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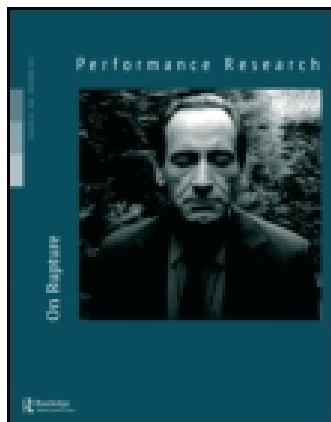
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### How to Do Things with Performance Art

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# How to Do Things with *Performance Art*

EDWARD SCHEER

It is crucial, then, in advancing art's political agency, to identify and make visible – and open to discussion – the forces in play.

Dean Kenning and Margareta Stern (2013:4)

Victor Turner's analysis of social conflict provides a mechanism for determining the cyclic dramaturgy of rupture in the social in terms of breach/crisis/redressive action/schism or re-aggregation (1980). His structuralist model of the social drama has proved adaptive to post-industrial society where the redressive phase of this process, the response to crisis created by rupture, is the generative space of ritual forms (for responding to crisis), such as judicial acts. This redressive phase is also the phase of the social narrative where aesthetic production originates.

The 'life crisis rituals' he describes are born from the wound in the social body and take myriad forms. One such form that has a particular relevance to this framework, given its embodied and symbolic format, is performance art. Performance art enacts these rituals for secular post-industrial society. The artistic act is not the rupture itself but a response to it and an attempt to heal the wound that, as Turner's structure indicates, is always reopened. The response forms an essential phase in the cycle of social dramaturgy.

It is true that this practice also constitutes a radical gesture in the business of the art world in seeking to short circuit the art market and to obtain a new and direct engagement with the public, devoid of institutional mediation based on the exchange value of art objects. Performance art in its early years promised such a rupture in the business as usual of this

marketplace, but the fabric has grown around this practice, too, and we have seen in recent years the re-institutionalization of performance art so that we can no longer claim, if we ever could have, that this practice constitutes a break or a discontinuity in the business of art making. Within the art world performance art has taken its place as a particular modality of ritual and its effects are purely symbolic and, at best, redistribute the values, terms and experiences of art rather than the sensibilities of the larger population.

In this essay I want to look at a recent example of performance art with a strong political message, from one of the leading practitioners of this form, Mike Parr, and ask what it actually does and what it can and may do as a response to crisis. In this sense I am asking about the performativity of this kind of art. Rethinking the performative in art means, first, thinking about what functions art may have and, second, thinking about the notion of the performative itself. In this sense, Dorothea Von Hantelmann's thesis in her recent study, *How to Do Things With Art – The Meaning of art's performativity* (2010), which investigates the idea of performativity and applies it to art, is helpful and timely. She begins by pointing out what is already known but too often ignored in the art world, and that is the slippage in the use of the term 'performative' from J. L. Austin's sense of doing something by saying something or changing states of affairs through speech to 'a ubiquitous catchword for a broad range of contemporary art phenomena that, in the widest sense, show an affinity to forms of staging, theatricality and mise-en-scène' (Von Hantelmann 2010: Introduction). Her study

seeks to restore some specificity to the term and a certain ‘methodological precision’, both of which I endorse, but where I will seek to diverge from her account is in her analysis of performance art itself. Von Hantelmann, like Austin, excludes performance from the domain of art’s performativity (its capacity to act), although not for the same reasons as Austin. In what follows, I question this exclusion and begin to address the question of the usefulness of performance art to the notion of art’s performativity.

*DAYDREAM ISLAND*, CARRIAGEWORKS,  
30 NOVEMBER 2013, 2 P.M.

A performance by Australian artist Mike Parr is always an event for the art world, ironically perhaps given his well-known antipathy to art’s rituals, its ‘alcoholic’ culture, its ‘window dressing’ as he calls it – the attractive display while the real business grinds on behind the scenes. His performance artworks, in their public manifestations (there are also now a number of significant closed performances made for camera), are also rituals of a kind, for the artist, and for a certain public. I form part of that public but have also been studying these works and writing about them for almost twenty years (since 1996). In this time, the artist and

I have become occasional collaborators, passionate interlocutors and friends. So if I have come to lack objective distance in the case of Parr perhaps I can make up for it in insider knowledge! On the other hand, his kind of performance art plays on this very border of intimacy and public imagery, so in a sense I am not in a unique position at all.

*Daydream Island* is the name of a savagely ironic piece of what the artist calls ‘Theatre’, and while it actually felt like Theatre for much of the time – we spectators were sitting, intent on the action, observing passively from our seats in the auditorium – it wouldn’t be the sort of thing the students at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) or the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) are learning much about. On the contrary, where the most complex acting is simulation, *Daydream Island* featured only the actions of participants (‘non-matrixed’ in the critical language) engaged in carrying out various real tasks. I am used to seeing Parr’s wife, Felizitas, at these events and admiring her sangfroid as her partner’s body undergoes various acts of violence – acts that are measured but no less real. This time I couldn’t see her and asked the guy sitting next to me, who happened to be master printmaker John Loane, Parr’s long-term collaborator on his *Self Portrait Project* (thousands of

■ All photos:  
*Daydream Island* (2013).  
Photo Zan Wimberley.  
Courtesy and © Mike Parr





<sup>1</sup> The mode of painting was expressly citational of the drip painting technique developed by Jackson Pollock. It is a complex reference both to a mode of art making that for Parr lacks ethical engagement with world events and also a reference to a parochial Australia of the 1970s at which time the then Whitlam government purchased Pollock's 'Blue Poles' for the National Gallery in Canberra causing widespread controversy over a perceived waste of taxpayer money.

dry point etchings and prints made with Loane's invaluable assistance), where she was. He pointed to the stage area where she was engaged in sewing tiny toys and little rubber monsters on to her husband's face, eliciting grunts of pain when she went too deep with the needle. I didn't expect to see her on the stage as a participant, especially not in the role of the surgeon, the giver of pain.

Two videographers circled them, relaying close-up visuals to three large high-definition (HD) screens. The lighting was altered awkwardly – clumsily – by manually inserting coloured gels over one of the spots, as if to say, this is 'Theatre'. Lisa Corsi stage managed the event and would interrupt the action when a 'scene' had been completed, for example when Felizitas had completed the sewing of objects. While the 'scene' changed, Parr sat in his chair on the stage, unrecognizable behind a mask of

fishing line and monstrous children's toys. Felizitas Parr gave way to Linda Jefferyes, a visual artist, and took her seat downstage with her back to the audience like the other participants. Black monochromes were fixed stiffly to their backs (part Dada gesture and part Parr's typical mobilizing of the minimalist image). The sewing became face painting like at a children's party, but instead of Spider-Man or a princess, Parr's face was painted in military-style camouflage. When this was complete he lay prostrate, subjectilian, on the floor and a Pollock-style drip painting was enacted on his face.<sup>1</sup> At the climax of this scene a battery-powered toy pig was let loose on the stage space, waddling around the inert form of Parr and grunting. At the close, Corsi read a statement that quoted the recent remarks of Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott describing any linkage of climate change and increased bush fire activity in Australia as 'hogwash', and then asked the audience to return to wherever they had come from.

Like Parr's other performances of the past decade, this intertwining of delicately elaborated sado-masochistic action and imagery with overt political statement is a clear vernacular.<sup>2</sup> But it's different in a crucial respect, too. The earlier works were all durational, that is to say they were elaborated over an extended measure of time, twenty-four hours or more, while *Daydream Island* was only just on 80 minutes, the length of a David Williamson or an Alan Ayckbourn play. This was a deliberate structure imposed on the work, but one that I want to question.

I wrote to Parr after the event to point out the following:

The piece ... left those present with a mark, a tiny wound, to work at and re-work.... It also raised some issues for me in its theatrical nature, specifically its limited duration. In my view this tends to shut things down in the manner of a theatre piece rather than open things up, which your durational works do, in allowing a wound its own time to develop and the viewers their own time to experience and to work through. I wonder if the structure of the piece might tend to suture over the wound?

The discourse of wounding is, of course, an important currency for performance art, since so much of this form engages directly the artist's body by placing it at risk of subjection to interventions of different kinds. The language of the wound also explains the peculiar affective quality, its sometimes repulsive valency as well as its ethical and aesthetic power, literally aesthetic in terms its capacity to forcefully engage the senses of a spectator.<sup>3</sup>

Parr responded in part with a version of the theatre metaphor:

[T]heatre is a kind of scab so this piece was about opening up a wound and closing it down at the same time.... Burying it in a way ... that's why I decided we should perform the piece with our backs to the audience and with the monochromes attached to the backs of my crew so that Modernist patches were created to block vanishing points ... a miscellany of negations of drafted theatrical space and the fixed positioning of the audience. (Parr 2014)

The embodied vanishing point is a concern of many of Parr's works, as it deals with the art historical discipline of drawing in perspective while also alluding to a certain disciplinary structure on the self, the way we are taught to view art and by extension the world around us. By blocking it he resists this kind of discipline, and the viewer is forced to find another way in to the image. In effect I read this as Parr trying to get people to look for themselves. His response also reconnected the shorter form of the work to the issue he was trying to represent. He explained:

[I] felt that this structure of theatrical convolution was exactly like our treatment of the wandering arrivals to our northern shores ... wounds that are constantly opened and closed ... boats turned back and people left adrift ... the collusive, muffled reportage. I'm thinking now about theatre space, theatre conventions and wondering if I can condense and invert my understanding of 'theatre' to a further extremity. Amputating duration in this way was a fierce hit for me. (Parr 2014)

The telescoping of 'wandering arrivals' and their grisly fate in our camps into a form of national theatre seems just right, an entirely

accurate observation, but this still does not address the issue of the *recurrence* of the experience he is trying to capture in this work, the eternal return of asylum seekers and of the carefully administered suffering our representatives continue to inflict on our behalf, in our name, whether we like it or not. To represent this accurately and truthfully – that we surely expect our artists to do, the work must forcefully engage these tropes, these experiences. For me the durational form that Parr adopted in previous works was the more adequate vehicle, but we will continue to debate this question.

These are important questions, particularly in light of the recent 2014 Biennale of Sydney (BoS) brouhaha, where the concerns about the proper role that artists can play in this scenario are still pertinent and very fresh. In February 2014, a group of young artists organized a boycott of the 19th BoS, and a number of artists withdrew from it in response to news that the major sponsor of the event was doing government contract work running detention centres for asylum seekers on Nauru and Manus Island. This practice of processing asylum seekers offshore and detaining them indefinitely has been widely condemned by human rights groups, even the United Nations

<sup>2</sup> While it may be tempting to observe that it is an aesthetic vernacular that has found its essential theme in the ghastly asylum-seeker politics of our time, it is also true that Parr has worked this seam for more than forty years, but I will remain with the most recent work here. For anyone interested, the performances of the first decade post 9/11 have been covered in my book *The Infinity Machine* (2010).

<sup>3</sup> I refer to the literal definition of 'aesthetic' in the sense 'relating to perception by the senses' from the Greek *aisthētikos*. See [www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/aesthetic](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/aesthetic)



High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The debate in Australia that followed the proposed BoS boycott never really focused on the core issue of the policy on asylum seekers and quickly shifted into a debate about the mix of private and public arts funding in Australia.

#### PERFORMATIVITY AND PERFORMATIVE ART

The questions that arise around Parr's political dramaturgy and the BoS boycott centre on the political efficacy of art. Given that intervention at best provokes a debate about – and possibly a crisis for – arts funding and not ultimately a debate about the policy of indefinite detention itself, what can art do in this context? Especially in the face of the major party/neo-liberal consensus about the threat posed to the concept of the 'public' by stateless individuals? How can artists, or anyone, meaningfully intervene in this vicious circle of suffering? These concerns beg the larger question about what art can do at all in the social world – what is art's performative quality? What can it ever do? More specifically, what can performance art do? The function I want to articulate here concerns the performative, as a 'site' or modality for the enactment of critical or alternative ethical positions, and the possibility of art to redistribute cultural and ethical values.

This word 'performativity' has done rather a lot since Austin's original formulation in *How to Do Things with Words: The William James lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955* (1962). More recently, the term has gathered multiple valencies in speech act theory and Jacques Derrida's 1988 critique of this – the 'breaking force' of language – and, more recently, Eve Sedgwick's re-engagement with the term as a creative and socio-political device (Sedgwick 1995) and of course Judith Butler's now standard arguments around gender politics as performative. (Butler 1997) There is also, as Von Hantelmann points out, considerable confusion around this term that results from the sense in which it is used as a common

descriptor of anything that resembles the theatrical or, in political theory, the 'event of language' (Lazzarato 2014: 171) or, more generally, as the enunciative power of speech.

The effect of the felicitous illocutionary or perlocutionary act (direct or indirect performatives) in Austin has the quality of changing states of affairs, for example, the speech act of the judge that sentences the perpetrator. Or beyond Austin's specific grammatical form, one may think about the gesture spoken or otherwise of the celebrity who launches the book, the ship, the event and so forth as a performative that has an aesthetic quality and performs or produces a real change in the state of affairs, such as starting an event or releasing a book into the market. These enunciative acts draw on specific ritual conventions and gain their power from these contexts but they deploy singular gestural tactics that extend these pre-existing arrangements. One may summarize the nuance Butler gives the term by seeing it as not so much the action (speech act or otherwise) of a subject but one that produces that subject to begin with, as in the gendered re-citation of strips of behaviour designated as male or female.<sup>4</sup> While Butler's thesis emphasizes the preexisting conditions of the speech act over the singular act of enunciation, her account of the performative is useful for our discussion as it enables the distinction between the productions of existing entities (performances) and the forces that give the entity its shape (performatives). I will return to this point.

If we are to base a discussion of performative art on the specific nuances that Butler gives this term – the citational act that forms the subject rather than the act of a subject, we will not find a ready-made practice of performative art in the art world. Art can suspend identity, as in the drag act, but in art this suspension is essentially durational. In the Turnerian discourse it is 'liminoid' rather than 'liminal', as it always involves at best a temporary transport of the self into another experience rather than a permanent transformation of the state of affairs. Austin precluded theatre

<sup>4</sup> I want to acknowledge Laura Joseph, a recent PhD graduate at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), Australia, for clarifying this so beautifully in a class discussion on this topic some years ago.

from his discussion on this basis – that there is no sense in which a work of ‘fiction’ can alter the state of affairs in the ritual structures he identifies. For Austin, rituals make use of symbolization but in order to encode real events and generate real transactions. Putting it simply, an actor playing the role of the judge cannot actually sentence a guilty person. This would be a form of infelicitous utterance that Austin explicitly excludes from his discussion. The actor standing in for the judge is also too unstable from an ontological point of view, and renders the utterance invalid from a performative perspective.

So where does this leave performative art? In Austinian terms it may appear to constitute a straightforward contradiction? But, in another sense, as Von Hantelmann implies and as Andrew Murphie has observed, ‘art is always performative’ (2005: 42). For me, this statement makes sense if one restricts the sphere of art’s influence to the sensorial world. In this sense art is always performative because it always involves a degree of interaction between the subject and the world (and even between the human and the animal worlds), across the interfaces of the senses. This kind of thinking implies that the primary purpose of art making is not representational but directed at the activation of the senses. The experimental aesthetics and difficult subject positioning of performance art is clearly establishing a sensorial site but also a mode of engaging alternate possibilities for sensing the world and one’s place in it. For Murphie, the performative arises most clearly in the case of interactive or participatory art and performance art where supra subjective forces are at work (2005). He does not define the term, but from its deployment it means art that is basically ‘agential’ and acting on and across subjects and the world.

#### EXCLUDED ART

Von Hantelmann’s thesis assumes a similar starting point, that ‘(i)t makes little sense to speak of a performative artwork, because every

artwork has a reality-producing dimension’ (Von Hantelmann 2010: Introduction) but she arrives somewhere else in excluding performance from the category of the performative. Unlike Austin’s argument this one is based on Judith Butler’s logic that ‘it is only within this nexus of convention and innovation, repetition and difference that any action towards change can happen’ (Von Hantelmann 2010: Introduction). Von Hantelmann explains that performance art ‘operates with an ideology outside of the social systems of the museum and the market’ and its attempts at rupture effectively disqualify it from the status of the performative, reliant as this is on operations ‘*within* the constitutive and regulative structure of conventions’ (ibid.). Her language at this point is interestingly dismissive: ‘Given Butler’s argument, it is clear that the idea of a radical break with conventions must fail and is therefore uninteresting. Singular expressive acts that completely withdraw from discourse are not only irrelevant; they are not even thinkable’ (ibid.).

There are a number of issues here: first, I would argue that the image of performance art constructed here, as essentially a withdrawal from the institution and from the symbolic, is insufficient and even out of date. As I have argued elsewhere, performance art has increasingly been absorbed by the institution and has lost some of its radical valency or its purely avant-garde function as a result but gained visibility and viability. As a contemporary art form it explores exactly the same terrain as Von Hantelmann describes in her book as the ‘legitimate’ performativity of ‘legitimate’ art in encoding the experience of the exhibition within itself. Second, Butler’s account takes both the singular act, for example, the creative instance of the embodied performance in the drag act, *in its very parodic citationality*, as exemplary of how resignification functions as a political speech act.<sup>5</sup> The drag act shows how the performative works and produces what Butler calls (after Derrida) ‘performative force’, although it is not itself a performative (Butler 1997: 147). In this sense Von Hantelmann’s radical exclusion of the embodied gestural

<sup>5</sup> Conversely, non-drag acts of gender tend to conceal the citationality of gender performance, and it is this concealment that gives gender ‘a certain inevitability’ (Butler 1993: 12). To challenge the type of performance or gender roles one has received will involve reading through the lens of culture, society and gender rather than imagining that one stands outside of these things that make us what we are.

practice of performance art is a misprision of its place in the development of the theory Butler espouses and that she relies on in her discussion of performative art.

In the context of political theory Maurizio Lazzarato raises some concerns about the performative that serve to further question the validity of Von Hantelmann's arguments. Basing his analysis on Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin, Lazzarato provides a critique of the performative and makes a strong case for the power of the singular expressive act (2014: 196–8). He reminds us that Butler's use of the performative as political speech act is based on Derrida who insists on the sign's autonomy from its context, that no context can exhaust the signifier and that the sign always exceeds any instantiation or any individual utterance of it. This position enables the 'point of rupture' of the sign from its 'dominant meanings' (187), such as Butler's example of the term 'queer', which has migrated from its original context of hate speech into a discourse of gay pride and identification. For Lazzarato this is a misreading. He insists, after Bakhtin, on the enunciative power of the subject engaged in the event of speech, in other words the performance of the speech act over the performative:

In every enunciation, the 'point of rupture' never follows from the autonomy or independence of the mark but rather from the singular speech act, from subjective affirmation, and from the ethico-political positioning that founds and supports it. (Lazzarato 2014: 188)

He argues for the significance of what he calls 'event generating dynamics' in the speech act, arguing that this creative 'self positioning' completes the meaningful political utterance as a micro-political act and not the subject's place in language as argued by Butler and others. This account restores the extra-linguistic and supra-institutional forces to the enunciative act, its corporeality, its materiality and its aesthetics.

Whether we think the point of rupture is linguistic or subjective we can recognize the 'performative force' of acts that rehearse conventions in unconventional ways (Butler 1997: 147). Von Hantelmann's examples do

this: James Coleman, Daniel Buren and Tino Seghal are richly described and evoke a sense of the potential of art to challenge more representational modes of thinking and making. I would extend this by arguing that so too does Mike Parr in his re-inscription of live art as 'theatre' and his resignification of Australian identity as the 'daydream islander'. Von Hantelmann's account privileges theatrical over more generally performance-based elements in the body of work she identifies as doing things and indicates how these art practices embrace the durational and the transitory but also mediatization and the retention of the trace in the form of the image. So a suitable variety of artistic methodologies is bound up with the topic of the performative in art, making her specific exclusion of performance art even more puzzling.

From Von Hantelmann's analysis and despite her opening claims, some key elements of performative art may be deduced. This art is not primarily about the production of objects or images but rather the production of sensations (as in Murphie via Deleuze), even experiences. Performative art does not act upon the state of affairs in any direct way but recodes relations in the state of affairs, remixes them in their symbolic function and challenges their place and value within the symbolic order. In this sense there is a connection with Butler for, by placing the constituents of a scene in flux, the performative in the artwork returns them to their essential relationality. It reintroduces the contingent 'point of rupture'. From the vantage offered by the scene of the performative it may be possible to identify alternative arrangements, alternative compositions of the elements producing different outcomes in the social. Simply making a political statement in an artwork is not a performative but a constative in Austinian terms. Performative art has to exceed the status of the true or false statement (representation) and influence the way that things are perceived and felt, thought and experienced.

I argue that precisely these considerations apply to a contemporary reading of performance





art as well as the practices described by Von Hantelmann and in particular to the work by Parr described above. There are specific limits. Of itself, of course, performative art cannot directly affect policy. At best, art can recompose the terms of the debate and the relations between the actants, whose identities seem so fixed, like a well-made play: the evil politicians, the hapless asylum seekers, the concerned citizens and so on. In Parr's 'theatre' these entities, indeed all entities, become unrecognizable – painted over, subjectilian (a surface to be painted on). What takes their place is the play of forces, the flux of urges and drives. In Parr's 'theatre' the cruelty it stages and re-performs is ours; we share in it. We love it. After all we pay to see it. Of course, we are ultimately hurting ourselves. The wound we create for others, for us, is an elaborate durational artwork of its own – a national treasure, such as Jackson Pollock's painting *Blue Poles* (1952). As Parr observes about the work: '[A] wound is on display but it is being hoarded.' (Parr 2014) Maybe the bitter message of *Daydream Island* is that enlightened self-interest is the only way out of this labyrinth.

If we consider Parr's performance art as an art practice of this kind, we will note that there are no characters in it, no figures with which to identify, just functions composed of drives and unspoken urges, where the forces that prefigure the actions we take in the world are staged and framed. In this sense, performance art of the kind practised by Parr can offer a means to observe how it is possible to recompose relations, to observe what happens when you alter the constituents of a relation at a level other than that of the public entity, the figure or the subject. At the pre-subjective or pre-symbolic level before speech and signification and where the roles have not yet been scripted, the entities are still not defined.

Nothing in the macro environment is changed by this act but this does not mean that everything is the same. The tiny wound that opens in this type of work will need attention. The National Theatre of Cruelty, which defines Australia's asylum-seeker policy and practice, goes on unabated but a life crisis ritual has been enacted and a gesture of solidarity performed. The dehumanizing political calculations are there for all to see

but the psychic and emotional forces driving it are the components of a performative art that places these forces more clearly in perspective. This etiolated performative, where there is no rupture with the political system, no cathartic assault on the immigration department, no breach of the fences at the camps (Manus Island and Villawood), is nonetheless one where 'the agency' of art retains some real but inchoate meaning as an enunciative act to express a different position to the dominant political inscription of Australian identity as a multiple of xenophobia and intolerance and to affirm a micro-politics of empathy and engagement.

Here we return to Von Hantelmann's thesis, that rupture is not as efficacious as reconfiguration (I would add resignification and recomposition). Resistance obtains a symbolic specificity in recognizing that smashing capitalism is as possible and therefore as meaningful as attaining world peace and thereby ending asylum seekers' suffering. The cycle of conflict and social drama continues, the wound always reopening. Redressive actions, such as art's life crisis rituals, will always be needed precisely because of the intractability of the problems that they seek to address. Tactical behaviours become important in maintaining a critical disposition and awareness, a sensibility that recognizes the limits of the performative but can capitalize on any opportunity to express solidarity, retain basic decency, reflect a better humanity and continue to offer a publically expressed ethical opposition to inhuman public policies expressed through whatever means are at hand.

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