



BODYANDSELF

PERFORMANCE ART IN AUSTRALIA 1969-92 | ANNE MARSH

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INTRODUCTION

AND PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969-1992 was initially written to fill a gap in Australian art history. Art practices that extended the boundaries of the art museum in the late 1960s and 1970s appeared to have been forgotten in the era of the 'post' (post-conceptualism, post-pop, post-feminism etc.). In the introduction to the 1993 edition of this book, I said that I wanted to reconstruct the development of performance art from circa 1969 to 1992 in an attempt to redress this cultural amnesia. Writing now, in 2011, this amnesia is still apparent in Australia, despite what has been termed a 'performative turn' in critical theory. A turn that Michel Benamou cites as "the unifying mode of the postmodern" and Erika Fischer-Lichte argues is the "prevailing culture" of the twentieth century.¹

IN Europe and North America there has been some substantial work in the field since 1993. Peggy Phelan's book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Amelia Jones's *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), Kathy O'Dell's *Contract with the Skin* (1998), Jane Blocker's *What the Body Cost* (2004), and Erika Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008) stand out in my mind as major contributions to the field but each from quite different perspectives. The merging of art history and performance studies has contributed to a critical mass with journals such as *The Drama Review* (TDR), *Performance Art Journal* (PAJ) and *Australasian Drama Studies* running papers on performance art. In Australia, Edward Scheer's monograph on Mike Parr, *The Infinity Machine* (2009), is representative of this merger.

INTRODUCTION

This on-line version of Body and Self is essentially an archival edition. The text has been edited, corrected and revised but the argument and content remains the same. The major difference is that, wherever possible, archival video imagery has been embedded together with the original black and white photographs. This has been made possible by a new research project which considers the documentation and remediation of performance art. The Australian Video Art Archive is part of this project and it has allowed for the conservation of old videotape, excerpts of which are included in this book.

Body and Self charts a course from the happenings of the 1960s, through body art in the 1970s, towards a more political body in the 1980s and 1990s. The text draws on contemporary theories of the subject and considers changes in art practice in conjunction with social critiques.

The performance art considered here had its genesis in the visual arts and emerged in relation to conceptual art, informal sculpture, earth art, environments, film, video, and popular culture.

It was a practice located in a specific time and place and usually involved the presence of the artist before his or her audience. Alternatively, the artist may have orchestrated an event in which the audience was involved in some way but the artist was physically absent.

The position of the individual in society is taken to be of paramount concern in performance art. If performance is different from other modes of art, it is invariably the presence of the artist before an audience that marks the distinction. The relationship with the viewer, sometimes the participant, is paramount. Chance, play, unscripted participation, various technological interventions (slides, video, computer interactions) and the literal absence of the artist, all engage with the problem of the artist's presence as the unique maker of meaning. Body art presents an important moment in the history of performance art because it often expresses individual psychological disturbances. Although this mode of performance has been criticized as self-obsessive, it often transgresses social laws or points to the fragility of human life.

Writers have claimed that performance art is concerned with place, space and time; that it is more concerned with process than with product, that it challenges dominant codes and represents a concerted attack on the museum.² Although these definitions are useful, they tend to be overly generalized observations which could be equally applicable to a range of works produced since the 1960s, such as conceptual art, earth art, sculptural installation, and video.³ In the following pages, in a more specific interpretation, I will try to situate performance art as a practice engaged with contemporary perceptions of the body and the self in the world.

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

IN CHAPTER 1 I will examine the connection between art and life and analyze the late 1960s in Australia and the ways in which social issues became manifest in the art world. The relationship between Australian artists and their contemporaries overseas will be framed against a background of activities in Sydney and Melbourne between 1970 and 1973. I have included a lengthy discussion of events at Inhibodress artists' space in Woolloomooloo, since this helps to place Australian performance within a larger 'international' context. The role of critics, curators, exhibitions and alternative art spaces is considered in relation to the spread of performance art activities to other states.

CHAPTER 2 concentrates on experimental art in Australia and the problems associated with the concept of the avant-garde. I have chosen to concentrate on the debates which arose at the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF) in Adelaide. The EAF was the first experimental venue to receive recurrent government funding, which allowed it to host many interstate and overseas artists. This, together with the involvement of key figures, such as Donald Brook and Noel Sheridan, created a fertile space in which artists could develop their ideas.

CHAPTER 3 analyses the complexities of body art and attempts to highlight the problems associated with an 'instinctual revolt', one of the major strategies associated with a New Left program of 'revolution through lifestyle' which informed the counter-culture.⁴

IN CHAPTER 4 I consider ritual performance and how it addressed environmental and ecological issues. The discussion covers the difference between an ecological concern, which focuses on the biological body and its relationship to the natural environment, and an environmental concern, which looks at the devastation of the planet. The political motivation behind the latter is considered together with other activist performances.

At the end of the 1970s Australian performance artists started to reconsider the relationship between subjectivity and political activity. A shift from humanist to anti-humanist theories became evident as artists concerned with political issues started to question their role in promoting social change. The structuralist analysis of culture, which stressed the ideological workings of the unconscious, represented a dramatic change in the role that the individual could play in social change. The structuralists argued that individuality was a humanist myth and they insisted that the subject (once the individual) was *always already* spoken by language. In short, social structures (family, church, state) determined the

individual; there was no free will as such, nor any possibility of an instinctual response. Following on from Freud's anti-humanist thesis, 'man' was no longer seen as an individual in control of his own destiny. Thus the correlation between consciousness and action, which had formed the backbone of humanist interpretations of social change, was scrutinized. Freud's analysis of the social construction of the subject was re-read and annexed to a specifically political analysis by Marxists and feminists.⁵

CHAPTER 5 looks at the aftermath of the structuralist critique and how it affected performance art. The idea that the subject is already spoken rang a kind of death knell for some forms of performance art. This was particularly evident in body art, which focused on the authenticity of individual experience. The idea of instinctual response was replaced by an analysis of subjectivity which saw the body as a social construction. In the 1980s many performance artists started to examine body language as a way of underlining stereotypical behaviours. Artists addressing the social construction of femininity attempted to find a place in which women could speak about their gender difference without falling into the trap of celebrating biological specificity. The idea that woman is different had already been used for the interests of patriarchy: woman-nature-reproduction the binary of man-culture-production often saw women confined to the home to bring up children and nurture the family.

Body and Self is constructed both thematically and chronologically. It does not reproduce a linear history, but aims to interpret performance art within a socio-historic framework so that the changes in the artists' interpretations of the subject will emerge.

ENDNOTES

- 1 For a useful overview see Tracy C. Davis, 'Introduction: The Pirouette, Detour, Revolution, Deflection, Deviation, Tack, and Yaw of the Performative Turn', in T.C. Davis (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, 2008, pp. 1-10. Michel Benamou, 'Presence and Play', in M. Benamou and C. Caramello (eds.), *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, Coda Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 1977, p. 3. Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, Routledge, New York and London, 2005, p. 14.
- 2 These ideas are common in most texts on performance art; see for example G. Battcock and R. Nickas (eds.), *The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology*, Dutton, New York, 1984; M. Benamou and C. Caramello (eds.), *Performance in Postmodern Culture*; and H. M. Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde since 1970*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1989.
- 3 In regard to art in the 1960s and 1970s, see G. Celant, *Art Povera*, Studio Vista, London, 1969; G. Battcock (ed.), *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology*, Dutton, New York, 1978; and R. Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1977. The similarities and differences between performance and other modes of art in the 1960s and 1970s will be developed in the first part of this book.
- 4 See particularly H. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, Beacon, Boston, 1955. Marcuse's works were widely read in the 1960s and 1970s and, although it is easier to establish a fairly direct influence on the counter-culture in America, it is also apparent that Marcuse was broadly accessible to a young generation in Australia. The absorption of Marcuse's thesis in Australia will be discussed in Chapter 1.
- 5 See particularly J. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women*, Vintage, New York, 1975; and L. Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971, especially the essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses', pp. 127-86. Althusser's essay was the first widely read Marxist structuralist analysis of the subject to be translated into English.