

AFTERGLOW: PERFORMANCE ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

Performance art has become a specialised field of practice within the visual arts. Many art schools have courses that focus on teaching performance art, art historians have traced the historical development of the practice, and art museums have begun to appoint curators to collect and exhibit the work of performance artists.

In Australia, performance art established itself as a form of visual art practice in the early 1970s, when art galleries began to host performance events. These events should not be confused with theatre or other forms of dramatic performance. In order to emphasise this distinction, performance artists have often described their work as Body Art, Live Art or Action Art. Taking inspiration from the Happenings and cathartic rituals of 1960s' counter-culture, performance artists are primarily concerned with making art that is connected directly with bodily sensations and the actual, live experience of an event.

Many performance artists are opposed to the production of art objects that can be treated as commodities to be bought and sold or preserved in a museum. Instead, their artwork is concerned with being in the moment. However, many performance artists include photography in their practice. Photography serves a range of functions, most commonly to make a reliable record or document that will preserve the original, transitory event. In so doing, these artists translate their performance actions into photographic art works.

Afterglow: performance art and photography highlights the creative ways that Australian performance artists have worked with still photography over a 40 year period. In a range of different ways, the artists in this exhibition have used photography to compose dynamic images of their temporal activities and to extend the audience for their performances beyond the event itself.

Afterglow draws on MGA's substantial collection of photographs related to Australian performance art; the exhibition shows that photographs of performance art have become a significant category in the history of Australian photography.

Tim Johnson's "Light performances" (1971–2) were some of the first art performances staged in Australian gallery spaces. For these events Johnson swung a lightbulb around on a long piece of electrical flex before releasing it to fly across the room and smash onto the floor. The aim of these performances was quite simple: to produce aesthetic experiences that were surprising and physically palpable. Johnson used the swinging lightbulb to build up a sense of anticipation, before bringing the action to a smashing crescendo that threw the audiences back into darkness.

Photographic documentation of these performances was always important to Johnson, who at the time was also using photography to create conceptual artworks and artist's books. Because slow shutter speeds were required in the darkened gallery spaces, the photographs translate the feverish action of the performances into ambient arcs of light. In some

instances, the “Light performances” were staged over the course of an exhibition, with the documentary photographs being hung progressively on the walls of the gallery.

Mike Parr is a performance artist who uses his own flesh as an object for artistic manipulation and experimentation. Performance artists who work in this mode are often described as 'body-artists'. The actions that Parr performs on himself have both social and psychological dimensions. They critique social conventions while also functioning as cathartic gestures for the artist. As a cathartic action, “Leg spiral” (1975) is specifically related to the fact that Parr was born with one arm. The performance involved wrapping a length of cordite (a dynamite wick) around his lower leg and igniting it to re-enact the primal trauma of ‘discovering’ a missing limb.

"Leg spiral" was performed and photographed in a studio space that Parr specifically designed for documenting his performance-based artworks. Fitted with 16 photofloods, which were reflected through filters to produce a bright diffuse light, this space made photographic documentation an integral aspect of how Parr’s performances were scripted and staged. Parr produced many of his most memorable works in this studio, and he has continued to use the photographs of these performances as source material for self-portraiture and gallery installations throughout his career.

Parr and Tim Johnson (along with Peter Kennedy) founded Inhibodress artist’s space in Sydney in 1970. They used this gallery space to champion Australian performance art and to exhibit documentary material of work being done by performance artists overseas. The photographs of performances by Parr and Johnson included in *Afterglow* demonstrate a particular interest in grainy black-and-white photographic evidence. The images of “Leg spiral” and “Light performances” have a cool documentary quality. These photographs also foreground the limitations of the camera by focusing on pure light, which causes documentary details to be overexposed or lost in blackness.

Gordon Bennett’s “Self -portrait (nuance)” performance was staged for the camera rather than a live audience. The artist prepared for the performance by painting his face with polyvinyl acetate glue. The process of peeling away the pale skin, created by the dry glue, was then documented in a series of photographs.

This work is a subtle critique of simplistic oppositions between people who have light skin and people have dark skin. Bennett discovered that he was of Aboriginal descent when he was 11 years old, but he resisted identifying as an Indigenous Australian for another 20 years. Conceived as a self-portrait, this work alludes to Bennett’s own process of ‘coming out’ as an Aboriginal man; removing his white mask. But, rather than representing this process in terms of a simple opposition, the photographs emphasise the nuanced ambiguities and transitory nature of identity.

This work was produced in the 1990s, but Bennett knowingly employs black-and-white photography in order to evoke the austere aesthetic of performance art documentation

from the 1970s. He has combined these photographs with a series of painted panels that reiterate the nuanced nature of racial identity in a more conceptual form.

Jill Orr's "Lunch with the birds" (1979) performance took place on St Kilda beach on a wintery day. It was conceived as a shamanistic ritual that would provide an antidote to the junk food that is often thrown to scavenging seagulls. Dressed in her mother's wedding gown, Orr lay on the beach surrounded by a meal of whole bread, fresh fish and pure grain, and waited for the birds to come and commune with her on the foreshore.

Apart from the photographer Elizabeth Campbell, who had been commissioned to document the event, there was no human audience on the beach. Like other performances that Orr has enacted in the landscape, nature itself is the primary audience for this ritual. All the same, Orr is quite conscious of using photography to share the performance with gallery audiences. Working with the photographic documentation after the event, Orr has composed the images as a narrative sequence, and presented them on black mount boards to suggest a filmstrip.

Unlike many performance artists of her generation, Orr embraces photography as a creative form of expression. Arguments that documentary photographs objectified and commodified their subject meant that many radical artists of the 1970s were reluctant to translate live performances into still images. Orr, however, saw the potential for poetic narratives in photographic documentation and she often projected this material to create backdrops for subsequent live performances.

During the early 1980s **Juan Davila** staged a series of performances based on the iconography of the *Pietà*. The *Pietà* composition, which came to prominence in fifteenth century Italian art, traditionally shows the Virgin Mary lamenting over the body of a dead Christ. More generally, it symbolises human empathy and the pathos of the flesh. Having grown up in the predominantly Roman Catholic country of Chile, Davila is well aware of how the image of the *Pietà* has been continually re-worked in both art history and popular culture. His versions consciously participate in this ongoing process of appropriation and re-interpretation.

In order to underscore this process of appropriation, Davila makes photographic documentation and reproduction an integral part of his performances. Moreover, Davila uses the photographs to create further versions by adding layers of collage and paint to the surface of the prints. The monumental version held in MGA's permanent collection clearly demonstrates how Davila brings the photographic document to life as a glimmering, multi-layered surface.

Linda Sproul's "Which side do you dress?" (1992) was a two-part performance that confused and challenged gender stereotyping. For the first part of the performance Sproul assumed the identity of "Victor" and dressed in a transparent business suit. "Victor" struck a series of poses based on the gestures of cricket and football umpires, with advertisements for "Linda" electric blankets projected nearby. For the second part of the performance, Sproul discarded

her suit and dressed as the erotic entertainer "Victoria". She then moved through and interacted with the audience, before staging a strip tease on a podium.

Sproul has employed two different forms of photography to translate the "Which side do you dress?" performance into still images. The first part of the performance is presented as a series of photographs based on the conventions of newspaper advertising, with "Victor" posing beside actual advertisements that sexualise domestic appliances. The second part of the performance is accounted for by documentary photographs that embed the viewer in the original event.

Hayden Fowler's "Call of the wild" (2007) performance took place in the shop front of a fashion boutique during the Auckland Festival. Over the course of a week Fowler had a pair of extinct Huia birds tattooed across his back. This species of bird became extinct in the early twentieth century as a result of a fashion craze, which was precipitated by the presentation of Huia tail feathers to the Duke of York when he visited New Zealand in 1901. By having the Huia birds permanently inked into his flesh, Fowler simultaneously offers up his own body as a memorial to this beautiful bird species while challenging the reckless caprices of fashionable consumerism.

The primary spectators for this performance were shoppers wandering the streets of Auckland's fashion district, but the orchestration of the event clearly anticipates the translation of this artwork into photographic form. Having prepared a pristine white stage-set, Fowler worked closely with the photographer (Sarah Smuts-Kennedy) and the tattoo artist (Captain Marvin Lerner) to produce a sequence of images that elegantly capture the physical intensity of the process.

Ash Keating's "Work in progress" (2006) documents a guerrilla performance that he staged at the opening of an exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, in February 2006. Accompanied by a photographer, Keating descended on a skip of vinyl detritus that had been discarded by the gallery technicians when they de-installed the previous exhibition. Keating wrapped himself in the petrochemical waste, transforming himself in a kind of ecological monster in order to make a statement about the impact of non-biodegradable materials on the environment.

Performance artworks that are staged in ways that interrupt daily routines, or interfere with people's expectations, are often described as 'interventions'. In this instance, Keating interrupted an opening at one of Melbourne's premier exhibition spaces, capturing the attention of a ready-made audience. The vinyl that Keating appropriated from the skip had been part of an exhibition of work by the American artist Barbara Kruger, whose thirty-year career has revolved around critiquing consumerism. In this respect, "Work in progress" is also designed to intervene in conventional notions of what constitutes political art.

Justene Williams's "Blue Foto" is a performance piece that was staged for a video camera. The performance grew out of the artist's anxiety about the value of continuing to make photographs when the contemporary world is already saturated with images. Williams's

response was to create stage sets from shredded photographs and costumes from recycled plastic, which she then re-animated as performance art, attempting to give a renewed sense of vitality to the still image.

Williams has exhibited “Blue Foto” as a video projection and as still images printed from the video recording. The presentation of the still images as a square grid evokes the procedural nature of the performance while also transforming the documentary images into an abstract monochrome.

Stelarc is a performance artist who uses his own body to explore futuristic possibilities for human life. Since the late 1960s he has used medical instruments, prosthetics, robotics and virtual networks to explore alternative ways for the human body to occupy its environment.

Photography has always been integral to Stelarc’s practice. He documents the processes of preparing for his physical experiments with a certain amount of scientific interest, and he organises others to photograph the actual events from a spectator’s point of view. Photographs of the artist hanging by hooks during his suspension performances of the 1970s and 1980s are among the best known images of Australian performance art. Stelarc continually draws on his archive of photographic material to produce postcards and make presentations to audiences not present during his live performances.

The image of Stelarc’s flattened head was originally developed as a digital skin to be wrapped around an interactive 3D avatar. The large photographic version of the image becomes a landscape of stretched skin, which metaphorically opens up new horizons for the human form.

Bert Flugelman is well known for his stainless steel sculptures composed of geometric shapes, which feature prominently in public spaces around Australia. However, during the 1970s Flugelman was actively involved in experimental forms of sculpture, including environmental art and performance art.

In 1975, at a time when traditional sculpture was being challenged by more experimental forms of practice, Flugelman buried a series of his stainless steel sculptures beneath Commonwealth Park in Canberra. The title of the piece “Earthworks” borrows a term coined by the American artist Robert Smithson to describe new forms of 1970s’ sculpture that brought together large-scale sculptural form and the natural environment.

The photographs on display here document the process of burying Flugelman’s sculptures. The final image in the sequence shows a billboard that has been erected on the burial site as a type of memorial. The billboard displays a selection of the photographs documenting the burial performance.

Ben Morieson’s “Burnout” performance was originally staged in Melbourne’s Docklands precinct on 18 March 2001. For approximately 40 minutes the artist directed a team of eight drivers to spin their wheels back and forth across a carpark to produce a large drawing on

the ground. The drawing process was watched by an audience seated around the performance arena, and it could also be viewed on the internet via a live broadcast that was edited together from five digital cameras. During the performance a photographer took aerial shots of the drawings from a cherry picker, and these images were printed and distributed to the audience as the event took place. At the conclusion of the performance the audience members were invited to have these photographs signed by the car drivers.

As well as incorporating photography into the live performance itself, Morieson has subsequently used the documentation of this event as the basis for exhibitions in Germany, Switzerland, Indonesia, China, New Zealand and various art galleries around Australia.

For almost 40 years **Peter Tyndall's** art practice has expanded on the proposition that artworks come into existence when something is 'framed' and presented as an object worth looking at. Consequently, all of his artworks are given the same title ("detail: A Person Looks At A Work Of Art / someone looks at something ...") and he insists on exhibiting his works in ways that make the framing and hanging device visible to the viewer. Throughout his career, Tyndall has been particularly interested in the camera as a mechanism that frames or crops details of the world and makes them into things to look at.

Tyndall conceived of Mr Camerahead when he noticed audiences at an art event all clicking their cameras in unison at certain moments during a performance. He subsequently attended other performance events dressed as Mr Camerahead. The highlight of Mr Camerahead's career to date is his participation in a New Years Eve parade through the town of Daylesford. This performance precipitated the type of self-conscious framing processes often found in Tyndall's artwork, as Mr Camerahead photographed people while they photographed him.

The performance art of **Robert Rooney** is highly abstract: the artist himself is not visible, and performance art generally turns around the artist's body. All the same, Rooney's performances involve the artist making a series of ritualised actions (such as preparing a meal) at specific times and places, which are then photographically documented. In this form of performance art, the act of taking a photograph is a performance action in itself.

Rooney's "Meals" (1970) artwork documents a series of dinner parties that the artist held in his home between July and August 1970. In order to emphasise the procedural nature of the artwork, the documentary photographs have been organised into a series of small grids; the artist has also provided a written inventory recording the place, time, menu and participants for each event. The systematic presentation of the photographs serves to transform the mundane routines of daily life into an artwork.

The photographs were shot with an instamatic camera, without any regard for staging or composition. Rooney famously describes the camera as a 'dumb recording device' in order to explain his mater-of-fact approach to photography.

David M Thomas's "Everyday I am a day older" belongs to a genre of performance art that involves repeating a simple gesture on a periodic basis and accumulating the documentation of these gestures as a type of visual diary. In this instance, Thomas has taken matter-of-fact portraits of himself in his studio, candidly recording his daily attire and working environment. In part, this work is an egalitarian project that makes everyday life into a work of art. As the title suggests, it is also an artwork about mortality and the transience of life.

Thomas began "Everyday I am a day older" in 1992 and the project continued until 1996 when his camera was stolen. He subsequently reinvented the project as "Everyday I am a day older (a man bitter)". Instead of photographing himself, Thomas began painting self-portraits on cigarette packets. These self-portraits were executed as automatic drawings, sometimes in one continuous line. This gives the paintings a matter-of-fact quality that resonates with the earlier photographs.

Cherine Fahd is primarily a photographer, rather than a performance artist. However, the subject matter and style of her photographs often emulate performance art documentation. In this respect, she demonstrates how contemporary art photography has been significantly influenced by the tradition of performance art.

Fahd's "Masking motions" (2002) sequence of photographs is inspired by the performance-based games played by the French Surrealists. Using a masked model to enact a series of actions, Fahd creates blurry black-and-white photographs that appear to document a cathartic unleashing of the unconscious.

Fahd's "Hiding" (2009-10) series consists of 100 self-portraits taken in her home on consecutive days. For each self-portrait she covers her face, frustrating conventions of portraiture and introducing a conceptual action into the ritual. By following a set program of making daily actions for the camera, Fahd embraces the performance art ethic of turning everyday life into a work of art.

Slave Pianos is a collective of artists who have come together around a shared interest in forms of performance art that have musical or aural components. The symbolic heart of their practice is the piano, which they treat as a kinetic sculpture that can be used to re-animate the history of avant-garde music and sound art within gallery spaces.

Drawing on archival research, they create musical scores and recordings of performances that were originally improvised as one-off events. They also manufacture a range of pseudo ephemera that assists in the re-animation process. This includes staged photographs that appear to document historic moments in art history. Some of these staged photographs of pretend historic events can be seen in this exhibition.

Slave Pianos incorporate photographs in their work in other ways. *Afterglow* includes an installation of posters, archival material, chess boards and a piano that each allude to the chess games played by members of Fluxus. Fluxus emerged in the 1960s and was a trans-national art movement that celebrated experimental, event-based approaches to creativity.

A central figure in the history of Fluxus is George Maciunas, who named and organised the movement. For Fluxus, playing chess was performance art. In this installation, photographs of the original Fluxus chess games/performance events form part of the stage for another performance event that is waiting to occur.

The historical intersection of photography and performance art highlights the fact that performance artists are also visual artists, who creatively engage with the presentation of photographs in exhibition spaces. By actively re-working the photographic evidence, and taking into consideration the expressive potential of scale, print quality, serialisation and style, these performance artists transform documentary photography into art photography.