

## Mike Parr and Edward Scheer

### The Resistances of the Body:

### On Durational Art and Tehching Hsieh

*This talk and the interview with Mike Parr were presented as part of the Durational Aesthetics salon, held in Sydney on 17 May 2014 in association with the Tehching Hsieh: One Year Performance 1980–81 exhibition at Carriageworks and the Experimental Humanities project at UNSW Australia. The Tehching Hsieh installation comprised the documents the artist produced (photographs, film, time cards, statements) as part of his Time Clock Piece, and ran from 29 April to 6 July 2014 at Carriageworks. The Experimental Humanities project is a collaborative research project funded by the Australian Research Council and headed by Professor Stephen Muecke, Professor Edward Scheer, and Dr Erin Brannigan to investigate cross over between creative arts and humanities discourses and practices.*

#### Introduction

**Edward Scheer** I'd like to thank Nina Miall (Curator at Carriageworks), for her work in curating the Tehching installation that forms the occasion for our discussion today. The work documented in it is now some 30 years old but what you actually see in the installation is new. The documentation itself has been renewed, so there are new prints from the original film, so that the piece has been given a refresh.

Some important questions immediately arise around the notion of 'refreshing' documentation—the documentation of performance. These are really for me very key questions around the value of performance, which is sometimes considered an ephemeral art form but is obsessively documented. The documentation then produces its own problems. What do you do with it? What is its status? What is its value? Does it stand in for the artwork? Is a 'refreshed' document still a document?

As Jeff Khan (Artistic Director of Performance Space) just said—the idea of durational art as perhaps the central time-based art form has really always had some kind of engagement with technology and I think Tehching's work is evidence of that. There's the time clock itself and the film camera which is there to bear witness or give evidence to the fact that he's surrendering a year of his life to art. (In the conversation with Mike Parr we will be unpacking that relationship in his work as well).

For me as a scholar of aesthetics and performance studies, these questions around time-based art forms and documentation are really crucial. I began researching this topic ten years ago focusing on Mike Parr's work and first saw the resonances with Tehching Hsieh when I was based in the UK about eight years ago, I suppose, working alongside Adrian Heathfield who was then just completing his work on the book *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (Heathfield and

Hsieh 2008). We had various conversations about this and did a public lecture together in the course of which it became clear that there was a certain similarity between our interests in this—my work with Mike Parr and his work with Tehching. I think both in terms of the methodology, we shared a kind of conversational collaborative methodology with the artists we were writing about; and also the interest in what happens to time in performance art.

There are a couple of things I want to say by way of giving some background to the question of time in performance art. I think as a result of Marina Abramović's interventions we tend to associate performance art with the present, with the now. In *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present* (2010), the major retrospective of her work held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, she sat through the duration of the exhibition for some months, every day, *en face* with the members of the public. This was really the culmination of over 25 years of her work, originally with Ulay, and first created in this city in 1981 when she was living here with Ulay. They created *Night Sea Crossing*, which was a durational work where they would sit opposite each other in the gallery for the duration of gallery hours, from 10am to 5pm. They had spent time with the Pintupi people in the Western Desert in the Northern Territory and it is significant that she associates her interest in duration, her placement of temporality at the centre of her performance practice, and her understanding of the art form with her experiences in Australia, specifically with our indigenous people. I think that's a little known but interesting fact to ponder, and an apt way to kick off this discussion around the durational in art in Sydney at this time.

The other thing is that it is a kind of rubbery concept. After all, what constitutes durational art forms? Are we just talking about any time-based art form? For me, it's an art practice that accentuates the passage of time as a key to understanding the work. Whether or not that's the extended duration of Tehching or the more contained duration of, say, one of Mike Parr's 36-hour performances or again the extended duration of Barbara Campbell's *1001 nights cast* (2005–08), there are different approaches to understanding the meaning of the word 'duration'.

I think one beautiful aspect to it is the sense in which it constitutes a disruption to the chronological experience of everyday life that we live, where our time is so regulated and accounted for in our professional and daily lives and where we continually and increasingly have to give an account for how we spend our time. There's something deliciously anarchic about allowing time to take over our lives in the way that Tehching did, and I think that's a very interesting dynamic, in the one year pieces, even the time clock piece, every hour on the hour.

There's a reading of duration which would say that the time clock piece is not really durational because it's still very chronological and this is the very famous argument about duration outlined by the French philosopher Henri Bergson in his books, *Creative Evolution* (1911 [1907]) and *Time and Free Will* (1910 [1889]), through his notion of a *durée réelle*, or 'real duration'. He's talking about a kind of challenge to Einsteinian physics with its time-space connectivity, and he's trying to focus on what happens when you disregard the clock, when you disregard spatiality and you focus on the experience or the unfolding of pure time.

So for Bergson this involves a kind of surrendering to time and I think it has a quasi-mystical quality in his writing. I've always been fascinated by that in relation to Mike Parr's work, for instance, that in this cutting off from everyday chronological time there is a kind of surrender of the self, there is a sort of suspension of identity.

A number of people have written about that in relation to Tehching's work as well, even in the *Time Clock Piece* (1980–81), in which that central restriction of activity to one hour, every hour,

that intensely regulated practice, still allowed—because that was all he was doing—a kind of loss of the sense of his commitment to other forms of temporality. By intensely focusing on the time signature of daily life to an utterly absurd extent, he actually freed himself from it. I think that's a really interesting dynamic that durational aesthetics opens up.

I think we can consider a range of possibilities for both the meaning and the impact of this work, from micro-durations to extended, year-long performances or even the 13 year long performance in which he made no public art.

One final point I'd make is that a lot of discussion around duration, especially via Bergson, is about forcing the self inward into a kind of metaphysical experience, away from engagement with the outside world and looking within. That's itself an enormous challenge in the contemporary world, but I don't think it's a simple binary. I don't think durational art is just simply seeking an escape from the chrono-political order. I think in some respects it represents a fundamental challenge to that order by reordering the time signatures of work-life and daily life, recomposing those time signatures. I think we can still construct alternate modes of being in the world and perhaps through these artists we might be able to explore some of those ideas, those possibilities in more detail.

It's interesting that Tehching's work as an illegal immigrant in America inevitably brings up those issues of isolation, alienation, the liminal status of the outsider in our society. He really concretises that experience, particularly in the first four of the five one-year pieces. In the durational work that artists in Australia are making, and particularly with Mike Parr's work in this space, there's a similar kind of willingness to engage with the political, with the external spatialised context in which we all work and live, but trying to disrupt that in some way.

Mike Parr's performances since the year 2000 have really returned to a questioning of the politicisation of the asylum seeker in Australian society, beginning with a ten day event at Artspace called *Water from the Mouth* (2001) in which he fasted, lived in a box in the gallery for ten days, and each day a bucket of urine was displayed in the foyer of the Artspace. You couldn't see him in the main gallery at all. You could hear him walking around, you could look through a little hole in the wall to see him, and his image was webcast so again the technological device was designed to make him physically invisible but virtually visible. If you wanted to encounter the artist you had to get online and that was a difficult thing 14 years ago, broadband being what it is in this country.

Since then he's made a number of works in which he's inhabited an art space for an extended period of time in order to focus on the issue of the indefinite nature of the detention of asylum seekers, the dubious achievement of our government's policies. I think his focus on that since our major political parties really started to target asylum seekers as a populist political tactic has been relentless. In November of last year he made a new work, which he describes as a 'work of theatre' called *Daydream Island* (2013) and presented here at Carriageworks. (*Mike arrives on stage eating a croissant.*)

*Daydream Island* was, I think, something different for Mike. It was a condensed durational work of about 80 minutes, about the length of a David Williamson play.<sup>1</sup> Mike was consciously trying to use theatrical devices to dramatise the discourses around asylum seekers in our society and in particular to cast ironic light on their small minded, soap operatic quality, and perhaps we'll unpack some of that, but exploring that same space around the performance of public cruelty around asylum seekers.

It's an interesting interplay with Tehching's work which is, if you like, a kind of autoethnography of the experience of the outsider whereas Mike's work deals with that as thematic material and tries in a way to raise the stakes in our representation of that experience. These are a cluster of topics that we might be unpacking in what follows. So again, welcome, on behalf of the Experimental Humanities team and the School of the Arts and Media at UNSW.



Fig 1. *Daydream Island* (2013). Photo Zan Wimberley. Courtesy and © Mike Parr.

### Interview

**Edward Scheer** I don't think Mike Parr needs an introduction to any contemporary art audience in this country, but he remains one of the best known, most widely collected visual artists in Australia, whose disruption to the 'business as usual' print-making machine is legendary in his extended self-portrait project with master printmaker John Loane.

He has also conducted a very intense and uncompromising performance practice as an artist since he started working publicly in about 1970, so that's over 40 years of a very rigorous and intense performance art practice. He's recognised as one of the leading performance art practitioners in the world and he "still calls Australia home." They played that song (by Peter Gabriel) at the start of *Daydream Island*. We'll get to that. Mike, it's great to be here with you. Thanks for coming. You wanted to kick off by talking a bit about Tehching's installation, which you have just seen.

**Mike Parr** Yes, he makes a very strong immediate impression and it's very interesting in the context of durational work. It's worthwhile thinking about it because it raises interesting problems, too, in respect of durational work.

**Edward Scheer** Just to back up a little, there are five of these one-year pieces dating back to 1978. The first one is *One Year Performance 1978–79 (Cage Piece)*, when he was in a cage in his

studio for a year. The second one is the one the documentation of which is exhibited here, *Time Clock Piece* (1980–81). It's probably the best known of those pieces. The third one is *Outdoor Piece* (1981–82) when he was living outdoors for 12 months in New York City, mainly in Lower Manhattan. There's limited documentation of that but there is some video footage of that which is pretty interesting, particularly when he gets arrested for vagrancy and the police bring him inside the station so he's breaking his contract and he goes absolutely berserk and the police have no idea why he's going berserk until one of his support team comes down and explains the situation and he's allowed to leave. Again, I'm thinking about all of these as representing particular experiences in the life of the illegal alien in New York – the cage, the time clock, proving their existence, the life of the vagrant.

The fourth one, *Rope Piece* (1983–84), has a slightly different title to the others, with the addition of *Art/Life* to the *One Year Performance*. That was the 12-month collaboration with Linda Montano when they were connected together by eight feet of rope and they weren't allowed to touch each other. The fifth one, *No Art Piece* (1985–86), is the year when he made no art or had no engagement with art and obviously there's very limited documentation of that. What we've got here, in this exhibition, is the second one and I imagine you were fairly impressed with the filmic documentation. As someone who's made performance art films with actual 16mm or did you use 35mm? You used 16mm.

**Mike Parr** I used 16mm.

**Edward Scheer** You understand the logistical problems associated with using that technology.

**Mike Parr** ... Click and one frame.

**Edward Scheer** Yes, that's right. So he'd do it frame by frame to ensure that no one thought he was cheating, partly.

**Mike Parr** Yes, it's a big problem with this sort of work, of course and the evidence is never complete once you start trying to accumulate it and squeeze out the doubts.

It's really an installation that's carving up time according to the use of the clock. It's being carved up on the hour. So this is reducing time to a sort of bureaucratic repetition. It's installed in a grey room and it marches round the walls relentlessly and you immediately think of the high Modernist moments. You think of Malevich and Rodchenko's *Black on Black* occlusions, which I saw in Amsterdam just before Christmas at the Stedelijk Museum which was a compelling exhibition, but that was 100 years old. You think of On Kawara—you could install this work with his telegrams sent each day for a year or more saying 'I am still alive', and his date paintings.

I mentioned that because I think this is duration subjected to evidential processes, relentless ones, and I think it creates this pervasive, almost bureaucratic image. I think its reductions belong to the Modernist reductions and it's no accident that it would resonate strongly in New York since the Museum of Modern Art is the custodian of these canonical moments, prolongs them and reinforces them.

I think of Beckett, too. None of this is meant to disparage the piece because I think it's a magnificent work but I think in some ways you could distinguish it from performative duration as we'd be inclined to think about it. I think of the adventitious and the existential colliding with the requirement to perform for as long as possible, like Marina Abramović and Ulay walking along the

Great Wall of China. It was a project that was going to take three months. It didn't take account of comedic disruption. Ulay thinking 'fuck this' going off to Beijing while Marina went on like a T-52, determined to reach the midpoint. He went off to Beijing and got married and came back and met her at the agreed point of reunion, I suppose, with a pregnant wife. The events suggest all possible scenarios. That was an explosive end to their relationship. I don't think it had been built into the original conception of the piece.



**Fig 2.** *Daydream Island* (2013). Photo Zan Wimberley. Courtesy and © Mike Parr.

This is the aspect of performance that's really important for me and that's why I argued for performances to be continued for as long as possible to exclude both the superhuman and the entirely mundane, where you perform relentlessly to fill out a brief but rather for as long as possible so you bring to bear a tremendous convergence of forces that take you to a kind of limit state. The fragility and the unmanageability of that, and the eruption of that, becomes a mechanism for exciting the return of the repressed both for the performer and for the audience. It's this collision of the unknowable and the untranslatable, that produces the volatility, the challenge even the empathy of performance.

**Edward Scheer** So Mike's referring to a number of the works I mentioned earlier in which sometimes in the subtitle itself was the act to be maintained for as long as possible. This was often 24 to 36 hours of Mike being in the chair with, say, an arm nailed to the wall as in *Malevich (A Political Arm)*, performance for as long as possible (2002) at Artspace or receiving electroshock treatment as in *Kingdom Come and/or Punch Holes in the Body Politic*, performance for as long as possible (2005), again at Artspace. I think this relates to that idea we mentioned earlier about the two sides of durational aesthetics. One is the limit of what the body can withstand and the other is the attempt to regulate a schedule around this and exhibit these actions. This other is a kind of institutional limit insofar as these events are occurring in art spaces. Curators like to designate a

particular length of time and this was the genius of Abramović and Ulay's *Night Sea Crossing*. It was ten to five, so gallery hours, perfect! But they had to maintain their fasting regime outside of those hours and you maintain fasting regimes when you're doing your work as well. Why is that? Why do you insist on effectively reducing your body's capacity to withstand extreme duration?

**Mike Parr** The problem is very simple. If you're in a public space for any definite time you've got simple problems to manage. Bodily waste. Urine is all right. I often exhibit urine but exhibiting buckets of shit, it's a possibility but it's probably a step too far. So fasting means that I'm much more in control of my body and fasting requires a lot of self-discipline, really. A three or four day fast before you start doing a ten day piece means that by the time you start the performance you've gone into yourself, you've focused, and you're in control of yourself and then you can tension that against the limits of the actual physical situation, the spatiality, the room, and then just the hour to hour demands and so on, lack of sleep, lack of food, lack of water, in my case for ten days, constant light, things like that.

What I'm trying to do is not display this superhuman because I'm far from superhuman, I can assure you; what I'm simply trying to put on show are extreme limits, the limits of my capacities to survive a situation but I'm also very interested in when that breaks down. The end of the performance becomes more interesting for me now because it's a very unprotected zone and the contents have been stripped of all symbolic order and all kind of manageability, and you're left with something utterly raw. So it's a kind of materiality almost in its abjection and extremity. That's very interesting, too.

So performance produces these extremes and I suppose it's interesting to think about them in relation to theatre, theatrical extremes, because theatrical extremes are always concerned to hold on to an audience whereas when I begin my performances the first thing I do is jettison the idea of an audience. When we did *Daydream Island* here we divided this area, so one half was black and empty and we did everything in this half and my team working with me, we turned our backs on the audience and the work was only accessible to the audience as large scale projections in real time, but it was mediated so it was a bit like watching television or going to the cinema except that you did have the occurrence here but you were shielded from it. It was enclosed; it was a nucleus in relation to itself.

The durational thing had been set by Performance Space saying you can have 80 minutes and no more, and the core of the piece wouldn't have required 80 minutes but it certainly required me going to a limit state. When we run a couple of minutes of video later in the session that will be clear, because I was having all these regressive toys, military toys and disordered people, all kinds of subconscious effusions stitched to my face and I was aiming to produce *Daydream Island*, not resort style, people in bikinis lying around working on their suntans. I was interested in the fact that other islands like Nauru and Manus weren't so far away, so you have the oblivion of *Daydream Island* and the insidious intrusion, the inevitable intrusion of these realities. So I wanted to recreate *Daydream Island* as a sort of miasma.

**Edward Scheer** You talk about *Daydream Island* as a kind of anti-performance, a piece of theatre which is negating the experience of the spectator. What does anti-performance mean for you? Why do you characterise the work in that way?



Fig 3. *Daydream Island* (2013). Photo Zan Wimberley. Courtesy and © Mike Parr.



**Mike Parr** I think I mean that it's denying the normal theatrical setup so it's producing a sort of negation and putting that negation on display and putting it on display in a kind of articulated way. My group working with me had black monochromes on their backs, glossy black monochromes that winked and shone in the light. They were just moving and performing tasks at great speed because of this durational limit that had been imposed on the performance, quite unconscious of their relationship to the audience. We were fully embedded in a task. I realised that was going to be the case so I wanted to signal that and I wanted to signal it by referring to Modernism, by referring to the visual history of modern art. I wanted to take those signs, those signs of terminus, those end points of Modernism, which are enormously resonant. Their absences are enormously resonant, there's no question about that. I wanted them to be just worn casually by the performers concentrating on something else, and for them to emerge in relation to the audience in a kind of inadvertent way. So I wanted that level of sophistication as one bracket to the parenthesis.



**Fig 4.** *Daydream Island* (2013). Photo Zan Wimberley. Courtesy and © Mike Parr.

The other one was a kind of risk of things going wrong and a kind of disaster. Working at that speed, I had the flu for the occasion, which added another dimension as far as I was concerned, so I was coping with two things, but that's beside the point, the show must go on as they say in the theatre world. We were doing this thing so I was interested in holding it in that way in relation to the audience and then letting it unravel beyond that point and pour out towards the final scenes.

It's anti-theatre in a sense in the way in which it's knowing about the theatrical setup. It's getting rid of a lot of preliminary theatrical convention and theatrical expectation and concentrating on a kind of structural essence, but a structural essence that's set up like a palisade around an event that's careening in relation to itself and requiring constant processes of adaptation and adjustment as people work very rapidly together without any rehearsal to arrive at desired states, imagistic

states. We wanted to produce this sense of the performer going from a presentation, even via video, to being on the floor, using Modernism in the form of abstract expression and the passivity of that, and the makeup person slashing paint onto my face ...

**Edward Scheer** Jackson Pollock style ...

**Mike Parr** Yes, and the camera coming in at increasingly low angles as though it was pouring in towards a landing strip, and you get all of that kind of extreme orthogonal distortion, everything starts to flatten out into the horizontal and you can then see the face looming, encased in the remains of these peculiar regressions that have been now, by this stage, encased in paint and it is some mysterious zone, some mysterious island, some separation of the head from the body, from the social nexus, isolated in relation to itself, a tropical miasma.

It was ending like this and then it was interrupted finally by a mechanical pig, which was hilarious and this was—we were conflating various things. I'm thinking that increasingly the refugees coming to our North will be coming because of climate change, so we're only at the beginning of enormous disturbances in the 21st century that are going to produce wars and unholy upheavals.

I was reading the other day that Nietzsche talked of two centuries at the end of the 19th century, two following centuries of catastrophe and it was TJ Clark (2012) writing very eloquently, and he was saying we've had one of those centuries—what does the next one bring?

**Edward Scheer** We'll show a bit of the video in a moment. The idea, though, that the work is kind of turning its back on theatrical conventions may not have been evident to the people in the space at the time, because we were all sitting there like you are now, (to audience) paying close attention, just like at the theatre, viewing intently, there were multiple screens around the space, but the only action, the only narrative, consisted of this kind of sado-masochistic performance occurring on the stage with very unveiled political overtones. Although you say it was radically cut off from the social, it was really in a sense to me a continuation of the very daily experience of watching the brutality meted out to asylum seekers in our name, as a kind of national theatre. I thought the theatrical element of that work was really playing to one of the major recreational pastimes of the Australian middle classes these days which is sitting back and watching the horrible things we're doing to the asylum seekers this week, like this ghastly reality TV show.

So I got quite a different sense. Rather than seeing something that was radically cut off and sometimes in the theatre you get the sense that it exists in a bubble, suing for a separate peace from the world outside, with *Daydream Island* I didn't get that sense at all. I got the sense that there was a real intervention happening and that I was being asked to consider those relationships, which I think is why I respond to your work in the way that I do, because it is making those connections, very uncomfortable connections.

**Mike Parr** But that kind of awareness is perhaps only available through a sort of contradictory structure because if it was laid out, if we'd turned around and just did this thing, then, without the separations built into the piece, I don't know that it would have provoked that response. That's the problem of Reality TV, lets say food pornography, because we're really into that, it just goes on endlessly, all those cooking programs, on the television, and the account of what's actually happening beyond the privilege of our lifestyle is absent.



Fig 5. *Daydream Island* (2013). Photo Zan Wimberley. Courtesy and © Mike Parr.

I think it's very important that we do—well, I don't know about very important but I think that structure actually makes your experience accessible. I think it makes it accessible to you. It's you thinking rather than simply being inundated.

**Edward Scheer** My response to that—you might remember I sent you an email about this after the event—is that although it was an intense experience it was also a truncated experience and what I'd found with the earlier performances that we mentioned before, that occurred over a longer duration, was that they allowed, for one thing, multiple perspectives. As a spectator I could come and see you in different states of catastrophe. It allowed for a different sense of my own relationship to the questions you were raising to evolve. It allowed a duration for me as well to get to grips with what you were doing, whereas this kind of 80 minute experience, and I think we can now blame Jeff entirely for that, was in a way cut off. That was my sense.

**Mike Parr** I kind of disagree with this because I think what you're describing is a process of projection. I think what's happening is a bit like *Blood Box* (1998) which in a way made your role clear to you yourself because you were the sort of amanuensis, you were writing up an account of your experience as the performance was occurring. You were keeping pace with that performance and keeping pace with your changing response, and that's what you were writing about. It's revealing because it's you projecting and reading in to the piece.

The durational performance is something like this—it's got a kind of abstraction about it because it's so self-willed it aims at separation from an audience because it goes on regardless. An audience is irrelevant to a durational performance. So it functions I think for an audience like a Rorschach blot. It encourages projection. It encourages reading in.

So you begin to narrate your own response. It's your changing relationship to the performance that is actually your content. It's that content that's increasingly conspicuous. The performer is not reciprocating at any level. He's not responding at any level. Durational performances all have a similar feel. The bride performances where I was walking day and night for three days, in *The White Hybrid (Fading)* (1996) ... I was going down that long wharf and disappearing into a kind of vanishing point and then returning and coming towards the viewer up to the barricade and then back down again. So you were constantly seeing up close like this and then that image would disappear and provide you with a kind of relief because then you would think about the disappearance of a performer in space and time and then they would return. So it was this kind of osmosis in space and time that was producing your receptivity. The piece itself declared no meanings at all.

That's durational performance, but then I'd argue that the performances I did in the 1970s, where I wrap a gunpowder wick up my leg, light it and in 28 seconds you're hit with a scaring image that just jars its way into your brain. *Integration 3 (Leg Spiral)* (1975) is only ever seen as film documentation. It always has the same effect. It's just this blast, but it's got this aesthetic coherence, this will to form and I don't know that there's a great difference between the impact of a work like that and the impact of *White Hybrid Fading*.

**Edward Scheer** *White Hybrid Fading* was the 72-hour bride piece performed on the old Woolloomooloo Wharf which is now where all the restaurants are. It was the last public use of that space before it was developed—just contextualising that for a moment. In a way I think you're right, the 72 hours of that which again you would only glimpse momentarily as you went down either to see you at the site or across the road in Artspace, the image of you walking up and down retreating from visibility was projected on to a wall in the upstairs galleries. Again, you were heavily reliant on mediation to get a sense of proximity to that work. The experience of it was also durational in the sense that you could stay with it for whatever period of time you chose, so it becomes durational for the spectator as well.

The 28 seconds of the spiral coil work similarly takes as long as it takes. There's no need to make that go any longer than it has to go. The temporal structure is determined by the task. So they're both durational works; however, very differently conceived, and they both can have a similar impact for the spectator.

I'd say that one sense in which I've always responded to your work as durational work is because, in Adrian Heathfield's phrase, it takes us beyond or 'out of now,' so there's a shocking recognition with a now, as in the spiral coil, but the meditation doesn't stop there, there is a period when you realise that you've scarred yourself, that that body has to heal, there is an ongoing meditation on the significance of that as well as the experience of that for you. It's more than the now, it's more than the Modernist hit: 'it's a masterpiece, I can move on to the next painting in the exhibition'. There's a sense in which you're demanding attention for a specific period of time rather than an endlessness which we might associate with Minimalism, which Michael Fried certainly associates with Minimalism.

I've always been intrigued by the way you insert Minimalist imagery into your performances as if to fuck with it, in a way, as if to disrupt it and challenge it to speak very specifically to what it knows of temporality as well, rather than hiding this fake experience of endlessness.

**Mike Parr** That's an interesting remark but I could say, too, that I've just been looking at the installation of one of my early works in GOMA (the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane) and it's

called *Tack Line* (1973) and yes, this is a perfect example of what you're talking about, this relationship to Minimalism, because I'm parodying Minimalist measurement. Minimalist measurement requires the deadpan. The assumption is that everything can be compartmentalised according to the inert and I'm pushing drawing pins into my leg and I've trained myself to do them very exactly and very quickly, roughly, in those days, one inch apart, so they go up my leg quite fast and then you see blood running down my leg. The idea, of course, is that measurement is being enacted not against a neutral surface; it hasn't got its objective correlative, it's in fact being enacted against the human body. The way it's installed works very well because it accentuates the idea of the Minimalist feel and the marking off of that feel in relation to the body.

A work like *Kingdom Come...* went on for as long as possible, roughly 30 hours, and had a very ragged collapsing end, but I was in Artspace, I was sitting within a square of light, very cubic square of light in an otherwise dark space, and I was very conscious of the formal ying-yang of that setup. People could intrude, if they did intrude into that cube of light I would be delivered a shock, and at that point, throughout Artspace, not just in the space in which the performance was occurring but throughout Artspace, that shock would come up as my face being jarred by the electricity and it was only there for seconds and then it disappeared. So the shock resonated throughout the whole space but it resonated with a very similar structure to the *Tack Line* that we're talking about. There was the same use of a limit state to structure, to carve up time and a physical space.

In all of my performances the use of media enables me to do that. Invariably, *Water from the Mouth*, the ten day piece, you could only experience that work by looking through small holes and cracks in the surface of the box and seeing part views of me inside, or alternatively you could go online and see a continuous screening, 24/7 projection. So invariably I don't want to overwhelm the audience with too much presence, too much extremity. I want to strain it through the articulation of space and time.

That's the crucial tension and the Tehching Hsieh work installed here at Carriageworks ... errs on the side of a sort of stasis, a documentation that fits back into the traditional Modernist measurement—it's performative but it's like On Kawara's performative paintings or his recurrent messages. It's time subjected to the measurement of time, but I suggest that performance art tries to go beyond that but it goes beyond that via a series of incremental steps. Your projection, your empathy, has got everything to do with those incremental steps. The aesthetics of the situation are very important. They're important to my imagining, when I conceive a work I conceive these increments and they're important to my preparation. I want to be before the audience in a very particular way and I want to hold that encounter, I want to hold the coherence of that encounter, against the disruption of my mind and body under stress, but I want that basic tension and I learned that very early in the piece (early in my career).

When I did some of my first performances way back in 1972 the one I often refer to, because it was a situation where the audience was hardly an audience and the piece was hardly a performance because we didn't have that language at that time. It was simply an instruction on the wall of Inhibodress gallery along with a lot of other instructions and I exhibited the instructions as the exhibition. Donald Brook, an important art critic at the time, talked about these instructions somehow or other extending the Surrealist imaginary in all sorts of extraordinary ways, but it never occurred to anyone that I would perform these things. But in accepting the exhibition as an exhibition of art it gave me a kind of permission to perform these pieces. At the end of the exhibition I invited the audience back and Peter Kennedy and I sat in front of the audience, they didn't know what was going to happen, I'd left this one statement on the wall: 'Arrange for a friend

to bite into your shoulder, he or she should continue biting for as long as possible or until their mouth is filled with blood' so Peter rolled up the sleeve of my right arm and began biting as hard as he could. I felt this sort of bulge, this surge in the audience, and I thought, if I react the performance will come to an end and it will come to an end in the most abject way. I realised that I couldn't react, that I had to meet this surge in the audience which was medical, psychoanalytical ...

**Edward Scheer** Ethical?

**Mike Parr** ... Christian Scientist, God knows, ethical yes, all of those parameters. I kept it at bay by not reacting, so I just – they couldn't get to me because I was a wall of resistance in relation to a disturbance. Terry Smith was there and he leapt into the breach. 'How are we going to organise our experience of this and talk about it?' Someone had fainted and everyone was in a state of disbelief, I suppose, at what had happened and how they had responded. So we couldn't organise a series of categories to manage our exit. The performance situation was born in that moment—the simple realisation that structure and a breaking of structure was the dialectic essence of the performance situation.

**Edward Scheer** Let's roll the video now. Those of you who weren't able to see the work at the time can see some of it now. You're actually seeing what the live audience to the work itself saw, really, because there were three large screens in the space relaying the visual information to spectators.

**Mike Parr** The cameraman, I'd instructed him to continually keep pulling focus past me on to the viewers, so that the audience could see themselves looking at the performance.

**Edward Scheer** You mentioned inadvertence before—was there an aspect to this that did not work out to your plan, or that exceeded the structure you'd created?

**Mike Parr** Yes, this is the other thing that is a very important part of the performance situation, because in a duration performance you can have panic attacks and so on. When I was doing the ten day 'Water from the Mouth', the lack of food and the lack of sleep, within three or four days I was becoming very anxious that I might have lost touch with things. So there's psychotic interludes in performances that are induced by panic and anxiety and I think it's my experience that I've learned to manage these moments back into the performance, regain control during the performance as part of the performance. So I wasn't very confident about this piece; I didn't know but I was working with a very good co-performer, my wife Felizitas who knows how to pace.

When I do face sewings with Gary Manson, he's great to do them with but he's like a butcher and I've got this fresh skin like a baby and I'm really falling apart because he just shoves sutures straight through, bang, and it's horrendous as an experience. He lifts me out of the seat, he does it with such force. There's one moment in 'Fresh Skin Like a Baby' when I actually rise up out of the seat in which I'm sitting because of the force with which he's pushing it through my face. But Felizitas knew how to manage this situation so she extracted a kind of duration that may have been very different if I'd been working with Gary Manson.

**Edward Scheer** Do you think she's always wanted to sew things onto your face?

**Mike Parr** We don't talk about it that much.

**Edward Scheer** I came in and was sitting next to John Loane (master printmaker and collaborator with Parr on the Self Portrait Project) and said, *Where's Felizitas, she's normally monitoring things very closely?* and he said, *Have a close look.*

**Mike Parr** She was unrecognisable in her reading glasses.

**Edward Scheer** Yes, right, she had glasses on and a white coat and was sewing the little monster toys on to Mike's face. But I am interested in the moments where the structure collapses, where the durational limit reasserts itself. Tehching talks about all the moments where he missed the deadline. He's got all the stats which show when he was late or when he'd slept in or when he'd missed the one-hour photo call and he's got lists of stats for each month. It really is, as you say, obsessively bureaucratic.

**Mike Parr** Yes, it's really interesting, and those moments of content where he's missed it for some reason because he's outside having a massage or talking to his psychiatrist or something, it would have been very interesting to know more. You could have reversed the whole thing and put the emphasis on the missed—

**Edward Scheer** The missed deadlines. But of course that's one key element to this kind of work which is regardless of what the chronological structure demands the body has its own experiences—so for you it might be a pain threshold, for Tehching it was the need for sleep. I know Fiona McGregor's piece *Water #1 Descent* (2011) at Artspace was disrupted some time before the planned deadline because it was simply too cold for her body to withstand it. I thought that was a very interesting experience to narrate in the context of an artwork; that despite all of the planning and preparation that an artist goes through and all of the commitment in order to make a work like that, at a certain point you might just realise you have to cut out.

Those kinds of extremes are also worth thinking about in relation to this kind of work. It makes it essentially an anti-theatrical genre, because you're really at the edge of representation the whole time.

**Mike Parr** Precisely, and you have disasters. When I was doing *Amerika* (2006) outside the Art Gallery of New South Wales I would have liked to have done this for a week. This was my ambition, but I was sleeping out under the tree as the 'Bride' and then walking around Beuys's tree, this tree of his that's been planted there and forgotten (see Scheer 2008), walking around this tree and I had the camera on a very thin wand, so it would move in the wind, and it was recording me, so the camera was moving 15 feet above me, looking down, and moving in the wind. I was circling the tree and sleeping out, and I think it was the second day in, it began the downpour that sometimes happens in Sydney and it just went on relentlessly, hour after hour and through the night, and after two days of lying out in the rain, this pelting rain, and starting to really crack up, I got through the third night, or the fourth night I think it was, I got through the fourth night and about six in the morning I just stood up and walked away. It was a tragic moment for me because I was determined to last seven or eight days, but I couldn't go on.

I think these are really interesting moments in performance. I had that with the *24 Hour Smile* back in 1983. Within minutes of starting this piece—it was going to be smiling for 24 hours—within three minutes I realised that this was literally an impossibility. This terrible feeling of panic came over me and by the end of that performance the smile was just like, it was just a rictus that I didn't own any more. I didn't know what had happened to my face. I can remember coming back

in the plane the following day and I was terrified because I thought I was still doing this. (*Pulls bizarre smiling face.*)

**Edward Scheer** How long did you last on that occasion?

**Mike Parr** I lasted 24 hours but there were lots of cop-outs in that performance. It just couldn't be done. It was a terrible failure and it produced this hiatus for a few years. It tipped me into the self-portrait project where I began examining all that documentation and began drawing, and drawing from photographs that were the weak part of my performance level. I had the heroic photographs and the abject photographs. It was the abject photographs that I began to draw.

### Questions

**Audience** How do you distinguish between theatre and performance?

**Edward Scheer** Yes, I think there may have been a bit of slippage between those things. It was partly because that performance had been designed as a theatrical experience, in a theatre space for an audience with a limited duration with the theatre lights and the coloured gels and all the rest of it, so it was very overtly gesturing towards a theatrical experience, while the experience was also that of a real person enduring a real physical experience. Of course, theatre is made up of performance but performance isn't always theatre. This was performance art really masquerading as theatre, I think, rather than the other way round.

**Mike Parr** I think that's probably right, actually. It's the first time I've done a piece in a theatre space. I rather like theatre spaces. I like this space. It really stimulates me for some reason. It's seeing you all at this angle, I think. One of my very first performance scripts suggested that I would film a fish in enormous close-up expiring on a sheet of blotting paper and project this on a screen in a theatre like this with all the lights out and while people were watching this really unpleasant image I would have a bucket filled with little tiny fish, whitebait, in the bucket, and I would throw these fish into their hair. I was very young at the time. I would throw these fish into their hair and I would drive them out of the theatre and they would have fish hanging out of their hair. So I'm not very good at conceptualising. It's very rudimentary, my relationship with theatre.

**Edward Scheer** Just be very careful if you ever want to attend a performance that Mike's billing as 'theatre'!

**Audience** How did you start making performances? How do you prepare? Do you rehearse for a performance?

**Mike Parr** Yes, it's interesting, all my pieces right back to 1970–71 have been preceded by scripts but they weren't necessarily performance scripts, they were responses to anxious states that I had and when people ask about the origins of my performance, I say it may have had this autistic beginning back when I was about 11 or 12, living in South East Queensland behind the Gold Coast before it became the Gold Coast, on a little farm with 50 or 60 acres and surrounded by these disconsolate and unappetising people. My father said, it's because they're all inbred. I don't know that that was the right explanation but they were certainly rednecks and they used to plague me with questions about *why do you have one arm, mate?* so I used to up the ante. I'd say, *I got my arm caught in the chaff cutter, and the horse ate it along with the other vegetable matter.* Anyway, it used to have a devastating effect and it was my way of defending myself against these



constant questionings about being different. So I really took a kind of advantage from that and upped the ante and made sure that I was completely different.

I thought to myself in recent times that that may well have precipitated the first performance script. So they began like that, without me necessarily thinking of doing performances. What I would do is I would write them down like one might write a poem. I'd rewrite them until I'd finally got them into some sort of elegant formal shape, a bit like my recounting of the instruction for arranging for a friend to bite into a shoulder. When the euphonics were right, and they had a nice balance as a text, I would leave them, but they kept coming back and then I made the decision that I had to perform these things as the next therapeutic intervention. It's very interesting, at this point it's sort of parodying the medical situation, isn't it, where they suggest a therapy and it doesn't work, or it works for six months and then whatever the disorder is it's been amplified somehow or other by the therapy, and you see the next level of specialist, and they suggest that you put a rabbit trap on your foot or something.

What I did was I performed these things to get rid of the instruction. I don't rehearse anything that I do. What I do is I refine the idea for the piece through writing it down and I kind of visualise every possibility. Then I can visualise the setting, I can visualise how I will feel even, the mental state that I will be in, if it's euphoric I build on that, I think then this is how I will see myself, it's quite primitive, the kind of senses of the self as a kind of edifice or barrier. I'm quite conscious of that and how to undermine that or collapse it as part of the course of the performance but none of this is rehearsed in advance.

**Audience** How do you manage extreme emotion that arises in performance?

**Mike Parr** By sort of objectifying it. By seeing it as one of the parameters for the performances. A performance can be presented, as it were, completely deadpan where you resist in a way. Tehching is doing exactly that. He's performing deadpan. It's like he isn't imagining an audience, he isn't imagining an interlocutor; all he's imagining, it seems to me, is to be the clock face. The only indicator really of the passage of time is the growing of his hair, but he just remains expressionless from beginning to end.

So that's one way of being a performer, but the interesting thing about duration performance is that it produces these other states, and you've got to accommodate them within the prevailing aesthetic, within the prevailing performative style of the piece so you've got to accommodate states where you're not in control, where you're flooded by anxiety, and you've still got to stay present because if you allow any of these kinds of wellings up to overtake the performance the performance has failed. That's true, I think, of any performance artist.



Fig 6. Mike Parr, *Daydream Island* (2013). Photo Zan Wimberley. Courtesy and © Mike Parr.

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**Notes**

1. David Williamson is a popular Australian playwright.

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