

# Replaced to displace;

## An Australian Perspective on Emerging, Brisbane-based Performance Art

By Nathan Stoneham

### **Perspective:**

As a young, emerging, transdisciplinary artist who has, since graduating, spent most of my time outside of Australia, I am in no position to catalogue or accurately synthesise the scope of Australian Performance Art. I can, however:

- Give a brief introduction to the Australian context that produces performance art,
- Offer snapshots of my work and the work of a small network of emerging Brisbane-based performance artists, tracing connections to the work of a handful of leading Australian performance artists
- In a few words, investigate fundamental issues informing how/why/where performance art is produced in Brisbane, and;
- Provide links to Australian performance artists, festivals and spaces for further reading

As an art activist, my perspective is influenced by the responsibility I assign art to be an agent for positive change.

### ***...what it is...***

Performance art in Australia is almost as diverse as Australia's people, landscapes, languages and beliefs.

What makes an Australian performance: the performer's cultural heritage? a particular training? a certain kind of physicality? possession of an Australian passport? (Rogers and Shafer, 2008, p.53)

Contemporary "Australian culture" is an ever-changing fabric of disparate influences forging unique fusions and diverse sub-cultures. It is from this evolving conglomerate of differences that Australian performance art emerges. Each piece of Australian performance art has a unique lineage – with every happening, another redefining thread is added to Australia's cultural fabric.

Australian performance artists address "*fundamental issues such as what it is to have a body, a mind, to be alive today, and to have different histories, traditions and social structures.*" (Loxley, 1994, p. 198) While the everyday Australian (and performance artists themselves) may struggle to define "performance art" – it does exist and is a small, active part of Australia's art scene. Like many other places around the world, "performance art" in Australia is loosely understood as an event (live or mediated, impromptu or planned, solo or as a group, for a knowing audience or for unexpected onlookers, site-specific or otherwise) that often extends on conceptions of what can be described as art. Another uniting feature is that all performance art in Australia takes place on land traditionally owned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

### ***...to have different histories, traditions and social structures...***

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the first performers and artists of Australia. But to separate art from language, culture and the land is a Eurocentric thought (Irwan, Rogers and Wan, p.204). Sharon Cruse, an academic from the Adnyamathanha people deems such separation artificial to her

community. Like many Indigenous cultures across Australia and the world, “art” cannot be translated into Cruse’s native language. Events that may be interpreted and described as art in English, may be seen by the custodians as inseparable events intrinsically connected to culture - to life (Cruse in Irwan, Rogers and Wan, p.204).

Regardless of ideological and language differences, it can be said that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia today present a variety of traditional and contemporary performances spanning contexts and disciplines, ranging from professional companies such as Sydney’s Bangarra dance company ([www.bangarra.com.au](http://www.bangarra.com.au)) and Perth’s Yirra Yaakin Theatre company ([www.yirrayaakin.com.au](http://www.yirrayaakin.com.au)), to in-community events that are a celebration and maintenance of culture. Works from such Indigenous artists contribute valued repertoire to Australia’s performing arts scenes exploring a range of content - from dreamtime stories to what it means to be an Indigenous Australian today to issues surrounding the fact that “since colonisation, they {Indigenous Australians} have experienced discriminatory treatment, oppression and control at the hand of governments” (Grehan, 2010, p. 56). Despite the slow increase in the mainstreaming of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories and artists in Australian performing arts, Indigenous perspectives are obviously underrepresented in the recently introduced (/imposed?) world of performance art. This may be a manifestation of what Grehan (2010, p. 56) describes as a gulf between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures in Australia. It should be noted that some Indigenous cultural performances have been presented as performance art, such as *A Walkabout Continuum: 30,000 years of Australian Performance Art* (1991) – an event that organisers said would:

"shed some light on Aboriginal culture, in which many Western artists and thinkers are finding their notions of art, their attitudes toward the land, even their assumptions about the nature of reality, challenged and changed." (Marshall-Stoneking, 1991)

Alongside Australia’s ancient history of performing arts, “performance art” and the type of experimental work the term signifies, is a relatively new addition to Australia’s artistic vocabulary and imagination. This freshness sets performance art aside from old-fashioned colonial values and patriarchal barriers, placing it in a position to challenge hegemonic discourses (Loxley, 1994, p.198) – not only the “*hegemony of Anglo-European perspectives, but also Anglo-European modes of representation*” (Hamilton, 2008, p. 7). Australian performance art can take further advantage of this political position to advocate for positive social change. There is space for performance art to follow in the footsteps of leading performance artist Jill Orr who states, “*I work in the environmental and socio-political arenas where I search for the humanity reflected in different sites and issues, which have a personal and universal relevance*” (Orr, 2010). This approach would see more Australian performance art contribute to dialogues around pressing issues such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights (see Orr’s *The Prayer* <http://www.jillorr.com.au/index.html>), the ill-treatment of asylum seekers (see Fiona McGregor’s *You Have The Body* <http://www.fionamcgregor.com/actions/you-have-the-body>) and the gender inequalities evident within the nation’s institutions and (marriage) laws... to name a few.

One must bear and thus transport and translate stories of past injustices beyond their moment of telling by taking these stories to another time and space where they become available to be heard or seen ... Through words, images or actions, one must indicate to others not only why what one has seen or heard is worthy of **remembrance** but also how such remembrance may inform one’s contemporary perceptions and actions. (Roger I. Simon and Claudia Eppert, 1997, p.38, in Grehan, 2010, bold added)

**...to have a mind...**

One of Australia’s leading performance artists, Mike Parr, performed an act of remembrance titled *Amerika* in 2006. Dressed as a bride, Parr remained around a fig tree outside the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, (<http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/>) for just over three days. The tree had been planted there over 20 years prior by a festival curator on the instruction of legendary German performance artist Joseph

Beuys, but the commemorative stone accompanying the art work was later inadvertently removed “rendering the artwork just another tree” (Scheer, 2008, p. 197).

Parr had not indicated a predetermined end point to the performance, but eventually... the conditions overcame him. This is as it should be for these durational events, which take their cue from the unfolding in time of their key concerns: memory, reconnection, aesthetic value. After all, how long does an act of memorialization take? (Scheer, 2008, p. 197)



***Please Keep On The Grass, 2010, Stoneham and Browning***

My performance installation *Please Keep On The Grass* (2010, in collaboration with Thom Browning <http://thombrowning.com/>) was also an act of remembrance connected to the value of a natural feature amongst a city setting. One hundred square metres of fresh turf was installed on King George Square – a civic space that until recently, boasted a family-friendly lawn. Dressed as grounds men, Thom and I invited everyday people onto the grass for picnics, afternoon naps and lawn games for the short-lived duration of six hours. The sudden re-emergence of the lawn at the site intercepted the routines of passers by and stimulated memories of a now extinct, rejuvenating, livable space. Similarly, the sudden re-disappearance of the lawn concluded the work that was dedicated to the remembrance of, and hope for, a greener Brisbane. In their efforts to support emerging artists, youth-friendly events and community development, the subtly subversive installation was ironically funded by the city council – the governing body responsible for the paving-over of the original lawn.



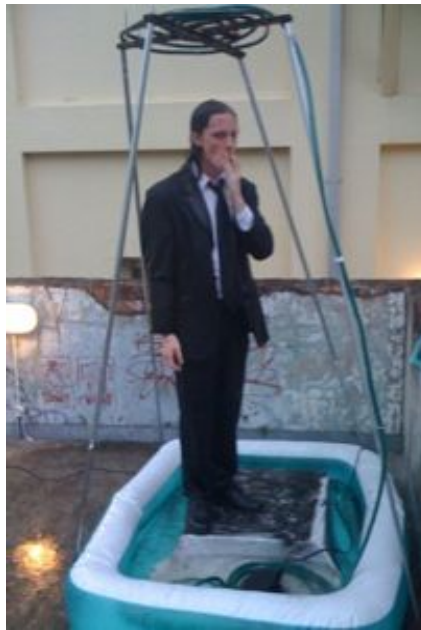
***In Memory Of A Tree, Jones***

McAuley draws parallels between *remembering* in performance and “the grounded performativity of Aboriginal remembering in which the land itself is the repository of history, story and knowledge” (2009, p.45). Alicia Jones, a Brisbane-based artist explored links to her Tasmanian Aboriginal Heritage in her performance art piece *In Memory Of A Tree* (presented at the State Library Of Queensland [SLQ] <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/>). “*Questioning the construction of identity in contemporary society, Alicia actively explores the past and present to create a future of understanding and compassion with the viewer*” (SLQ, 2007). Jones states that *In Memory of a Tree* “remembers the land, remembers those who have passed, provides a channel for the transition of energy, heals the earth, heals the people, awakens the Dreaming” (Jones, 2011)

***...to have a body...***

When I reflect on the performance art work that my friends in Brisbane have been creating over the past few years, I can identify a connection to the way Parr “force(s) the artist’s body to respond beyond its everyday capacity to meet the extremes of the environment” (Scheer, 2008, p.200). In *What You Do While I’m Sleeping* (2008), Brisbane-based emerging performance artist, Sarah Winter deprived herself of sleep for days in preparation for a performance wherein audience members witnessed her rest, and engaged in a

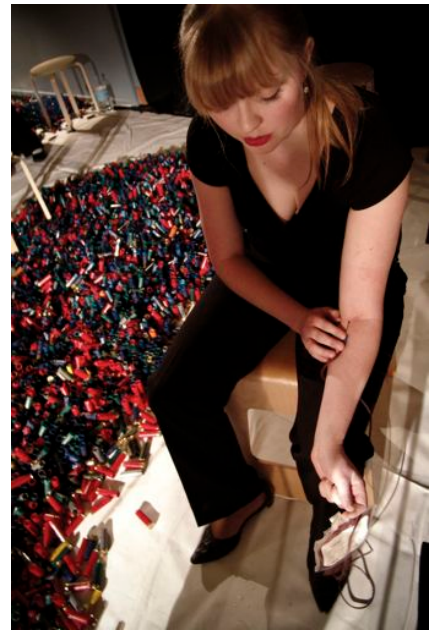
dialogue with the artist in-between dreams through journals alongside her bed. “*Playing with notions of vulnerability and trust, What You Do While I’m Sleeping* comments and problematises the role of the artist in society and asks the audient to assume responsibility in an intimate space where their actions are of their own volition” (Winter, 2010). Robert Millet has been seen freezing cold, standing under his homemade rain machine chain smoking cigarettes around Brisbane in *Smoking In The Rain* and downing vodka shot after vodka shot, blindfolded, with consecutive audience members in *Vodka and Truth*.



**Smoking In The Rain, Millet**

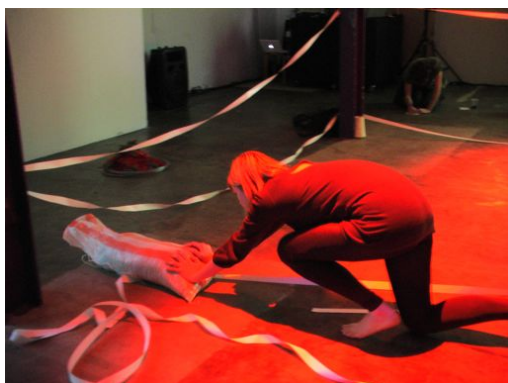


**Mokuso, McK**



**1 LTR of Blood 1000 KGS of Bullets, Cunningham**

At the intersection of performance art and activism, Rebecca Cunningham’s *1 LTR of blood, 1000 KGs of bullets* (2009), saw the artist extract her own blood in front of her audience. Surrounded by bullet capsules, Cunningham collected the onlookers’ thoughts on war and then wrote these thoughts onto blank canvases using her blood as paint. This use of blood mirrors Parr’s work, *Blood Box* (1998, Artspace, Sydney, <http://www.artspace.org.au/>) wherein he remained in a glass box streaked with his blood for 24 hours.



**Lines and Flux, Woodnutt**

In Brisbane, performance art works such as those listed above are supported by a limited number of producers and festivals such as Brisbane Festival’s *Under The Radar* ([www.brisbanefestival.com.au/Under-the-Radar/0,15,346,015.aspx](http://www.brisbanefestival.com.au/Under-the-Radar/0,15,346,015.aspx)), the *Anywhere Theatre Festival* (<http://anywherifest.com>), Metro Arts ([www.metroarts.com.au](http://www.metroarts.com.au)), Backbone Youth Art’s *2High Festival* (<http://www.backbone.org.au/> see McK’s *Mokuso*). *Exist* (curated in 2008 by Zane Trow and Rebecca Cunningham and in 2010 by Rebecca Cunningham, Brittany Guy and Lauren

Clelland <http://existenceperformanceart.wordpress.com>) is Brisbane's only event committed entirely to performance art, live art and action art. Over two days, *Exist* showcases local, national and international works at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts ([www.jwcoqa.qld.gov.au/.com](http://www.jwcoqa.qld.gov.au/.com)). *Exist* has evolved into an artist run initiative, hosting regular performance art, action art and live art events featuring works from Brisbane performance artists such as Melody Woodnut (<http://web.me.com/vote.bohemia/Site/Ody.whO.html>.)

As a part of *Exist* 2010, Dan Koop's (Melbourne, [www.dankoop.net](http://www.dankoop.net)) project, *Wish We Were Here* bridged the The Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Art with the outside world. Visitors to Koop's *DJK International* booth wrote on postcards that were later hand delivered by the artist to addresses within a 5km radius. Deliveries were tracked via twitter. "*Part corporate spoof, part re-humanising latter day communications, it was a sweet idea and in great demand*" (Leonard, 2011). This project was later programmed in *Tiny Stadiums*, a festival of live art and site-specific work in Sydney.

### **...to be alive today...**

Schwenk (2010) argues that participatory performance art placed outside of art spaces can be used as a tool to build local communities. She uses the term *Performosis* to describe the way in which:

...everyday people become performance artists when they become a performer in participatory performance art; and spectators and passers-by performing their everyday activities become active parts in the performance that is being performed in public spaces (Shwenk, 2010, p. 22).

Presenting art in public spaces is not to displace art – it is to replace art back into the community, without the privileged murmurs of theatres and art galleries. "*Story telling began as something we did around camp fires and over time it has become ghettoed inside traditional theatre venues and the structures that go with them*" (Osuch, p. 2010). Art outside of these structures "*reconnect(s) audiences with theatre, with story telling, with performance... anywhere*" (Osuch, p. 2010). Within replaced arts experiences, there is *performosis* which;

...causes a *displacement* of the routine and everyday events, and through this disjunction people become more aware of the environment in which they routinely engage, seeing it in a different perspective. When you draw attention to something there is a fracturing or shattering of the moment that existed immediately before. It is almost akin to breaking a spell, and you reveal something previously unseen (Shwenk, 2010, p. 23, italics added).

The theory of *performosis* and displacing routines strongly resonates with a performance I developed and showcased throughout 2009. *Nok Cha Café* invited pedestrians into a temporary street side multimedia café to witness a traditional Korean tea ceremony and unite with strangers over cups of green tea. The work traveled between Australia and Korea many times, each time adding another layer of video content to the projected material. By offering a pocket of calm and a sense of unity, *Nok Cha Cafe* aimed to fracture



*Nok Cha Cafe, Stoneham*



*VIP OTT, Stoneham*

and draw attention to the rapidity and hardhearted nature of the surrounding city and provide a space to reflect on our relationship with space, especially when in transit and in-between cultures. As Brisbane and Seoul temporarily blurred together through sound, language, appropriated cultural icons and video, pedestrians-come-performance-artists became part of a cross-cultural happening that attempted to offer a meditative experience, a bridging of cultures and an energetic exchange (accompanied by tea) between artist and onlooker. Similarly, in *VIP OTT (2010)* I transformed pedestrians into faux celebrities, dressing them up to star in over-the-top glamour photographs in a mock high-end fashion studio. A comment on our preoccupation with beauty, consumption and waste, this sugarcoated pop-performance challenged exclusive social hierarchies and the “elite” products and attitudes that represent and defend inequality.

There is a trend evident in my work, and much performance art work across Australia to create “*hypothetical universes... {that} emphasise the social dimension of participation*” (Shwenk, 2010, p. 22). Melbourne based performance artist Amy Spiers (<http://amyspiers.tumblr.com>) “*attempts to test the barriers to human connection in her work, often facilitating unlikely meetings and interactions between people*” (Spiers, 2010). When everyday people are transformed into performance artists themselves through engagement in out-of-the-ordinary settings, performance art acts as a catalyst for civic connections that would otherwise be left inert. Engagement;

“...is not mere rational assent – a nodding towards the profound, often without actually ‘arriving’. It is the illusive, sparkling verge where art and community fuse in intense intercourse. It is the amalgam, signifying an irreversible bond between both community and the art. (Peitsch, 2010, p. 37)

As the fabric of Australian culture continues to evolve, so too will Australian performance art and its ability to remember, re-tell, fracture, replace and displace. As a nation, I believe we are moving towards reconciliation, towards equality and towards peace, which will result in the presence of diverse voices within Australian Performance Art that exists to contribute to the cultural health of communities and to celebrate humanity through meaningful, personal and innovative exchanges in the here and now. Australian performance art will continue to interrogate the “*nexus between place and performance, and... the complex ways in which place and performance interact with each other, often activating memory and a sense of the past*” (McAuley, 2009, p. 45). As Australian performance art continues to discern “*what it is to have a body, a mind, to be alive and to have different histories*” (Loxley, 1994, p. 198) it will forge connections between artists and onlookers, between communities, between art spaces and the outside world, between gulfs in our cultural landscape and between Australia and the world.

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