their ideas was different, not the issues they were exploring; magic, ritual, the occult, theosophy and various other ideas about physical or conceptual matters had been investigated by previous generations of artists. The new modes of presentation, which often appeared fragmented and incomplete to the spectator who was more accustomed to contemplating art objects, enabled different aspects of creation and invention to be investigated. This type of art practice, most evident in ephemeral sculpture and performance which emphasised the process of investigation, was connected to many of the ideas associated with the counter-culture.

Donald Brook insisted that conceptual art was a sub-group of what he called 'post-object art' and that the latter category was multifarious. In Brook's scheme, post-object art was recognisable as a reaction against mainstream modernism. As a mode of art it was more inclined to explore intellectual systems than sensory experience[3] and its primary aim was to investigate ways of thinking: art as epistemology.

Writing about Imants Tillers's performance Enclosure (Mildura Sculpture Triennial, 1973), Brook argued that Australian artists who produce post-object art recognise 'that artistic perception, like any other sort, is not a matter of

sensation-having but of information-getting, that art is ideologically continuous with life.'[4] However, this definition appears limited since it is clear that the getting and having of sensation was a primary focus in some performance art. The sensations aroused in Tim Johnson's Disclosures and the pain experienced by Stelarc in body suspensions, where the skin was pierced by hooks to enable its elevation, are just some examples of the way in which sensation was foregrounded (Stelarc's work will be discussed in detail in the following chapter). In claiming that post-object art was more concerned with information-getting Donald Brook was making a distinction between works which were conceptually based and those which focused on the emotion or sensation of the artist. Tillers's 1973 performance represented an investigative mode of art which sought to explore conceptual thought.

Tillers mapped out an area on the beach in Sydney and placed two tents on the perimeter of a circle. He then proceeded to dig out the mirror-image of one tent (producing a tent-shaped hole in the ground inside the structure) and fill the other tent on the opposite side of the circle with the sand extracted from the first. The performance/action was documented, showing the physical fatigue of the artist, and the same structure was recreated for the Mildura Sculpture Triennial with the presence of the artist only evident through photographs placed at intervals around the perimeter of the circle.[5]

The type of creative intelligence defined by Brook can be seen in the way in which artists used art to explore different physical and intellectual structures. This was not a new idea; conceptual artists had been involved with an analysis of art throughout the 1960s. However in the 1970s, investigations spread beyond the semiotic analysis of art and into a more physical-conceptual mode. Conceptual artists working in two-dimensional modes of art produced diagrammatic works and photographic documentation which analysed conventional art practices. Ian Burn and Mel Ramsden's Text #3 from 'Proceedings' (1970) presented a dictionary definition of the word 'meaning' in the form of a document on a wall; as such it was a critique of the sort of painting that is supposed to represent a metaphysical meaning for the spectator. Conceptual performance art, like other modes of performance, existed in a specific time and place and usually involved the artist's presence in some way. As such it ventured into the physical arena and beyond the world of ideas in its purest sense. The American artist Robert Barry produced purely conceptual works such as Psychic Series (1969) which was simply a statement declaring that the work was: 'Everything in the unconscious perceived by the senses but not noted by the conscious mind during trips to Baltimore during the summer of 1967.'[6] Barry's work had no physical existence, it could not be perceived by the spectator. Performance works like Tillers's Enclosure existed in a physical sense on the axis between the conceptual and the physical world.

Although it is apparent that Australian artists drew on many sources, and that direct contact with artists from overseas was important, the type of art theory presented by Brook was significant. As an art critic he actively supported artists at Inhibodress, The Tin Sheds and later the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide. He interpreted their works seriously and tried to develop a theory of art which would accommodate the multifarious modes of the 1970s. Without Brook's critical appraisal of 'post-object art' many performance artists would probably have gone unnoticed in the greater text of Australian art history.

Brook tended to use the terms experimental art and post-object art interchangeably. He disliked the term conceptual art because he saw in examples such as Barry's Psychic Series, evidence that art, concerned exclusively with ideas, was becoming so self-conscious that it remained a totally private affair that did not participate in a public forum. Brook argued that works of experimental art were:

> ***unspecific experimental models of possible forms of life, public in principle and functioning as regulative models in terms of which all social institutions may be modified or reconceived.[7]***

The term post-object art had little credibility outside Australia. In America and Europe terms such as: process art, documentation art, conceptual art, idea art, ephemeral art, informal sculpture, arte povera were used to describe what Brook preferred to call experimental or post-object art, the latter being slightly more specific in that it made it clear that the art object was somehow being displaced by artists.

In 1976 Brook outlined some of the qualities of post-object art in a paper delivered at the Experimental Art Foundation, he said:

- Post-object art may be physically tenuous rather than solid (literally as thin as air) and indeed entirely non-physical in the sense in which poems, promises and abstractions generally are not physical.

- Post-object art may tend, unlike object art, to require human activation or participation in order to constitute itself, and not merely in order to be appreciated . . .

- Post-object art is very likely to rely heavily upon its physical, temporal, social, historical, economic (etc.) context and not, like object art, to prize its own hermetic autonomy. Hence (unlike object art) it will not even tend to formalism, nor will it invite the sort of attention that is characterised as 'pure contemplation.'

- Post-object art, if it is physical or makes use of physical elements, may tend to be distributed rather than unified, localised and compact.

- Post-object art is very likely to be ephemeral, whereas object art characteristically had the ambition to be permanent.

- Finally, post-object art will most likely not be elevated, either in a literal sense (on a pedestal, or framed) or even in a metaphysical sense. It may seem just to be a thing among other things . . . Works of post-object art like, say, acts of kindness, are not 'framed' by any customary device.[8]

Although Brook's definition of post-object art attempts to accommodate a plethora of practices in the 1970s, many of the features outlined above can be seen in performance art. Brook's definition of post-object art is particularly relevant to a discussion of experimental performance practices which do not fit into the categories of body art or ritual.

A fundamental feature of Brook's writing was his insistence that the 'institutional theory' of art espoused by George Dickie and widely debated amongst aestheticians, who drew heavily on the later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, had been proved wrong by the art of the late twentieth century.[9] Indeed, one may summarise the main thrust of Brook's theory as an unrelenting desire for a more active role for art which would refute the type of inertia that had resulted from the criticism waged against dada and pop art.

George Dickie argued that 'a work of art in the descriptive sense is an artefact upon which some society or sub-group of a society has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation.'[10] Duchamp's readymades, which were ordinary objects placed in an art gallery and renamed by the artist, forced the spectator to consider the object in its institutional context. According to Dickie, Duchamp's status as an artist and his action of placing his readymades in established art galleries were what made the readymades art. The urinal became a work of art by being assigned status by the artist, the museum and, later, art history.

The institutional theory thus shifts debates on what art is away from the essential or exhibited qualities of art (the formal qualities of the art object) towards

an investigation of art's social properties.[11] The theory, developed in the 1950s, was an attempt by aestheticians to account for Duchamp's readymades and pop art,[12] which had exploited the structures of the institution by making mundane objects into art or taking popular cultural images and assigning them status as high art. In many ways Donald Brook's attempt to reassert another definition of art was an effort to go beyond what had become a rather predictable Duchampian strategy. Brook argued that the institutional theory failed in the late twentieth century as artists presented 'candidates for appreciation' which were not recognised by the endorsed language users (gallery directors, critics, etc.). Brook insisted that 'suitcases full of rotting cheese . . . or specifications for a hole in the ground'[13] exploited the theory to the point of its demise.

In an attempt to refute the institutional theory of art which placed its emphasis on the status of the artist and established museums, Brook argued that experimental art was trans-institutional.[14] Brook's most notorious example of a work of art that refuted the institutional theory was a quasi-terrorist bomb scare which resulted in forty-two Woolworths stores being searched and three 'bombs' de-activated in Adelaide in November and December 1979. The initial scare was reported on the front page of The Advertiser on Friday 30 November. The sensational caption read: 'Threat to "gas-bomb" Woolworths stores — hundreds cleared from supermarkets — $150,000 extortion demand.' Five unemployed university graduates had devised a sophisticated plot geared to extract funds from a wealthy supermarket chain to finance their own business. The 'extortionists' planned to market and distribute a miniature battery which they claimed they had invented, a small, energy-efficient device more powerful than a car battery.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Volume 122, No. 37,773 48 pages 15c ADELAIDE, FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1979

Threat to 'gas-bomb' Woolworths stores
—hundreds cleared from supermarkets

$150,000 extortion demand

By Police Reporter CHRIS BRICE

Extortionists threaten to detonate "gas-bomb" devices in Woolworths stores throughout the metropolitan area unless the company pays them $150,000.

Shoppers at Woolworths Marion store wait near check-out points as police search the store for bombs. Fifteen stores were cleared by police last night after hoax calls.

Startling find on coffee shelf

By DAVID ENGLISH

JACOBS

Anonymous, *Skunk Oil Action,* Woolworth's Stores, Adelaide, 1979.

Photograph from *The Advertiser,* Friday 30 November 1979.

Senior Chief-Superintendent Lockwood was reported as saying: 'At this stage we are treating the matter very seriously . . . We have no indication as to the extent these people will go.'[15] However, in the same report it was revealed that police were uncertain 'whether to treat the Woolworths "gas-bomb" affair as a serious extortion attempt or an elaborate prank.'[16] After the letter from the 'extortionists' had been printed in the press, it became apparent that the 'scare' was most likely a prank. The Editor of The Advertiser argued that:

If the full text of the letter had been released at the outset, it is hard to believe that citizens familiar with the work of humorists like Stephen Leacock, Damon Runyon and their many talented successors would not have reacted with instant and uproarious delight, smelling a rat, if not a skunk, from the beginning.[17]

Several days later Donald Brook stepped into the fray to 'endorse' the incident as a 'work of art.'[18] In a letter to the Editor he announced that:

> ***It would be as serious a mistake to suppose that skunk oil is a hoax as to imagine that it is a serious crime. It is both, and neither: it is in fact a work of art, and one of the most powerful to be made in Adelaide in this decade.***[19]

Summoning a rhetoric familiar to his readers, Brook continued:

> ***Serious works of art are new models of the world. They enable us to see things that we had not previously seen. Skunk oil shows us terrorist crime as a model of the capitalist system — a way of looking at it that many will reject, but most will not even have tried.***
> ***Consider: we have alleged authors of the plot who are disappointed graduates, responsible for a great invention (a skunk oil battery!) that 'the system' will not buy. Hence they are driven to use the standard devices of the commercial market. They threaten to diminish the profits of a successful established corporation, Woolworths, by ingenious overt and covert manoeuvres ('competition'). They seek assistance by extortion (business pressures towards rational co-operation restraining out-and-out conflict). Finally, they propose a merger of interest in which they will jointly exploit the public by profitably marketing skunk oil products (movement towards monopoly stage).***[20]

Brook concluded his letter with two suggestions:

> ***May I commend to your art critic, Mr Dolan, a work of far greater weight than the general run of silly pictures that he regularly reports to us?***
> ***May I also commend skunk oil to the Art Gallery of S.A. as the purchase of the year?***[21]

Needless to say, curators at the gallery did not take up Brook's challenge, and after several controversial news items in the press the incident was forgotten, disclaimed as a joke. However, Brook's campaign to have the work recognised as art appears to be incongruous and to support the same 'institutional theory' which he had previously argued was inappropriate and outdated.[22] As an 'endorsed language user' (in George Dickie's terminology) the Professor of Visual Arts, speaking from a position of authority, claimed the skunk oil affair to be art. Although Brook's strategy succeeded in providing an example of his theory of 'trans-institutional' practices, one must question why the adventures of the skunk oil extortionists needed to be classified as a 'serious work of art', and given the elevated potential of guaranteed social status by being collected and housed in a museum.

Despite the trials and tribulations encountered by Donald Brook, his theory of post-object art was influential if somewhat misunderstood. The broad definition of experimental art as 'unspecific models of possible forms of life' which were, if successful, capable of modifying social institutions, was appealing to many artists. It is difficult to assess how much of Brook's theory artists comprehended; however, it is evident that many artists knew of the 'trans-institutional theory' developed by the critic through public forums, papers published by the EAF and reviews in journals.[23]

The EAF, more than any other group, tried to implement Brook's theory. The statement displayed in the foyer clearly indicated the theoretical framework of the organisation:

1. Our appreciation of the world is active, not passive, and art displays an emergent apprehension.
2. Art is only incidentally and not essentially aesthetic. Art is concerned with every kind of value and not particularly with beauty.
3. Art interrogates the status quo: it is essentially, and not incidentally, radical.
4. Art is experimental action: it models possible forms of life and makes them available to public criticism.[24]

Although artists associated with the EAF appeared to be seduced by Brook's theory — he was the man considered to know what experimental art really was — their practical understanding of the critic's thesis may have been limited. Bob Ramsay, who probably understood Brook's theory more than the other artists (he took up its academic challenge and wrote a Master's thesis on the role of the institutions in relation to art, supervised by Donald Brook), argued that there was much misunderstanding of and some resentment toward Brook's theory amongst artists at the EAF.[25]

Brook's thesis was open-ended, a theoretical web woven across a broad framework. The success of 'models' was to be agreed upon through public consensus. Although Brook instigated various discussions at the EAF, it is apparent that the authority of the critic overshadowed a broadly democratic system. Indeed, disruptions and splits within the organisation were common as artists attempted to contest the validity of the 'Brookian model.' The debates which evolved in the late 1970s eventually led to a change in direction and director when Noel Sheridan resigned in 1980 to take up an academic position in Ireland and David Kerr took over. Writing about the new direction of the EAF Kerr said:

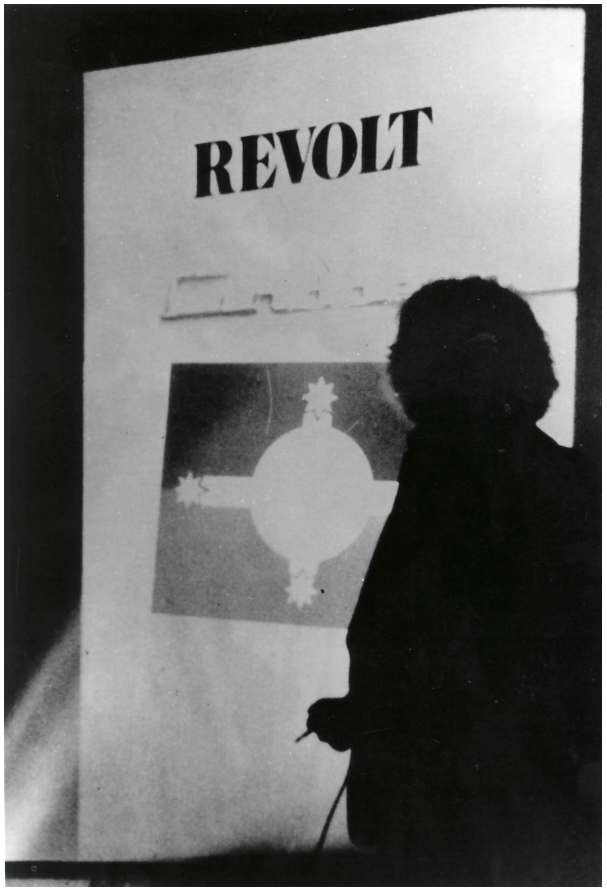
> ***The programme of the first five years focused primarily on conceptual and performance art. In retrospect it appears these investigations were absorbed into the languages and experience of the bourgeois Art Institution. The language was enriched, but the base of the Institution of Art was otherwise unaffected by the challenge. Bourgeois art had weathered the lean years of ephemeral work, surviving on adaptations (reproduced documentation) for commercial souvenirs, and was striking back with object-oriented neo-expressionism.***
> ***Fortunately there were other emergent tendencies growing through and from the post-object period of the 1970s. These concerns emerged in the next five years at the EAF.***
> ***A study group in Ideology and Culture provided a parallel theoretical base to that of Brook's influence on the EAF. Ideology is inconsistent with Brook's thesis to the extent that it has a prescriptive component; but boundaries and limits were a compromise as soon as the EAF began operating in the world. The decision to add sub-clauses to the constitution's objectives, to prescribe that activities of the Foundation would not be fascist, racist or sexist in intent, further pointed up the inadequacies of the EAF's philosophical base in providing guidelines for action in the world. Generally speaking what subsequently emerged was an informal policy of initiating and promoting investigations and concerns that were progressive-left in content and context. The study group thus gave a possible theoretical direction for action and interaction, and it could co-exist with the interrogative model already adopted from Brook's work.[26]***

Donald Brook did include an analysis of the use-value of art in his theory, however, it was problematic in a practical sense. The idea that art objects and events needed to be 'subjected to an appraisal of their APTNESS FOR USE as HYPOTHETICAL OR PRESCRIPTIVE MODELS of the world or some part of it'[27] was an attempt to democratise art, whilst the concept of 'unspecific modelling' appeared to neglect the moral or political issues which may erupt as a result of a particular art event. Despite the contradictions which were apparent on a theoretical level, Brook's moral concern was projected into the public arena on several occasions. As the Chairman of the EAF, Brook was one of the major protagonists to argue against and withdraw support from Stelarc's proposed suspension performance in 1975. Brook signed the letter which stated that:

> ***The Experimental Art Foundation has taken medical advice . . . In the light of that advice the executive of the Foundation is convinced that the performance should not take place. The Foundation declared that it no longer condones or lends support to the work in any way, and requests its members, and members of the general public, neither to participate in the work as assistants nor to condone it by witnessing the performance in the event that the artist should insist upon proceeding with it under his or any other auspices.***[28]

According to Stelarc, it is more than probable that Noel Sheridan, Director of the Foundation, and Donald Brook disagreed on the final decision which led to the cancellation of the performance.[29] Sheridan often argued against any censorship of the arts in public debates and was known, on at least one occasion, to try to incite censorship of his own work. Sheridan's controversial performance Beyond the Fridge (April/May Show, EAF, 1979) directly addressed the issue of censorship by presenting a work of art that had been excluded from the exhibition on the grounds that it was blatantly sexist. A refrigerator, which once occupied a local artist's kitchen and had the dual function of message board and cooling unit, was presented for inclusion in the April/May Show at the EAF. The graffiti on the outside of the refrigerator was explicitly sexist[30] and, more significantly in the local context, the comments were directed at specific female artists. The fridge dialogue, a group effort by local male artists, documented the sexual exploits of various individuals. It was a kind of 'boys' room' commentary on the sexual potential of various women. The executive of the EAF excluded the fridge on two grounds: first, it was sexist and the EAF had a policy not to show works of a sexist or racist nature (a battle hard-won by members associated with the Art and Culture group), and second, the executive feared that the individual women 'named' in the commentary may have been prompted to take legal action.

Noel Sheridan presented the fridge in its absence through photographic documentation. Fragments of the fridge were projected larger than life in a performance where Sheridan argued that the comments on the fridge were not derogatory but,



Noel Sheridan, *Beyond the Fridge,* Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1979.

Photograph from the Experimental Art Foundation collection.

on the contrary, they were clearly affirmative remarks about the sexual pleasures of men and women. Sheridan's performance was essentially an oratorical work, accompanied by slides; it relied quite heavily on the proverbial 'gift of the gab' for which the Irish artist was infamous. To crown the performance with a sense of irony, Sheridan documented the performance in one of the EAF's annual publications.[31] The photographic representation shows Sheridan standing in front of a large refrigerator bearing the Australian flag of independence, the emblem used by Maoists. This final gesture was obviously a comment on political intervention in the arts and made reference, by association, to the Progressive Art Movement in Adelaide spearheaded by Brian Medlin, a prominent Maoist activist.

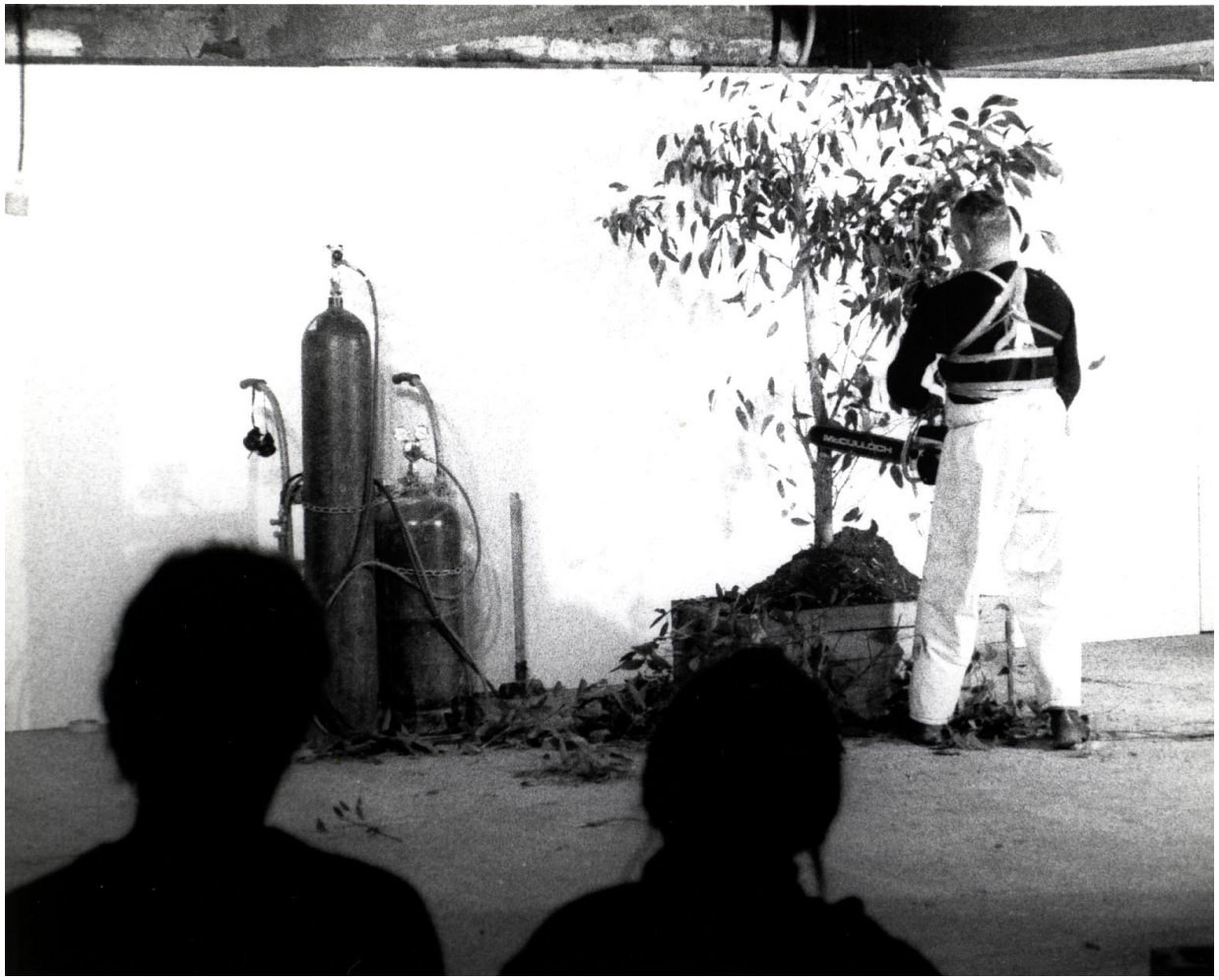
The difference between Donald Brook's positive affirmation of art as an experimental 'modelling' process geared to investigating 'possible forms of life', and Noel Sheridan's at times dogmatic insistence on an art practice divorced from socio-moral responsibility, highlights a particular issue which is connected to the problem of the avant-garde. As evident in the Stelarc performance and various comments he wrote about body art,[32] Brook was not prepared to grant an independent position to art ('art is ideologically continuous with life').[33] Sheridan, however, argued that it was necessary to grant art certain privileges so that it could go 'beyond' the mundane socio-moral responsibilities that one associates with 'progressive' life-views. In short, experimental art is exempt from life-time responsibilities. In many respects the difference between the two points of view foregrounds the complexities associated with experimental modes of art, especially performance, in the 1970s and the debates over body art in the late 1970s and 1980s. The difference is between accepting a philosophy which separates the artist from society and the desire of many artists and critics to bridge the divide between art and life by making art socially responsible. This is a complex debate and one which has yet to be resolved, since it is apparent that too much 'political' concern can produce a rather stagnant art which claims, in an arrogant voice, to speak for others. Sheridan's strategy of representing Beyond the Fridge with an Australian flag of independence was a poignant statement, albeit somewhat misdirected in the context of the performance.

Donald Brook recognised the difference between experimental art and the avant-garde; however, he did not successfully transmit this distinction to artists. The critic argued that:

> ***It is important to recognise that the generation of new models, extending human language, by non-voluntary action, has little or nothing to do with the 'avant-garde' conception of art. Avant-gardism is a matter of the determined manipulation of recognised art forms within their various institutional parameters.[34]***

In 1988 Brook acknowledged that it was the failure to distance himself and his theory from the concept of the avant-garde that led to the demise of the experimental project at the EAF. He argued that:

> ***We should have called it "object-indifferent" or something of the sort, to frustrate that reading [of the avant-garde]. We were neither careful enough to dissociate the position from avant-gardism on the one hand, nor to make sure that the muddle headed passion for pure mentalism or idealisation, under the rubric of "conceptualism", would be confined to a minor role as one of the zanier expressions of object-indifference.[35]***



Jim Allen, *Chainsaw,* Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1976.

Photograph from the Experimental Art Foundation collection.

During the 1970s, teasing out the distinction between experimental practice and avant-gardism was not a paramount concern. However, as the 1970s drew to a close and body art started to be criticised for representing a conventional Western, existential angst, the difference became crucial.[36]

Performance works which centred on the violent responses of artists to the art establishment and to society in general did not appear to fulfil Brook's designs for an experimental practice. Jim Allen, who was Professor of Fine Art at Auckland University, spent a considerable amount of time at the EAF in 1976. Chainsaw was an angry and potentially violent work which involved the artist reading Allen Ginsberg's poem Howl against the sound of a powered chainsaw.[37] Dale Franks (later Frank), who performed under the title MSPCCL (Masteroid Space Cama Control Council Propaganda Legion) was artist in residence at the EAF during 1979. Franks presented many disturbing actions, including: dragging his body along the gutter outside the EAF during peak-hour traffic, and shouting abuse at an embarrassed audience at the Art Gallery of South Australia whilst dressed in a military uniform. Gaze: Bloody Minded (EAF Performance Week at Carlew House, 1980) involved the artist sitting in a sunken area in a room in which straw had been burnt for several hours. As the audience became accustomed to the smoky environment their eyes focused on the artist who was cleaning a rifle; slowly and deliberately he sanded the various parts and applied creams and cleaners. One audience member, responding to the masturbatory action, shouted 'why don't you try K.Y. jelly.' Franks ignored the comment, however, the suggestion appeared to delight other members of the audience.

Robert McDonald was another angry young man associated with the EAF. In 1980 he shocked visitors at the Art Gallery of South Australia by posing around the galleries with part of his head shaved upon which was written 'Art Lobotomy.'[38] Although such actions are clearly anti-institutional, they tend to communicate a violent (at times military) image to an audience who may not be familiar with the reasons why such a response is felt to be appropriate by the artists.

There are several problems associated with aligning performance art in the 1970s with the concept of the avant-garde. RoseLee Goldberg wrote about the history of performance art at the end of the 1970s and attempted to map a linear progression.[39] Goldberg's shorthand version of her thesis, published in numerous essays, stated unequivocally that performance art was the 'avant-avant-garde.'[40] Goldberg argued that performance was an eruptive activity which preceded a change of 'style' or a shift from one movement or tendency to another. In presenting such an argument Goldberg attempts to make performance art acceptable by fitting it snugly within the parameters of the modernist avant-garde.

Although Goldberg addressed all those practices which Greenberg, as a formalist, had ignored (dada, surrealism, the Russian avant-garde), her insistence that performance art preceded shifts in style echoed Greenberg's linear interpretation of modernism. Greenberg claimed that modernist painting had developed in a linear way throughout the twentieth century to arrive at the point of pure abstraction in the 1950s. To make her argument relevant to the 1970s Goldberg needed to underline the multifarious nature of modernism and to stress that the anti-bourgeois stance taken by many of the artists was in fact contradictory to the project of modernity. Some of the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century attempted to bridge the gap between art and society; some were anti-progress; some were disenchanted by Western democracy and its structures. However, even if Goldberg had succeeded in disrupting the linear paradigm of modernist art history, the problem of the institutionalisation of the avant-garde gesture would have persisted.

Greenberg believed that an avant-garde should be encouraged and maintained and that it should be protected from popular culture, kept separate from society. In the 1970s this scheme was in conflict with the aims of artists to create works which changed the relationship between object and perceiver; works which tried to make art more relevant for society, and those which continued the dada project of dismantling art from within by interrogating forms of representation.

Performance art in the 1970s was in a precarious historical position. On one hand the focus on the individual in body art tended to reinscribe the uniqueness of the artist's personality and to centre the individual thus reinscribing a humanist space for the subject. On the other hand many ritual and conceptual performances presented strong critiques of progress and technology, which were contrary to the utopian commitment to progress associated with both humanism and some modernist avant-garde movements such as futurism and the Bauhaus.

Performance was thus situated in a kind of no-man's land in the 1970s. Although performance art is difficult to categorise, most of the cross disciplinary practices that one encounters under the term performance art share in common an anti-formalist position. Most of the artists, if not all of them, were reacting against Greenberg's interpretation of modernism. Because of this it is more appropriate to situate performance under the umbrella of experimental art rather than trying to claim some status for it as an avant-garde.

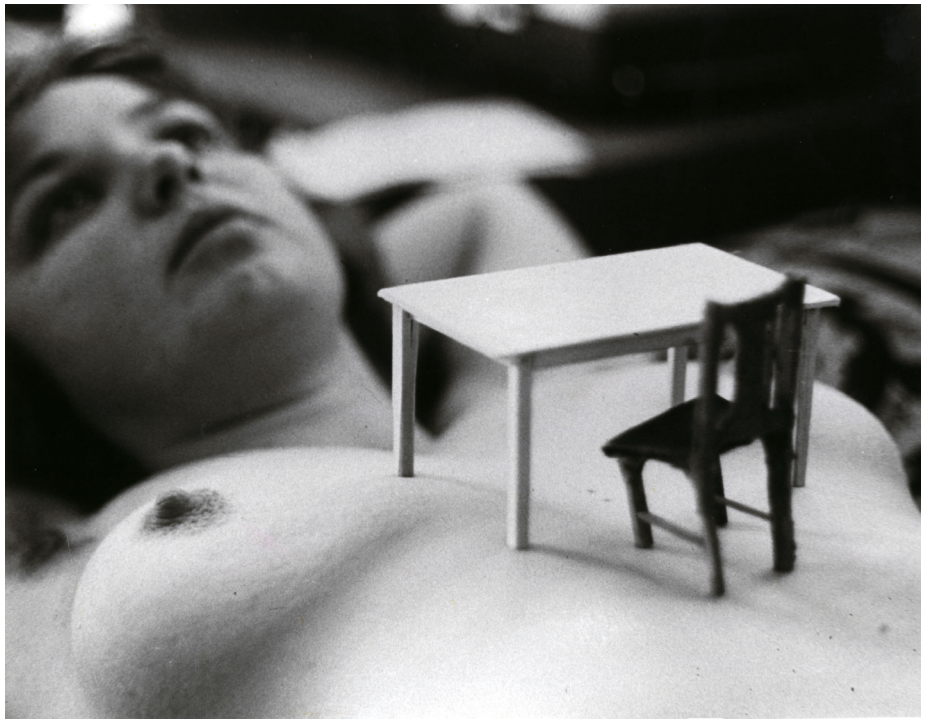
A questioning of art and its structures (the art gallery, the museum) was a major feature of experimental art in the 1970s. Peter Burger who wrote about the avant-garde in the 1980s claimed that the critique of, what he termed 'the institution art', was a major characteristic of the avant-garde of the early twentieth century.[41] It is this activist position that artists such as Mike Parr invoked when he called for artists to: 'complete the break with the art gallery system, the bullshit of Modernism, bullshit art criticism . . . '.[42] However, in many ways the political critique of art and its institutions, which was associated with

actions such as Duchamp's readymades, had, by the 1970s, been absorbed by the very system it hoped to contest. The dada gesture had become part of the canon of art history and it was this that prompted Donald Brook to launch an attack on the institutional theory of art.

In 1968 the Italian critic Renato Poggioli argued that there were two major characteristics of the avant-garde: an agonistic or antagonistic tendency which was emotive — the artist as alienated outsider reacting against modern society — and an activist tendency which was more of an organised political strategy. These two tendencies collide and intersect throughout the history of Twentieth-century art and are apparent in the debates over experimental and socially committed art in the 1970s.

It is important to acknowledge that the personal experience of the individual was a major feature of cultural theory throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. One could argue that a rather subjective agonistic response was characteristic of the counter-culture. There was a utopian sentiment expressed by Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown, a kind of valorisation of the personal as the political which was behind the idea of cultural resistance through lifestyle. [43] The enmeshing of the personal and the political was later interpreted in a more sophisticated way as the Left started to analyse the concept of the individual as a cultural myth which supported social institutions. The idea of the unique individual reacting against society was replaced by an analysis of the 'subject' (once the individual) constructed through cultural structures and institutions, including language. The shift in theory, associated with Althusser and the rigorous structuralist analyses that preceded him, led to a rejection of a 1970's reading of experiential difference associated with the counter-culture and existentialism.[44] The structuralists presented a determinist theory and argued that the 'subject' was already written in language, inscribed by social codes. Althusser in a famous example said that as soon as a child is born it is coded by society; the first question is always: 'Is it a boy or a girl?', there can be nothing else: subjects are 'always, already' written into the masculine or feminine codes of the society into which they are born.[45] Such a determinist theory effectively displaced the utopian models of individual resistance characteristic of the 1960s and early 1970s.

The merging of experience and politics was highly problematic in the 1970s. Christopher Lasch's book The Culture of Narcissism clearly highlights the ways in which the merging of the personal and the political backfired.[46] Lasch argues that the persistent focus on individual experience during the 1970s produced a self-obsessed culture. However, Lasch takes a liberal position and, although his critique is rigorous, it tends to ignore the complexities of emerging issues. Feminism, which was also influenced by the experiential critiques of the 1970s, continued to analyse the idea that 'the personal is political', indeed this became a slogan for feminists.



Melanie Howard, *Portrait of An Artist as a Nude,* Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1977.

Photograph from the author's collection.

Melanie Howard, *Portrait of An Artist as a Nude,* Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1977.

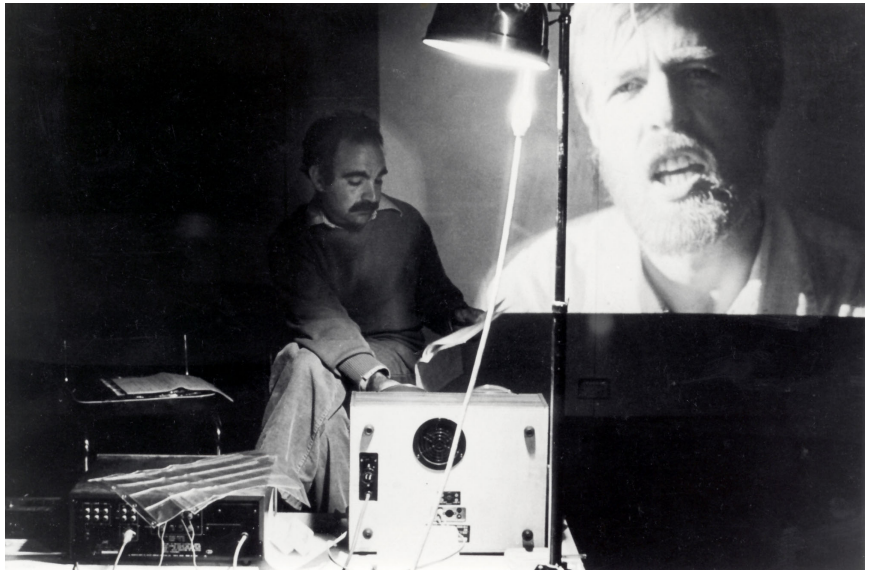
Photograph from the author's collection.

Melanie Howard, a conceptual artist working at the EAF who was instrumental in establishing the Women's Art Movement in Adelaide, addressed the question of female representation in a work titled Portrait of An Artist as a Nude (1977). Howard examined the way in which the female body became objectified by offering herself to artist-friends as their photographic model. Photographs taken by male and female artists were then presented as a slide-commentary performance during The Women's Show in an attempt to ascertain whether men and women objectified the female body in the same way. Howard was responding to feminist analyses of culture, which argued that visual representations of the female body underlined conventional stereotypes of femininity: woman was objectified to the extent that she became a sexual commodity on the commercial market.[47] Howard's Portrait clearly showed how the female body became an object of fantasy for the male artist. In the 1980s feminists committed to analysing the personal/political complex turned to a rereading of psychoanalysis in an attempt to chart a way out of a seemingly impossible theoretical position which left the 'subject' in a kind of academic cul-de-sac: already written, spoken before s/he speaks.[48]

IN relation to performance art, which even in its most conceptual mode often relies on the artist's presence and their demonstrations of some sort of process through their actions or experience (the artist is always doing or experiencing something in front of the spectator), the personal-political issue erupts. This is apparent in the contests between Donald Brook and Brian Medlin at the EAF (private art vs social practice) and the various critiques of performance art which attempt to underline a difference between body art, ritual performances and conceptual practice[49]. In the 1970s as the theoretical debates continued, artists, who were able to ignore what Brook called 'intelligence' of a 'bookish sort', often confounded the issues being debated by the critics or they made a mockery of them.

Sue Richter, an artist associated with the EAF in Adelaide in the late 1970s, experimented with technology as a way of presenting a multi-layered argument which spoke about theory and inserted the artist's internal thoughts on the issues being debated. In the performance Internal Dialogues (EAF, 1979), Richter, David Kerr and John Gasper presented an analysis of art integrated with an analysis of the self and how the individual reacts on a public as well as a private level.

Two slide projectors and two sound tracks, split through the left and right channels of a stereo system, were used in conjunction with the live conversation of the three artists. They spoke about post-object art and their doubts and fears were incorporated through technological devices so that an overlaid dialogue evolved. Selections from the script explain the way in which a multi-faceted language was achieved:



Sue Richter, *Internal Dialogues,* Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1979.

Photograph from the Experimental Art Foundation collection.

John [live]: What makes you want to be an artist?

David [live]: Oh, I came to art after having studied in the rigid disciplines of economics and politics. Art seemed a good way of creating new worlds through unspecific modelling.

Slide A/Speaker A (David): [laughing] I suppose that's what he wants me to say.

Slide B/Speaker B (John): Well, what's he doing making formalist sculpture?

Slide A/Speaker A (David): It's OK for him, he has a ticket, he's sort of recognised … but I've still got to establish myself in the art community. He's had to play the game too.

David [live]: And how did you become involved?

John [live]: Well, I came to art through having been an architect.

Even then I had a very empiric approach to my work, but the architectural institution didn't encourage this. Artists seemed to use empiricism rather than negate it.

Slide B/Speaker B (John): Bullshit, I was unemployed and art seemed like a good way to waste some time [slide change] I wonder if he knows what I mean by empiricism?

[David leaves. Sue talks to John (live movement)]

Sue [live]: David says he's going to hang himself. Do you think he is taking Stelarc seriously? I can't see what he is going to achieve by it.[50]

Richter's interest in the double language of social interaction (public and private) has often been presented with the use of video and life cast-sculpture. In the performance-installation Rules of the Game (Festival Centre Gallery, Adelaide, 1980) she used life-cast sculptures against the backdrop of a large video monitor. Describing the tableau in the magazine Art Network the artist said: 'The work centres around a simple conversation between two strangers — Narelle and John — and their rather ill-fated efforts to establish communication.'[51] The characters (both life-casts, real people, and their projected images on video) played out a sequence of events prompted by five cards with five options. Richter wrote:

> ***Given a basic conceptual framework, Mo Gordon (Narelle) and Gary Benson (John) improvised according to the options on the cards. Neither of the actors had seen the cards before. Point-of-view camera angles, extreme close-ups and internal dialogues were used in the video in an attempt to get an inside view of what was going on. In contrast to this the life-cast figures of Narelle and John within the sculptural environment were seen from the outside or as a wide shot in video terms.***[52]

Rules of the Game was presented in three different media: Narelle and John (life-casts) were seated at a table; an image reflected on the video screen behind the figures repeated the same gestures continuously throughout the event, and the two actors (Narelle and John) interacted with the setting, wheeling away the sculptures and re-enacting the life scene. Rules of the Game focused on the social rituals experienced by 'couples' trying to communicate. The choices scripted on the cards outlined various ploys used to generate communication between people. Richter used a framework similar to that employed in Internal Dialogues as the actors spoke aloud their internal thoughts during the performance:

> ***Card no. 2: John says aloud what he thought to himself when Narelle refused his offer of a cigarette.***
>
> ***Card no. 3: Narelle says aloud what she thought to herself when John laughed at her.***[53]

In this way the live performance acted by the 'real' couple created another dialogue; initially the actors played out the game on the cards which represented a clichéd form of social interaction. In the second sequence the actors performed the same gestures, but their language spoke of their individual fears.

Sue Richter is not primarily a performance artist; she prefers to work in various media. When she does incorporate 'actors' they are always juxtaposed with other elements. When the artist appears in the works herself she becomes part of a sequence, just one of the actors in the scene; there is no sense in which she focuses on her own presence in the way in which body artists explore structures of the self. Richter's analysis of the human psyche is carefully constructed within the ritual of the communication

Sue Richter, *Internal Dialogues,* Festival Centre Gallery, Adelaide, 1980.

Photograph from the artist's collection.

Sue Richter, *Internal Dialogues,* Festival Centre Gallery, Adelaide, 1980.

Photograph from the artist's collection.

process, in which language plays an important role and the memory (or internal dialogue) is presented as a second-order discourse. The ways in which technology can assist the artist's representation of the subject is most apparent in Richter's events, where the video operates as a mirror, used as an analytical tool, and sound tapes and loops enable a multi-layering of language.

Richter's work is endowed with a humorous edge, as the ridiculous side of human interaction becomes the focus of the event. The artist is critical of an over-determination of theory, yet she addresses the construction of the subject and the role of language in a serious way. Explaining the impetus behind her works, Richter makes reference to the writings of the novelist Joseph Heller:

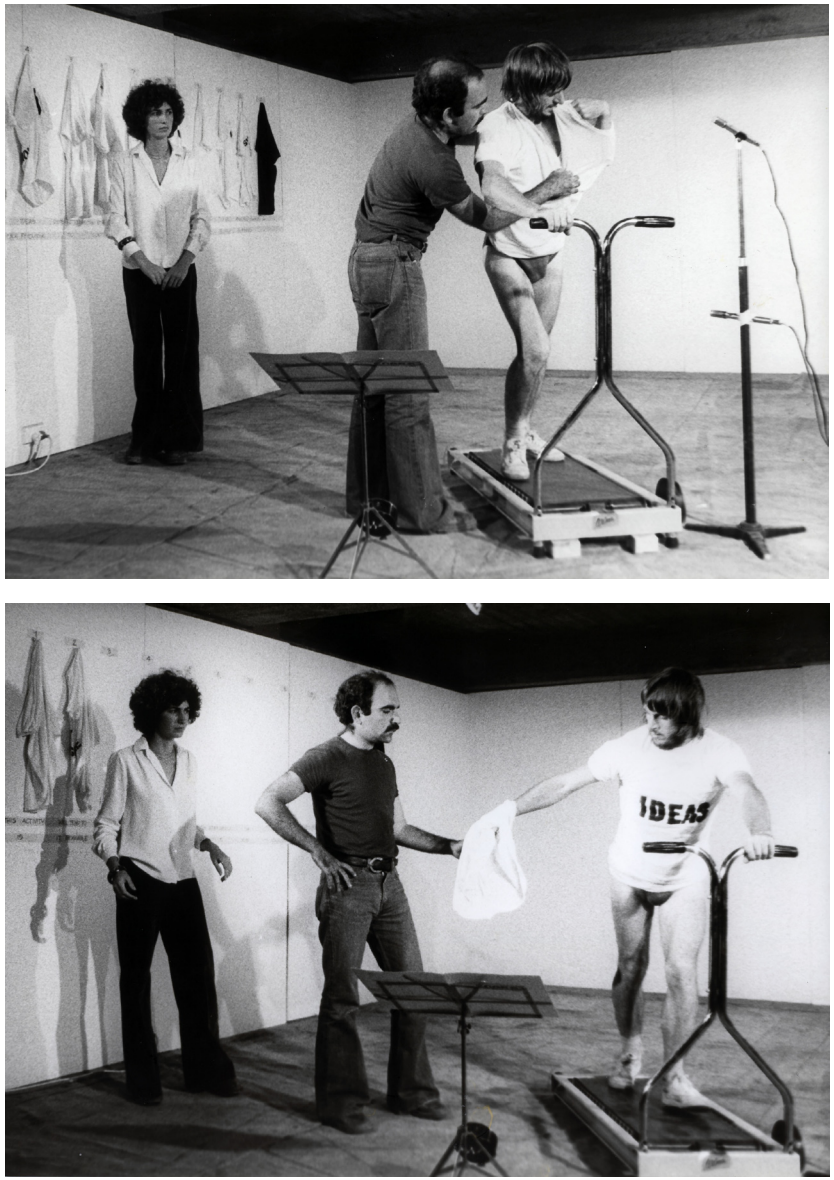
> ***Joseph Heller in his book Something Happened talks about people having 'the whammy' on each other, indicating some inability to establish a reasonable communication with another human being for one reason or another. It seems that as long as one is unable to shift outside that circumstance one will continue to have ' the whammy' and not much can be done about it.***[54]

Bob Ramsay, who was one of the major protagonists of post-object art at the EAF, presented seven performances between 1977 and 1979, all of which explored the notion of investigative intelligence described by Donald Brook. Although most of the works were concerned with intellectual rather than psychological or physical structures, and could

thus be described as conceptual performances, in one instance (Of Voice to Sand, discussed below) the artist confounded categorisation by exploring the rituals of the Navajo Indians. Ramsay, like Sue Ritcher, also produced performances which addressed the theoretical discussions then current at the EAF.

Read (EAF, December, 1977) is described by the artist as a metaphor for the position of conceptual artists working at the EAF.[55] The idea of continuously running to keep up was represented by the artist walking at a rapid pace on an exercising belt. Over a period of thirty-eight minutes the artist dressed and undressed himself in a series of T-shirts displaying words on the front and back. The messages read by the audience over the duration of the performance were concerned with the generation of ideas and the endurance of the artist:

> **Ideas lead to change and continue differing in direction.**
>
> **This activity will lead to ideas.**
>
> **It is possible for ideas to continue yet seem to get absolutely nowhere.**
>
> **This activity will tend to change until all energy subsides.**
>
> **To get ideas, change.**
>
> **Ideas lead to change.**
>
> **Change will tend to lead to ideas.**
>
> **Continue until all ideas change.**
>
> **Change will tend to lead to each revolution.**
>
> **Each revolution will tend to lead to change.**
>
> **Continue each revolution until all energy subsides.**[56]



Bob Ramsay, Read, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1977.

Photograph from the artist's collection

Peanuts (Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1978) utilised a similar word-image format. However, the Brisbane performance was more political and questioned the role of art in society. Both Peanuts and Read were scripted performances where the artist 'read' his actions from a score. Peanuts was presented in the context of an installation of newspaper clippings hung in large strips from the ceiling. The 'news' described various political activities in Queensland and the artist's score, which began as a random sequence of words on the wall, was gradually transformed into a series of questions and statements: 'Is the function of political activity to develop social alternatives?', 'Is it essential that artists start to question art?', 'Is art a private activity or does it have a public function?' and so forth.[57] Over a period of fifty-two minutes Ramsay presented the spectator with an intellectual debate concerned with the function of art.

The Swing (Act 1, Canberra, 1978), Of Voice to Sand (EAF, 1979) and Eureka (April/May Show, EAF, 1979) all extended the investigative function of art while simultaneously introducing more visual elements some of which tended to underscore a ritualised practice. The Swing involved the artist swinging back and forth over the heads of the audience, oscillating between two slide screens, which displayed both visual images of swinging and suspended bodies and texts which defined the word 'swing' and its various metaphorical implications. Of Voice to Sand, one of Ramsay's most elaborate productions, involved an installation of coloured sand in small pigskin sacks, a large drum made from animal hide, and a sound system which was set up to amplify the artist's voice. The action occurred within a circle mapped out by sand and consisted

Bob Ramsay, Read, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1978.

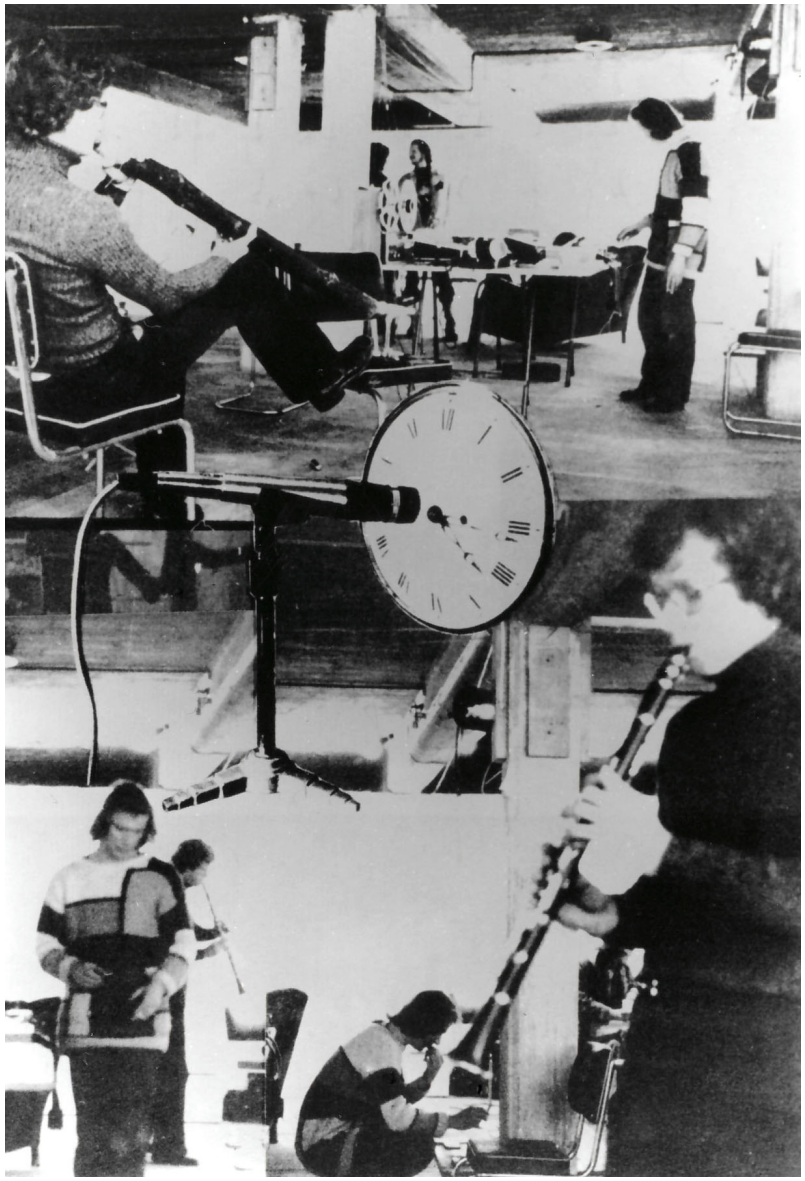
Photographs from the artist's collection.

Bob Ramsay, Of Voice to Sand, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1979.

Photograph from the artist's collection.

of the artist making noises through the sound system in an attempt to move the sand. Ramsay, who was a secondary-school science teacher, was exploring both vibrational sound and its potential to change the physical environment, and the powers of the mind to implement similar activity. He says that he was inspired by stories he had read about the Navajo Indians and their rituals, and the accounts of psychics who claim to be able to bend spoons or break glass through a concentration of mind-power.[58]

In Of Voice to Sand technology met the natural environment and conceptual approaches to performance met ritual approaches. Earlier works like Read and Peanuts involved an intellectual analysis, and, in the example of Read, the artist's physical endurance. Although this type of work is conceptually based and has more to do with ideas than the expression of emotion or psychological states, it is apparent that an interrogative activity is informed by various sources; as Donald Brook noted about Imants Tillers, the occult and magical ways of interpreting the world and human experience are as appealing to artists as the intellectual concepts they seek to explore.[59]



Leigh Hobba and Ian de Gruchy, Freeways, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1978.

Photograph from the Experimental Art Foundation collection.

Other artists working at the EAF also investigated alternative structures of 'knowing' and 'being.' Leigh Hobba, who travelled Australia extensively to record the music of the Aboriginal peoples, utilised many of the rhythms and chants he had heard in the desert in his own music. Freeways (EAF, 1978) was a collaborative performance which explored the working relationship between two artists — Leigh Hobba (an experimental musician) and Ian de Gruchy (a conceptual artist). The performance involved the amplification and mixing of numerous sound sources collected by the artists, including: Indulkina Tribal Elders teaching singing to non-aboriginals; an eight channel recording of antique clocks and a music box; car and street sounds; noises collected from a creek, a meadow and a beach; various chants and songs from Africa and a skit by Spike Milligan. The soundscape was mixed during the performance and presented together with compositions for the didgeridoo and clarinet devised by Hobba.[60] The clarinet was played using the same circular breathing technique as that employed to play the didgeridoo.

Jim Cowley, who produced performances in the late 1970s, also oscillated between conceptual and ritual productions. Mentation (EAF, 1978) involved a textual format similar to that used by Bob Ramsay in Peanuts; however, Cowley had the words attached to his body so that over a period of time the artist was glued to the wall with the letter-cards. Cowley became a papier-mâchéd figure encased in an elaborate art language.[61]

A younger generation of artists and art students started to present performances at the EAF in 1979-80. Arguments between those supporting

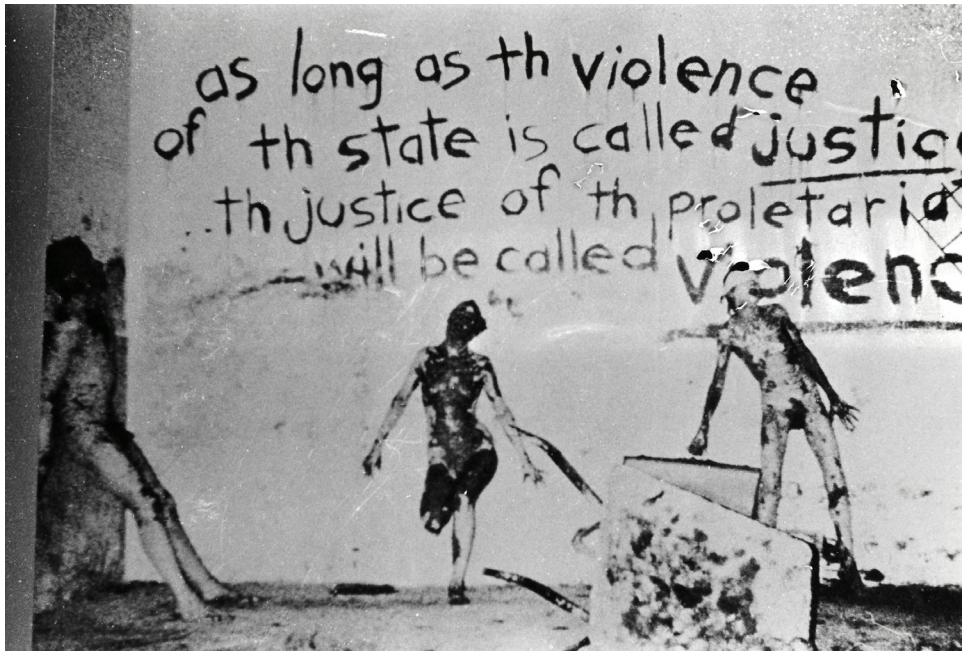
experimental practice for its own sake and those committed to a social function for art continued. Some of the younger artists, recognising the utopianism of a conventional Left programme for the arts, and its limitations, presented cynical or witty works which often addressed concepts of 'organisation' and hierarchical structures that appeared entrenched in the artworld. Peter Cheslyn's The Meeting (EAF, 1979) consisted of a grid of chairs and a group of people each in possession of a box of matches. The artist orchestrated a mock meeting; operating as 'chairman', he tapped a broom on the floor which indicated to the meeting that they could speak. Each participant recognised a type of pecking order which had been determined previously and began to speak on the command of the broom. As each person spoke they struck a match and as it burned out they fell into silence. This pattern was continued until all the matches had been burnt, signifying the end of the meeting.[62]

Peter Cheslyn, Robert McDonald (who later formed Art Unit, an artists' run space in Sydney[63]), Alison Davey, David Watt, Derek Kreckler, Stephen Wigg, Richard Grayson and Michele Luke were the most prominent of the younger artists then in Adelaide.

Cheslyn, McDonald and Kreckler all worked in experimental theatre productions, primarily with the All Out Ensemble directed by Nicholas Tsoutas. The Ensemble presented productions by Australian writers which incorporated a significant contribution from the visual as well as the performing arts. Tsoutas preferred a multi-disciplinary approach, apparent in performances like Basket Weaving for Amateurs (a play about

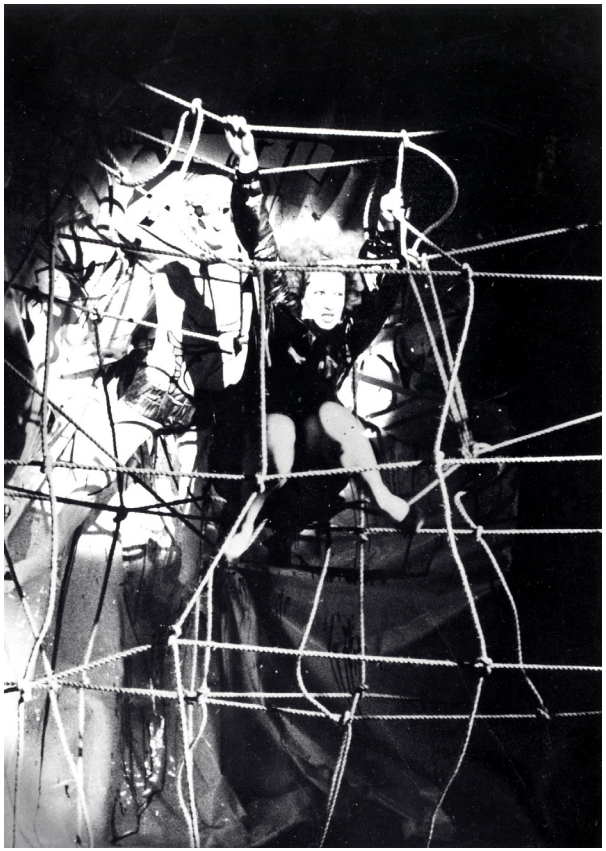
Jim Cowley, Mentation, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1978.

Photographs from the artist's collection.



All Out Ensemble, Last days of the World, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, 1983.

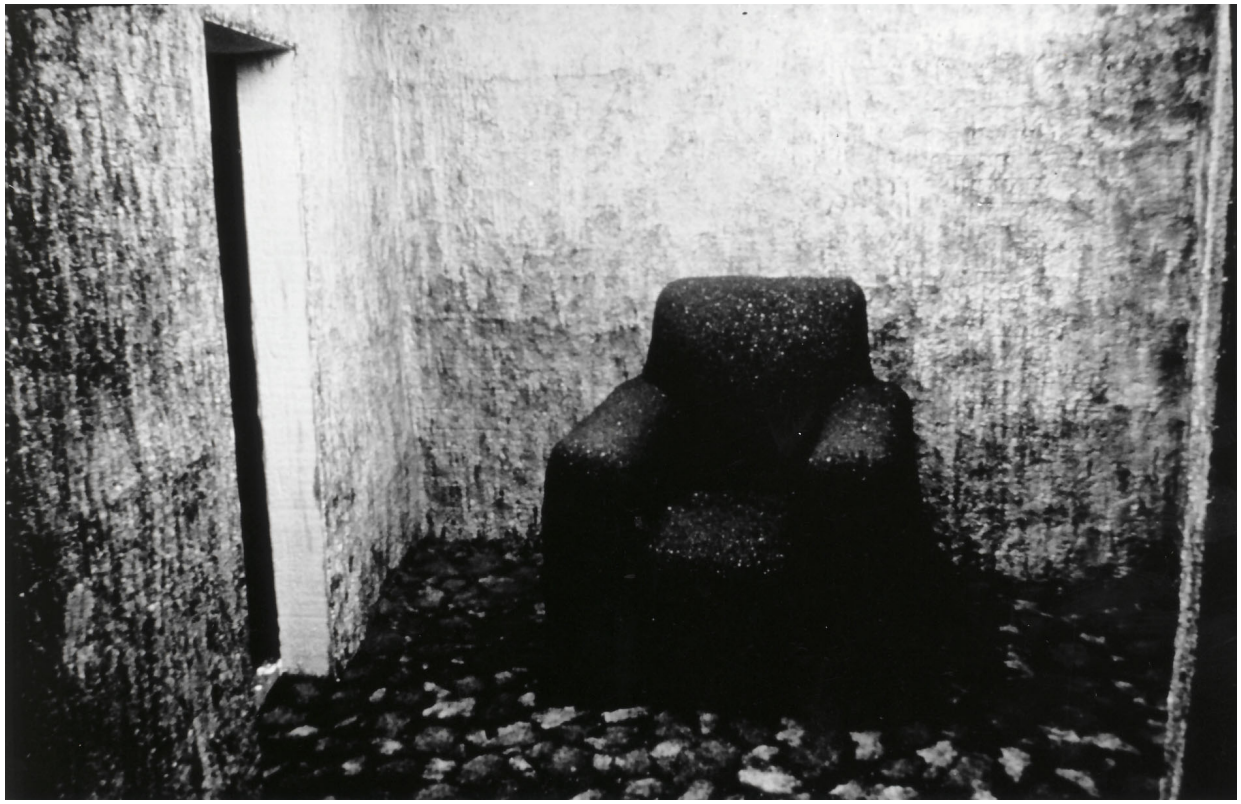
Photograph from the Nicholas Tsoutas's collection.

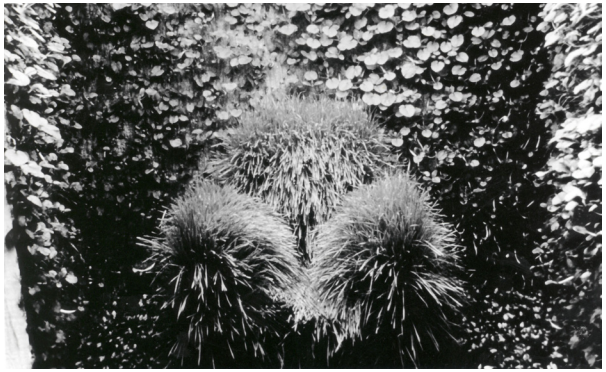


Peggy Wallach performing in Basket Weaving for Amateurs, All Out Ensemble, Roundspace, Adelaide, 1980. Photograph from the artist's collection.

Margaret Preston) and Last days of the World (an apocalyptic production scripted by Christopher Barnett). In these and other productions a multi-media event was designed so that the audience moved through the performance, where simultaneous events were presented.

Many of the younger artists did not make a firm distinction between performance art and theatre. They had witnessed the self-referential nature of much experimental art and wanted to distance themselves from that type of practice. Richard Grayson who had been involved with the Basement Group in England, before he came to Australia in 1984, explained the shift in political terms, arguing that the older generation of performance artists had concentrated on the existential quest of the individual. According to Grayson the younger generation questioned the political and cultural roots of such a philosophy.[64] Although a shift in theory is apparent in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and this in turn influenced the content of performance art (one witnesses a more structuralist-political interpretation of the individual's place in society), Grayson's comments on the 'older generation' are too generalised. There were many approaches to performance art which cannot be categorised in terms of the existential quest of the individual.





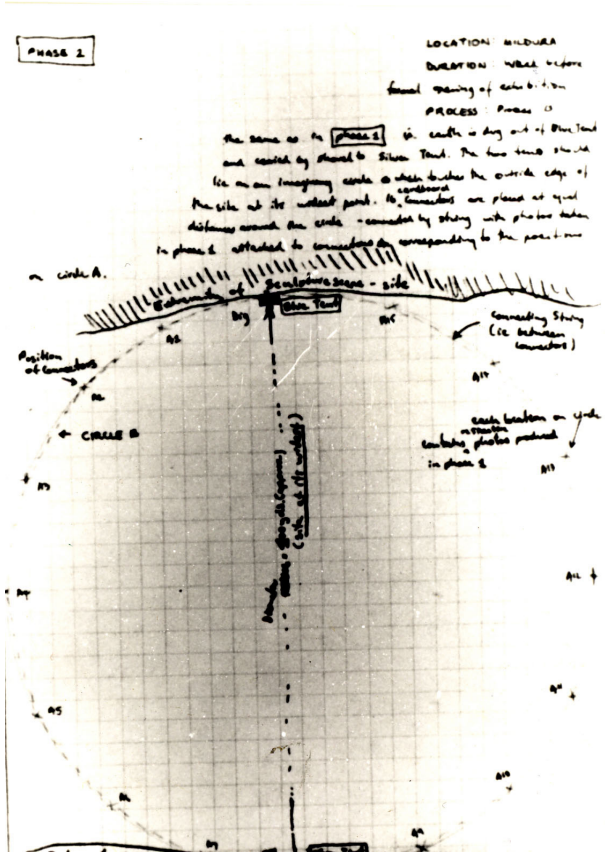
Aleks Danko and Joan Grounds, We Should Call It a Living Room, time-lapse film first shown at the Sydney Film Festival, 1975. Photograph from the artist's collection.

Aleks Danko's early works in collaboration with Joan Grounds brought a sense of fun into performance in order to make poignant social comments on sexuality. We Should Call It a Living Room (1975), an 'organic' performance on film, presented a 'growing room' complete with furniture. The 'room' and its contents were planted with grass and the process of growth recorded on time-lapse film. The lounge-room setting anticipated occupation, perhaps by those who belonged to the furniture, those who would be startled by the 'organic' anarchy reigning within inanimate objects. As the space matured a naked woman took her place in one of the armchairs and, as the credits rolled across the screen, a group of similarly unclad men and women joined the 'organic' madness of a suburban interior.[65]

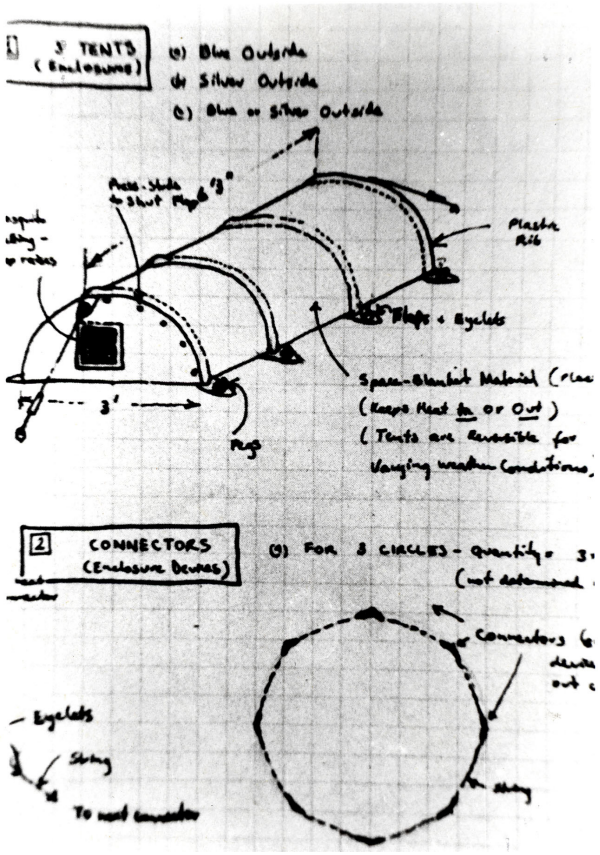
Jude Walton, who enlisted Danko as a set builder for Room (1982), concentrated on a similar theme. Suburban madness was created for an audience ushered into a large paper cube. Slides of domestic interiors projected from the outside depicted a 'reality' in crisis, as the washing-up appeared on the clothes-line, wearable garments were distracted from their mundane roles, and the noise of an ordered environment change into chaos. The audience taped into the 'room', trapped in the psychic space of housework gone haywire, could only stop the madness by breaking out. The participatory structure presented the audience with a decision: either they escaped or they remained locked within the neurosis of mundane work.

Like Danko, Peter Tyndall uses wit to analyse the social conventions of an art supposed to express a 'meaning.' The artist's critique of the gaze in the 1980s was precipitated by an opus of non-representational art and performance works which questioned the role of art and the position of the artist.

Tyndall's performances questioned art and its ritualised activities. Work in the mid-1970s, like Performed in the Storm/Observed in the Calm, or a Windy Day for Art (1976), which involved the artist clutching the drawing of an object being blown by the wind as friends watched from a warm lounge room,[66] and All/This/Art/And/Not/A/Drop/To/Drink (Apollo Bay, 1975), where the artist held 'word cards' against the panoramic backdrop of the ocean,[67] were simple actions presented in non-art contexts by 'an artist.'



Imants Tillers, *Enclosure*, performance / installation, Sydney beach, 1973. Photograph from *Art and Australia*, July/Sep 1975, page 55.



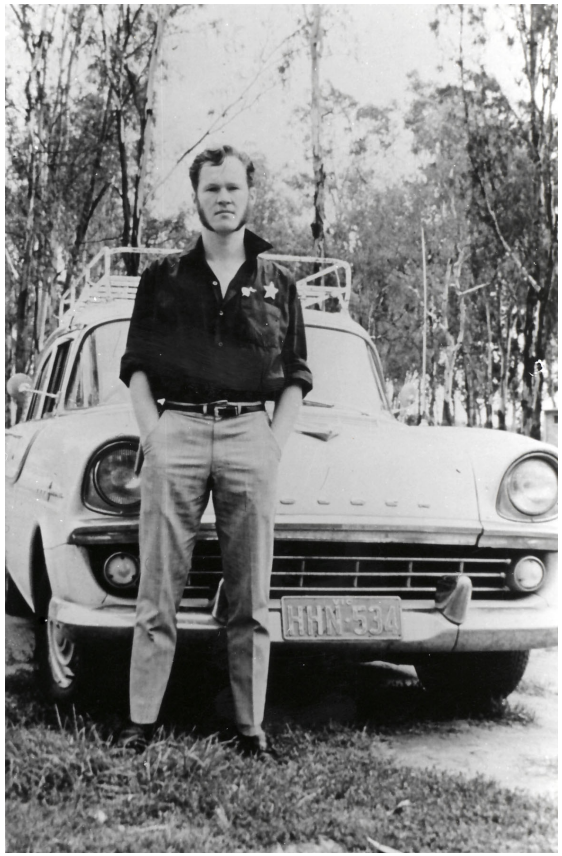
Imants Tillers, *Enclosure*, performance / installation, Sydney beach, 1973. Photograph from *Art and Australia*, July/Sep 1975, page 59.

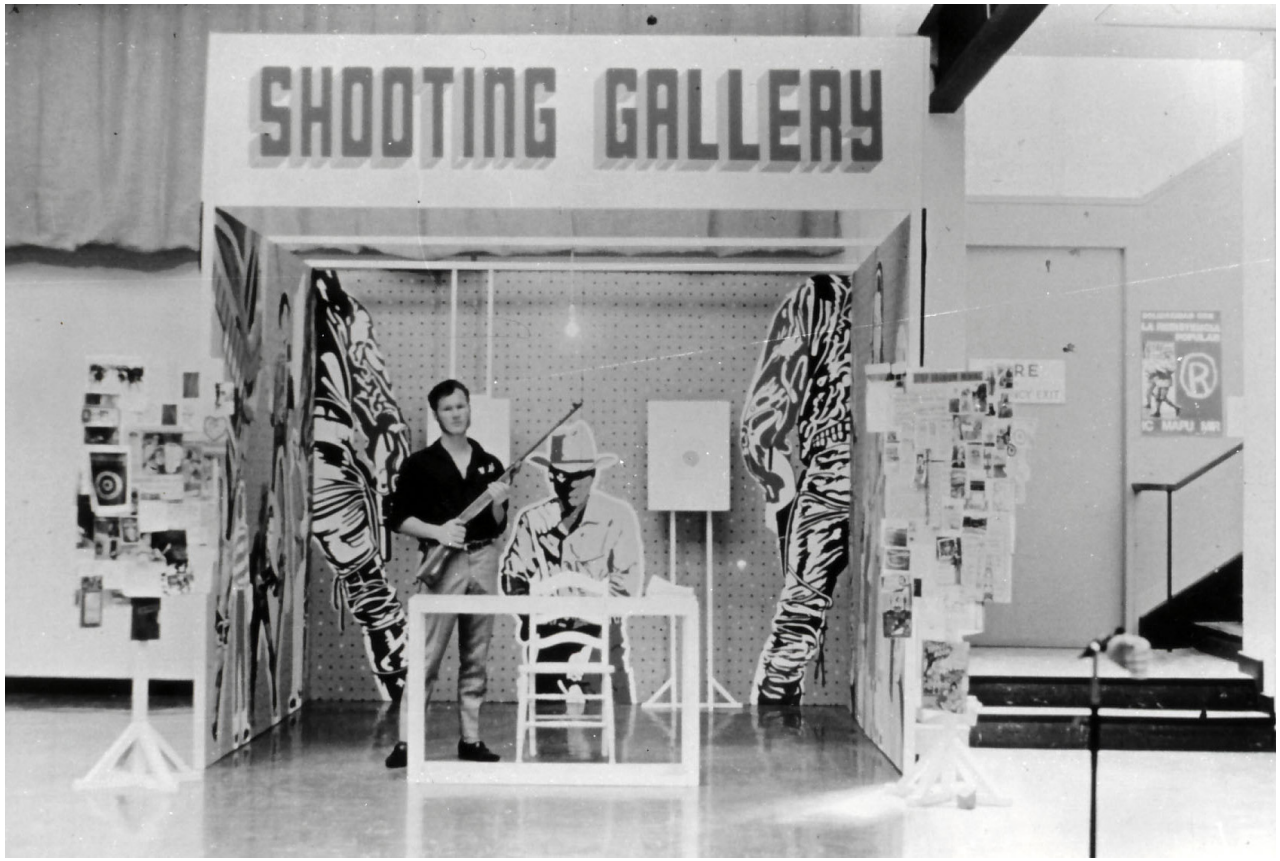
Peter Tyndall, *A Person Looks at a Work of Art / Someone Looks at Something . . . Performed in the Storm / Observed in the Calm, or a Windy Day for Art*, 1976. Photograph from the artist's collection.

Peter Tyndall, *A Person Looks at a Work of Art / Someone Looks at Something . . . Painting Red Poles White*, Monash University. Artists in Residence program 1975. Photograph from the artist's collection.

Painting Red Poles White (1975), where the artist simply photographed a workman changing the colours of a line of barrier poles set in a concrete grid,68 recalls the readymade strategy of Duchamp. Tyndall borrowed an event from life and named it art. All of Tyndall's work to date has addressed the institutionalisation of art. The first series of works entitled A Person Looks at a Work of Art (1975) were photographs of the artist looking at paintings in the National Gallery of Victoria. There were no 'essential qualities' in these works; they functioned within a specific social context by unveiling the cultural rituals of the museum.

Peter Tyndall's most elaborate performance, The Shooting Gallery, was presented at the 7th Mildura Sculpture Triennial in 1978 and later in the same year at the Brisbane Festival of Arts. In Mildura the performance was shown daily, from 10 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., over a period of two months. The Shooting Gallery was a replica of a carnival side-show complete with an attendant (Tyndall) dressed as a 1950s-style rocker — greased hair, long sideburns, tight trousers and pointed shoes transformed the artist into a stereotyped fairground character. The 'gallery' within a gallery transformed the context of both venues through their juxtaposition, as the art gallery, traditionally but by no means exclusively reserved for works of serious intent, was confronted with the superficiality of the side-show. The Shooting Gallery was likewise reconstructed through its contextualisation. The artist performed all the traditional functions of a side-show attendant: he set up the targets, loaded the air rifle and invited the audience to shoot. However, there were no prizes to be won; instead the artist gave participants their targets after they had tested their





skills and proceeded to discuss the ritualised process of the game and the metaphors associated with guns, shooting and targets. Often these discussions were lengthy debates between the artist and his audience, and the event evolved, like most of Tyndall's work, into a semiotic analysis of art and its context. The Shooting Gallery enticed the audience to play the game, to become involved in a simple procedure that would extend before the eye into a conceptual discourse: *A Person Looks At A Work of Art/Someone Looks at Something . . .*

Peter Tyndall, A Person Looks at a Work of Art / Someone Looks at Something . . . The Shooting Gallery, Ritual Significance or State Your Aim / Set Your Sights / Make Your Mark, detail, 7th Mildura Sculpture Triennial, 1978. Photograph from the artist's collection.

Peter Tyndall, A Person Looks at a Work of Art / Someone Looks at Something . . . , detail, Monash University, Department of Visual Art Gallery, 1975. Photograph from the artist's collection.

Performances by artists such as Danko and Tyndal offered a different role model to a younger generation of artists. The humour involved in such events helped to neutralise the high seriousness of experimental art. This in turn made the performances more widely accessible and, one could argue, more attuned to an Australian culture that had a history of satire dating back to Barry Humphries and earlier.

Derek Kreckler's Wet Dream (1980) was a performance in two parts. The title of the performance was sexually provocative yet the action was ridiculous. The artist, dressed in a new business suit, waded into the ocean and deliberately fell backwards into the water and floated along the beach. This part of the performance was documented on colour film from three angles. The second part of the performance was presented in an art gallery against an eighteen-metre white wall. A bed was placed in the centre and a man with a saxophone leant against the wall on the extreme left. After several minutes Kreckler entered, dressed in his suit, and got into the bed pulling the covers over his head and

Derek Kreckler, Wet Dream, SA School of Art, 1978. Photograph from the artist's collection; photographer James Cowley.

obscuring himself from the audience. At that point the lights went out; six slide projectors, operated by computer, started to show the panorama of the beach, and the saxophone player began the tune 'Beautiful Dreamer.' On the screen the audience witnessed the action at the beach: the man walked into the water, and as the image reached the centre of the screen, above the bed, he fell backwards into the sea. The saxophone player switched tunes to a version of 'Wake unto Me' and the action on the screen continued until the man in the ocean regained an upright position and walked off the right hand screen. At that instant the projectors were stopped, the lights were turned on and the saxophone player disappeared. Finally, Kreckler rose from his dream dripping wet; the 'bed' was actually a hollow structure full of water.

Derek Kreckler was part of a new generation of performance artists who started to produce works at the turn of the decade. Performance works by other artists associated with this generation will be considered in the final chapter of this book. Collaborations by Richard Grayson and Michele Luke; performances produced by Stephen Wigg and David Watt, and works by the Sydney-based group Grotesqui Monkey Choir are important because they deal with relationships between the sexes (Grayson/Luke, Grotesqui Monkey Choir), the sexual stereotypes of masculinity (Wigg/Watt, Mark Rogers) or both. Artists associated with the new generation of performance art were aware of the issues pertaining to experimental and post-object art in Australia. They were also aware of the problems associated with claiming an avant-garde status for performance.

Derek Kreckler does not deny the importance of the experimental generation that preceded him — he cites John Cage as a mentor[69]— but, like other artists of his generation, he is critical of the idea of the artist as a unique individual. Kreckler is committed to experimentation in the visual arts but he is politically aware of his position as an artist in a society that still values a humanist interpretation of the individual.

Although the experimental art of the 1970s is generally associated with a post-modern shift or a reaction against late modernism, it is apparent that experimentalism is in many ways an avant-garde concept. The avant-garde was committed to newness and progress in the arts, however, in Greenberg's interpretation of modernism this led to the idea that each new style or movement surpassed the preceding one. This reading of progress was contradictory to the pluralism of the 1970s that valued various cross-disciplinary approaches to the visual arts and was philosophically committed to a critique of 'progress for its own sake.' This was particularly apparent in ritual performances that focused on the devastation of the environment informed by a belief in humanist progress. 'Man' as 'the measure of all things' had destroyed the planet with toxic waste and plundered the world's natural resources for his own financial gain. Body artists were also aware that the humanist doctrine of power and control was misplaced. If 'man' was master of his own house (specifically his mind) why was there so much psychological disturbance? Body artists, exploring psychoanalytic concepts, attempted to reposition what had been repressed by society.

In the 1980s the Western artworld experienced a return to painting and to the established gallery and market system. At that time there were criticisms levelled at the experimental practices of the 1970s by critics such as Bonito Oliva who claimed that artists were tired of ideological interference in the arts, they wanted to return to a more subjective practice and emphasise their own centrality in the work.[70] According to Oliva:

> ***The art of the immediate past [the 1970s] sought to take part in social change through the expansion of new processes and new materials, moving away from painting and from the static time of the work. Present art tends to discard illusions of what lies outside itself, and to turn back on its own footsteps.[71]***

Oliva argued that experimentation and the 'hysteria for the new typical of the traditional avant-garde' had come under attack because of its association with progress in the Western world.[72] However, the Italian critic still maintained the word avant-garde in his descriptive title for the new art, he called it the trans-avantgarde. Oliva's criticism is convoluted and one needs to be suspicious of its claims to suspend ideology as it clearly supports a return to the market after a decade of change where artists had sought to find alternative ways to produce and distribute their works. It is also apparent that a lot of the experimental modes of the 1970s were not concerned with 'new' materials. Some performance artists integrated video and amplified sound into their works but many turned to poor materials such as earth, sand or water. The use of the body in art is not new; figurative and narrative painting both focused on the body. In some ways it is possible to construct a continuum been the return to narrative and figuration in the 1980s and the kind of work being presented by the body artists. The destruction of the environment and the decay of Western society was addressed in narrative modes by body artists and those producing ritual performances. The return to the body and natural materials, an interest in ancient rites and alternative religions and therapies was an attempt to reclaim what had been lost: it was more a return to the past than a faith in the future that one associates with some aspects of an earlier avant-garde.

Responding to the type of criticism apparent in Oliva's thesis, the French critic Jean-Francois Lyotard argued that to reject experimentation was a conservative move. He said:

> ***. . . in the diverse invitations to suspend artistic experimentation, there is an identical call for order, a desire for unity, for identity, for security, or popularity . . . Artists and writers must be brought back into the bosom of the community, or at least, if the latter is considered to be ill, they must be assigned the task of healing it. There is an irrefutable sign of this common disposition: it is that for all those writers nothing is more urgent than to liquidate the heritage of the avant-gardes.***[73]

Experimental art, as outlined in this chapter, was also criticised by political artists and critics who considered various modes of performance to be self-referential. Body art became the major focus of such criticisms at the end of the decade. Mary Kelly, a British artist concerned with the social construction of femininity, argued that body artists addressed 'the Husserlian body, discovered as what belongs to me . . . the body of the self-possessing artistic subject.'74 A phenomenological interpretation of the body isolates the consciousness from the material world. Here the world is known through personal experience, how reality appears to be from a subjective point of view.75 In Australia Terry Smith expressed a similar position when he withdrew work from the Act 1 exhibition because he objected to the title 'performance art.'76

A survey of performance art in the 1970s shows that there were many approaches to the field and that body art should not be foregrounded. The body artists were concerned with the subjective space of the self; they believed that by focusing on repressed fears and desires that they could transgress the polite codes of a civilised society. The acceptance of this form of performance was consolidated in Australia in 1979 when European Dialogue: the 3rd Biennale of Sydney presented performances and documentation by Hermann Nitsch, Klaus Rinke, Jurgen Klauke and Mike Parr.[77] In many ways the transgressive response, especially evident in male artists' works, re-enacted a conventional Oedipal revolt: the desire of the sons to murder the fathers, but, it is also apparent that some of the most significant works of body art were concerned with the social construction of sexuality. In the following chapter it will be argued that a misreading has silenced this aspect of the work. Furthermore, a misreading of body art separates the body works from other practices of performance art. Artists cannot be neatly categorised into different performance art compartments, the complexities of a practice that focuses on the body need to be taken into account and placed within a socio-political context.

ENDNOTES

1 See S. Britton (ed.), *A Decade at the EAF: A History of the Experimental Art Foundation*, 1974-1984, EAF Press, Adelaide, 1984, p. 37.

2 D. Brook, 'Imants Tillers and the Redefinition of Art in Australia', *Art and Australia,* July-September 1975, p. 55.

3 See D. Brook, 'From the Margin', *Agenda* vol. 1, no. 2, August 1988, special supplement *Art Papers*, pp. 8-10, and 'Towards a Definition of a "Conceptual Art"', *Leonardo*, no. 5, 1972, pp. 49-50.

4 D. Brook, 'Imants Tillers', p. 59.

5 D. Brook, 'Imants Tillers', pp. 56-8.

6 This example was used by Brook in his essay 'Post-object Art in Australia and New Zealand' 1976, published in S. Britton (ed.), *A Decade at the EAF*, p. 21.

7 D. Brook, 'Art and the Social Institutions', in S. Britton, (ed.), *A Decade at the EAF,* p. 19.

8 D. Brook, 'Post-object Art', p. 24.

9 See D. Brook, 'A New Theory of Art', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1980, pp. 305-21. George Dickie's essay 'The Institutional Conception of Art' in B.R. Tilgmann (ed.), *Language and Aesthetics,* Kansas University Press, Kansas, 1973, pp. 21-30, caused considerable debate within the 'ordinary language' school of aestheticians. The essays collected in G. Dickie and R. Sclafani, (eds.), *Aesthetics: A Critical Anthology,* St Martin's Press, New York, 1977 present the most rigorous explications of the 'institutional' theory and its faults to date. See especially: A. Danto, 'The Artistic Enfranchisement of Real Objects: The Artworld', pp. 22-35; T. Cohen, 'A Critique of the Institutional Theory of Art: The Possibility of Art', pp. l83-95; G. Dickie, 'A Response to Cohen: The Actuality of Art', pp. 196-200; and M. Weitz, 'Wittgenstein's Aesthetics', pp. 474-83. The ordinary language aestheticians were applying their theories to the late works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, see C. Barrett, (ed.), *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, compiled from notes taken by Y. Smythies, R. Rhees and J. Taylor, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1967.

10 G. Dickie, 'A Response to Cohen', p. 196.

11 G. Dickie, 'The Institutional Conception of Art', p. 29. Considering Duchamp, Dickie wrote: 'Our attention is forced away from the object's obvious properties to a consideration of the objects and their social context.'

12 See especially T. Cohen, 'A Critique of the Institutional Theory of Art', pp. 183-95, where the author engages in a debate with Dickie's theory using Duchamp's ready-mades.

13 D. Brook, 'A New Theory of Art', p. 305.

14 See D. Brook, 'Art and the Social Institutions' (1977), in S. Britton (ed.), *A Decade at the EAF*, pp. 16-20.

15 C. Brice, 'Police Dilemma in Bomb Case: An Extortion or a Prank?', *Advertiser*, l December 1979, p. 1.

16 C. Brice, 'Police Dilemma in Bomb Case'.

17 . The Editor, 'The Skunk Oil File', *Advertiser*, 4 December 1979, p. 5.

18 D. Brook, 'Skunk Oil "Work of Art"', Letters to the Editor, *Advertiser*, 6 December 1979, p. 5.

19 D. Brook, 'Skunk Oil'.

20 D. Brook, 'Skunk Oil'.

21 D. Brook, 'Skunk Oil'.

22 D. Brook, 'A New Theory of Art', p. 305.

23 The theoretical value or status of Brook's theory for artists associated with the Experimental Art Foundation is evident in their documentary publication, where Chapter 2, 'Theory', consists exclusively of reprints of Donald Brook's essays, some of which were first published as small press publications by the EAF. The editor introduced the essays saying: Donald Brook is recorded in Noel Sheridan's diary of 1975 as helping to build partitions and fix the wiring at the EAF; to put a theory into practice there must be a physical site for it, and luckily the most respected art theorist in Australia is also good with his hands. The theories that Donald Brook gave to those who came and listened, and to many others who read them in various forms, created the fundamental base on which the whole rationale for the Foundation rested. Five of the many papers he wrote, delivered and/or published during the period 1975-77 when he was working closely with the EAF are reproduced here.
S. Britton (ed.), *A Decade at the EAF,* (p. 16.)

24 This statement was displayed in the foyer of the EAF and was reprinted on the inside front cover of N. Sheridan (ed.), *The Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, South Australia,* EAF Press, Adelaide, 1979.

25 Taped interview with Bob Ramsay, March 1988.

26 See D. Kerr, 'A Seeker of New Meanings', in S. Britton (ed.), *A Decade of the EAF*, p. 14.

27 D. Brook, 'A New Theory of Art', p. 307.

28 Statement dated 21 August 1975, signed by Donald Brook as the Chairman of the Experimental Art Foundation, reprinted in S. Britton (ed.), p. 34.

29 Taped interview with Stelarc, 19 August 1987.

30 These observations are based on my own memory of the performance and the controversy that surrounded it, which generated debate in the days after the event. There is no documentation, as far as I am aware, which outlines the performance in any detail.

31 In N. Sheridan (ed.), no pag.

32 See especially his comments in 'Idea Demonstrations: Body Art and "Video Freaks" in Sydney', *Studio International*, vol. 185, no. 956, June 1973, p. 269, where he writes: 'Everywhere the question comes up: May I not butcher my enemies (or my friends, or strangers for that matter) as art?' and a little earlier in the article: 'One might well inquire whether the artistic doctrines of aesthetic disinterestedness and "physical distance"

have crippled us, or whether we are secretly grateful for the opportunity to operate Roman appetites under an eighteenth-century rationalistic licence.'

33 D. Brook, 'Imants Tillers and the Redefinition of Art in Australia', p. 59.

34 D. Brook, 'A New Theory of Art', p. 321.

35 D. Brook, 'From the Margin', *Agenda*, vol. 1, no. 2, August 1988, *Art Papers*, special supplement, p. 8.

36 In Australia the published debates between Brian Medlin and Donald Brook concerning the social role of art, and Terry Smith's criticism of body art, stand as important Australian documents which detail the arguments between the notion of an autonomous art and an art which accepts a degree of social responsibility. See B. Medlin, 'Culture, Ideology and Power', and D. Brook, 'The Nature of Art and some Implications for Public Policy' in N. Sheridan (ed.), *The Experimental Art Foundation*, and T. Smith, 'Private Art and Public Work', in *Act 1: An Exhibition of Performance and Participatory Art*, exhibition catalogue, Australian National University Arts Centre, Canberra, 1978, no pag.

37 See N. Sheridan and I. de Gruchy (eds.), *The Experimental Art Foundation,* EAF Press, Adelaide, 1976, no pag.

38 See S. Britton (ed.), *A Decade at the EAF,* pp. 46-7.

39 See R. Goldberg, *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1988, first published as *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present,* Thames and Hudson, London, 1979.

40 See especially R. Goldberg, 'Performance: A Hidden History' in G. Battcock and R. Nickas, (eds.), *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, Dutton, New York, 1984, pp. 24-36.

41 See P. Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, tr. M. Shaw, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1984.

42 M. Parr, *Pensees a la Carte*, artist's broadsheet, 28 April 1975, as quoted by B. Murphy in *Some Recent Art in Adelaide, Project l8,* exhibition catalogue, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1977, p. 3, note 3.

43 See H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1955 and *An Essay on Liberation*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1969.

44 See L. Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy*, tr. B. Brewster, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971, pp. 127-86.

45 L. Althusser, *Lenin andPphilosophy,* pp.127-86.

46 C. Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism,* Abacus, London, 1980.

47 See J. Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising,* Marion Boyars, London, 1978.

48 The change of focus for 1980s feminism was undoubtedly precipitated by the growing interest within British Marxism in structuralist theories. One of the first books to analyse the significance of psychoanalysis for feminism was Juliet Mitchell's influential text, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and women*, Vintage, New York, 1975. In the early 1980s a psychoanalytic interpretation was continued in J. Mitchell and J. Rose, (eds.), *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne,* Macmillan, London, 1982, where the authors included valuable introductions to the texts of Lacan. In the same year Jane Gallop published *Feminism and Psychoanalysis — The Daughter's Seduction,* Macmillan, London, 1982.

49 Body art will be considered in Chapter 3; ritual practices tend to be used by many performance artists — the reasons for this will be discussed in the following chapter and in Chapter 4, where an ecological philosophy will be considered.

50 Excerpts from script reprinted in N. Sheridan (ed.), *The Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, South Australia*, E.A.F. Press, Adelaide, 1979, no.pag.

51 S. Richter, 'Rules of the game', *Art Network*, no. 2, Spring 1980, p. 41.

52 S. Richter, *Art Network*, p.41.

53 S. Richter, *Art Network*, p.41.

54 S. Richter, *Art Network*, p.41.

55 Taped interview with Bob Ramsay, March 1988.

56 Information supplied by Bob Ramsay for research purposes.

57 Information supplied by Bob Ramsay for research purposes.

58 Taped interview with Bob Ramsay, March 1988.

59 D. Brook, 'Imants Tillers and the Redefinition of Art in Australia', p. 55.

60 See documentation of Hobba's work in N. Sheridan, (ed.), and S. Britton (ed.), *A Decade at the EAF,* p. 43.

61 Taped interview with Jim Cowley, March 1988; see also documentation in N. Sheridan (ed.), *The Experimental Art Foundation.*

62 Documentation in N. Sheridan (ed.), *The Experimental Art Foundation.*

63 See R. McDonald and J. Pryor (eds.), *Final Verse: Art Unit 82-85,* Sylvester Studios, Redfern, 1988. The then new generation of performance artists will be discussed in Chapter 5.

64 Taped interview with Richard Grayson, April 1988.

65 The film *We Should Call It a Living Room* was first shown at the Sydney Film Festival in 1975 and screened later that year in the *Performance, Documents, Film, Video* exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria.

66 Peter Tyndall, in artists' chronicle section in N. Howe, 'A History of Australian Performance Art', unpublished manuscript, no pag.

67 Peter Tyndall in N. Howe, 'A History of Australian Performance Art'.

68 Peter Tyndall in N. Howe, 'A History of Australian Performance Art'.

69 D. Kreckler, *Conceptual Theatres 1978-1990*, Master of Arts by Studio and Research Paper, Sydney College of the Arts, 1990.

70 See A. B. Oliva, 'The International Trans-Avantgarde', *Flash Art,* October-November, 1982, pp. 36-38.

71 B. Oliva, 'The International Trans-Avantgarde', p.36.

72 B. Oliva, 'The International Trans-Avantgarde',p. 36.

73 J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, tr. G. Bennington and B. Massumi, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986, p. 73.

74 See M. Kelly, 'Re-viewing Modernist Criticism', *Screen*, vol. 22, no.3, August 1981, p. 54. Husserl is considered to be the 'father' of phenomenology; Merleau-Ponty, discussed in Chapter 1, continued work in the area and was contemporary in the 1950s and 1960s.

75 See J. Hospers., *An Introduction to Philosophical Analysis*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1956; rev. edn., 1981, p. 530-1.

76 Smith had been planning to exhibit a political community-based work, which would encourage participation from the local community in Canberra. His essay titled 'Private Art or Public Work' presents a strong critique of body art. See *Act 1: An Exhibition of Performance and Participatory Art*, exhibition catalogue, Australian National University Arts Centre, Canberra, no pag.

77 For an analysis of some of the works shown by these artists see M. Parr, 'Parallel Fictions: The Third Biennale of Sydney, 1979', *Art and Australia*, vol. 17, no. 2, December 1979, pp. 172-182.