

Adam Geczy

In many ways the two books under review here are part of the same book. Edward Scheer’s *The Infinity Machine* assumed its own subsequent autonomy once it transpired that the tome of Parr’s performances was reaching mammoth proportions, of a weight and magnitude befitting some of the events for which the artist is best known. In a country that is still embarrassed about applying superlatives to anything that is not either overseas or to do with sport, both of these detailed documents make a strong case for Parr as Australia's greatest performance artist. In addition to their inherent value as documents of over three decades of Parr’s performances, these books convey his extraordinary contribution.

Parr’s work is primarily caught up with the logistics of identity. But it is a notion that well predates the identity art since the 1980s - national, ethnic or otherwise - and one that is deeply hostile to such aesthetic ideologies. Philosophical and physical, Parr’s relationship to identity is always about a promise of something indefinitely deferred. When Parr places his body under duress - the stress of boredom to bodily harm, one the mutilation of the spirit, the other the mutilation of the body - it has the double function of conserving the self by dint of theatrical assertiveness, and of exploding it. The body is treated as an object to be moulded, a site of scarification, tested to the point when it can no longer be that object and must return, quite naturally, to the state of subject. In my own discussions with Parr, we have always discussed this oscillation in the language of failure. Performance art is primarily the art of failure, from the failure of the body to withstand whatever rigour, to the ‘failure’ of time itself, its inability to preserve; performance art is thus the failure of an idea against the ineluctability of change.

Parr’s work can be said to be at the fundamental juncture of difference between theatre and performance. Many performances explore the conditions of the unutterable gap between audience and performer. Performances such as *Kingdom Come ... Body Politic* (2005) go so far as to step into something like vaudeville, if only to create a scene which the rest of the action will undermine (triggers in the space caused him to be administered with an electric shock). Whereas conventional play-acting implies that an actor will always play a role of some sort (the I is briefly subsumed by another I), in performance art the nature of persona, identity, and Being are radically destabilised. The ego collapses or is, for a time, annulled, subsumed by the much larger aesthetic framework. The majority of Parr’s performances pose the same question: ‘If the self is a necessary fiction for creation and action, then is my body also fictive?’ The answer is yes, since the body is as much an idea as the self, but it is also a network of facts that ideas are unable to fathom.

It is during the performance that the subject of the artist with his baggage of intentions and beliefs is cast adrift in some way. As Scheer states at the beginning of his book, Parr ‘disrupts the artist’s presence’ (3). Parr himself is adamant on this matter and has stated that what separates his performances from those of Stelarc or Jill Orr is that in his work there is a tension between artist and performer that exists on the level of what is being staged, but also the general uncertainty as to where Parr the ‘artist’ fits within the event.
Parr’s performances are essentially about the conundrum of staging the self. They involve a ritualistic structure which is both creative (the art, the work) and destructive (self-immolation). This is a binary that was well articulated in Freud in *Civilisation and its Discontents*, in which he sees society as ruled by the laws of Eros and Thanatos, one balancing the other. In performance art that involves self harm, this binary is in microcosm and introjected. The ardours of pain and duration for which Parr is notorious have the double function of announcing the event as present, but also of destabilising the individual. Self-immolation becomes the point at which the self encounters its own nihilation. As a form of communication, such performances test the limits of affect. The audience is swept up in the embrace of violence (self-mutilation, exhaustion) or travesty (dressing up, as in the bride project) that frequently affects a shocking silence. As Parr would be the first to point out, this pre-linguistic lull, or frisson, that is perhaps the will to power of all art is particularly acute in performance. Because of its access to the vectors of time and ritual, performance art can achieve this with startling effectiveness, but also at the expense of banality and anticlimax to which other visual forms are more insulated. The reason: performance art is seldom beautiful in any conventional sense. When a performance fails, it does so in ways that play into parody and anti-climax. One of the successes of these two publications is that no effort is made to compensate for the less successful or over-aggrandizement of some of the smaller or more obscure gestures. They are simply laid out as part of a long and concerted conceptual project in which the body and the self are the oscillating, agonistic partners.

Thus *Mike Parr: Performances 1971-2008* sets out every single performance of that period, scores of them. The decision to carry over the body of analytical text (there are quotations from letters, excerpts from past responses and newspaper cuttings) turns out to be a prudent one, as it downplays the didactic in favour of the descriptive. So presented, with little if any justification, unmoored from critical history except placed in chronological order, the photographic record of each performance retains a vestige of its place within active time. Parr is an obsessive archivist, so that, in more ways than one, this is very much authored by Parr himself through the material gathered over almost forty years (allowing for longstanding partnerships in documentation like Paul Green). This heavy brick of a volume is like a tomb full of ghosts, an ironic monument to the art of the unrepeatable. It is more than a comprehensive record but an artist’s book in its own right.

The book that follows, *The Infinity Machine*, more than contextualises the material from the previous one; it is an elegant, multilayered feat of analysis. Scheer is a writer and academic who specialises in performance art and one suspects that with this book he has found a challenge that is commensurate with his ambitions. It could even be said that this is also a collaboration of sorts similar to those that Parr has undertaken with other artists over the course of his long career.

One of the ideas that Scheer sets out to contest is performance art’s privileged access to presence. He calls upon Jameson’s warning that to extract the work of art from comprehensible time into an unquantifiable present (which is in fact timeless) is thereby to withdraw the work of art from history and all the accountabilities that that may entail. Floating in the cliché of so-called pure presence, the work of art is divested of anything but its capacity to entertain and occupy that moment in time. Scheer’s challenge is somehow obvious yet perhaps so obvious that it is seldom entertained. It is not only entirely sensible but is entirely in sympathy with Parr’s constant, interminable negotiation of the subject. The poet Arthur Rimbaud comes to the fore here: ‘Je n’est pas je’, ‘I is not I’. But with Parr, and as Scheer suggests
indirectly throughout his book (although he doesn’t mention Rimbaud’s formula), ‘I is not I, is I, is not I, is I (etc.) .... I’. The avowals and disavowals continue ad infinitum (the ‘infinity machine’?), stopped only by what the literary critic Paul de Man calls the ‘linguistic predicament’ of death.

Since Scheer has only seen a small portion of the performances, it is only fitting that he engage with the way in which they come to us in remediated form, in film and photographs. This re-engagement is what Scheer has called the ‘techno-live’, - a challenge to the fetish of lived presentness in performance art. There are works that are remediated in video, Scheer contends, that have an independent life with a presence as striking and as commensurate to the lived event, sometimes more so... In words, performance art has the possibility of an eternal return of its presence; there is no need to mourn its passing as it lives on effectively in media. This playing havoc with the lived event, the ‘real’ is furthermore pertinent to Australian art’s consciousness of distance, and all the concomitant concerns about cultural reception and translation.

Scheer tracks Parr’s performances from the days of Inhibodress in the early 1970s through to the trenchant political works in the 2000s motivated by protest against Australian conservativism under the Howard government. Although Parr was doing performances in the late 60s, 1971-2 marks the commencement of his maturity as an artist when he and Peter Kennedy produced the seminal string of videoed performances under the title Idea Demonstrations. In many ways this work is the point of emanation for everything that was to follow. (And, incidentally, it is also the first work since Roy de Maistre’s short foray into non-objective abstraction at the beginning of the twentieth century that is cutting edge with other contemporary practices abroad.) The discord between the written idea and its physical ‘demonstration’ was key: demonstrating no less that when words and acts are made accountable to one another, both are inadequate with regard to the other: the written does not live up to the act and the act is not exactly its written description. This may sound overly precious to many of us now, but such particularity was its point. It asked the fundamental question about what is the sine qua non of performance, and it answered that a performance can never be essentialised because - and something close to Scheer’s heart - there is always a component that is elsewhere. Performance art as a modality is neither quite action, nor event, nor meaning, nor intention, and yet it demonstrates that there is an ineffable yet comprehensible thread linking them.

On the performances since the mid-90s, Scheer is especially eloquent. Included in the book is his own performative diary of the Blood Box (6-7 September 1998, Artspace). Suggested to him by Parr’s curatorial collaborator, the then director of Artspace, Nicholas Tsoutas, Scheer recorded the goings on in the space on an hourly basis. Parr dressed as bride lay or sat in a glass enclosure sprayed with his own blood. These accounts are an invaluable record of the minutiae, the dross, the comings and goings, the casual reflections that circulate about any performance but which are perforce forgotten or not even known to occur. If the bride is for Parr a mirror image of madness, as he himself gets more tired and more involved in his own attentiveness, Scheer in this account whips himself up into his own intellectual-affective frenzy.

When we turn to Parr’s more overtly political performances from the last decade, we see the almost maniacal extent to which the artist wages war on the false consciousness of ideological certainty with all its attendant historical associations: blue-collar racism, boganism, red-necks. Again the issue of Being is at the forefront of this encounter. The glib certainties of Being - the unflinching Cartesian ego that sees itself as autochthonous and entitled - have the power to germinate into the shattering and belligerent certainties such as nationhood, ideology, gender and race which at
worst create zones of exclusion. Parr’s sewn faces from the years 2003-4 were, from a national-cultural point of view, like the real face of Dorian Gray finally revealed in all its hideous glory. The notoriety of these works certified them as classic works of social catharsis.

What distinguishes *The Infinity Machine* from so many of its kind, in Australia or internationally, is that it transcends the promotional function that is the first aim of an artist’s monograph. It is a cynical but undeniable truth that monographs appear once artists have gained approval from the commercial market in order to place them historically and to give them theoretical legitimacy. They are commissioned by professional art writers with varying levels of investment in the artist. Parr is of a standing, and fortunate enough, to have his share of writing on his work. Without detracting from the efforts of previous writers on Parr’s work, this is easily the best written, most entertaining and readable. As a student of Antonin Artaud, the central progenitor of performance art, Scheer is sensitive to the notion of insufficiency.

As Artaud wrote in his essay on van Gogh, words constantly escaped him - yet he wrote this knowing full well that it was through this collision of the imperfect, the impossible, the unstable, that sufficiencies are born. It is not self-indulgent to say that art speaks for its own and yet it cannot. Artaud knew that art is not a thing, it is a formless but ever-present area of knowledge that can only be matched by the threat of the artist’s dissolution. Scheer cites Artaud’s ‘implacable necessity’ and ‘appetite for life’. He is a writer who unequivocally loves performance art and also understands many of its secrets, as much as one can. He is also aware that Artaud’s ‘appetite for life’ is not a sybaritic dream but a collision with death. As Nietzsche said, ‘we are all a breed of the dead, and a very rare breed at that’. But this knowledge affords us a certain exuberance and humility. It is with these two instincts that Scheer approaches Parr’s work. Parr has the writer he deserves. This book will be a lasting and absorbing testament to one of Australia’s most significant artists.

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