

PERFORMANCE ANXIETY

Nowhere is everywhere, but most of all it is the country we happen to be in at the moment.

Alfred Jarry, program notes to

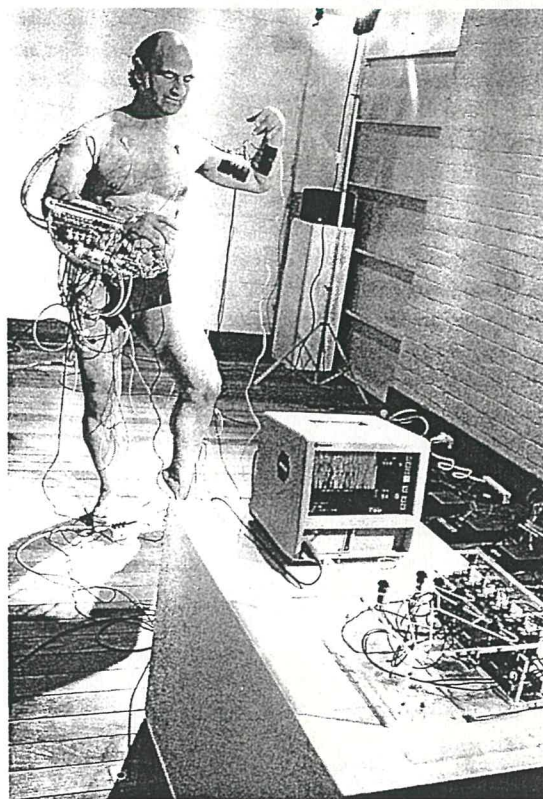
Ubu Roi, 1896.

In the catalogue accompanying "25 Years of Performance Art in Australia" (Ivan Dougherty Gallery/The Performance Space, May 23 - 29, 1994), curator Nick Waterlow locates Alfred Jarry's 1896 staging of *Ubu Roi* as the generative moment for practices now called performance art. *Ubu*, an absurdist piece of theater about the lumpen, morally bankrupt, and murderous monarch of "nowhere," had, in the late nineteenth century, the epoch-shattering smell of succès de scandale about it. The play provoked vocal moral outrage in the fin-de-siècle Parisian audience who recognized, with febrile consternation, their own image in the regent-buffoon, and took none too kindly to the exclamatory *pschitt!* as a performative leitmotiv. In the 98 intervening years such figurative excrement has become the genuine article as performance has evolved to include the ritual abjection of the human body, the literal dismemberment of the "sovereign" subject, and every other imaginable formal innovation. In 1994, then, a survey show of the history of performance—albeit an antipodean take on part of that vast chronology—is unlikely to elicit any late-twentieth-century equivalent

of the post-performance melee that had sent *Ubu Roi* patrons' fists and pince-nez flying.

This is not to say that the jam-packed program featuring performances, films, forums, and documentary exhibitions elicited ennui. Rather, the event embodied a tension between its engagement with contemporaneity on one hand, and with historiography on the other; between performance's evanescence, and the imperative toward hypostatization in the aspic of an official "history." The retrospective imperative perhaps explains the slightly museological feel, the faint whiff of formaldehyde attending "25 Years." Moreover, the event was also imbued with a speculative uncertainty about where performance art might be heading as it chugs ineluctably toward the next millennium.

The show featured a range of "pioneering," established and emerging performance artists and groups such as Kevin Mortensen, Aleks Danko, Bonita Ely, Ken Unsworth, Derek Kreckler, Jill Scott, Arthur Wicks, Jill Orr, The Sydney Front, Deej Fabyc, and Penny Thwaite. A temporal disavowal locates Stelarc's 1969 *Event from Micro to Macro and Between* at the Hamilton Gallery as the seminal moment of performance in Australia. Any particular theme was wisely eschewed, since like *Ubu*'s mythical kingdom, performance is "everywhere" and therefore "nowhere" at once. This undecidability of name and place is the condition of the hybrid—which cannot be taxonomized and so lacks



Stelarc, *PYSCHO/CYBER: Event for involuntary body*, 1994, performance.

conventional identity. As a set of interdisciplinary practices, with a myriad of conceptual and formal concerns, such has been the lot of performance, as PICA Director Sarah Miller points out in her lucid catalogue essay. After two weeks of performances and other events running day and night, it's no wonder that the event as a whole became an atopia, a "morphing" series of material and perceptual commutations.

Salient moments included Yuji Sone's acerbic text, sound, and body work *The Voice of the Masked Other Part 3*, featuring the serial onanism that is becoming the artist's trademark. Sone manages a kind of playful

eloquence with conceptual punch—this work has him faking masturbation as he exaggeratedly mimes tapes of theoretical readings on Western constructions of orientalism. On the rather more strident side, VNS Matrix used a pop aesthetic and the technology of advertising (such as LED readout) to deliver their guerrilla-feminist sloganeering with attitude ("we are the modern cunt"), designed to sabotage "big daddy mainframe." Though retro, VNS's work remains curiously pertinent in a contemporary milieu where languid political disaffection and technological utopianism are rife. Speaking of this, Stelarc, with a kind of viral persistence, appeared

indefatigably hoisting the banner for technology in *PYSCHO/CYBER: Event for involuntary body*, a kind of McLuhan-on-acid scenario where the technological "extension" of the body has sublated the latter. In typical style, the artist stood semi-nude for seven hours having megavoltage conducted into one side of his body to produce spasmodic involuntary movement. Such commitment lends a certain brute immediacy and veracity to Stelarc's oeuvre, which indubitably occupies near-pole position in the international pantheon of techno-performance. However Stelarc's mantra—that technology has rendered the body obsolete, the human physis now reaching "planetary escape velocity"—is starting to wear a tad thin.

Open City's *The Museum of Accidents* (an excerpt from the 1991 work) featured the group's characteristically mordant, rapid-fire repartee style. Combining a narrative of physical accidents with an emotionally peripatetic romance, Open City explore the complexity and multi-dimensionality of dialogical and physical space-time. The clinamen of accidental chance means that while physical worlds may cataclysmically collide, messages never quite meet their mark.

In *Fleas, or the menses of Lizzie Borden*, Barbara Campbell has produced an idiosyncratic work of nuanced intelligence based on the story of the infamous double parricide. Over five days the artist appears on closed-circuit TV, hunched intently over a lump of soap, carving figurines of the Borden family with a measured rhythm that mimics the "period" (both

menstrual and chronological) that enframes the piece. She wears a new dress each day, styled precisely on the account Lizzie gave of the clothing she wore. In her defense the accused apparently claimed that the minute, evidentiary specks of blood located by the prosecutors on her clothing were menstrual—in the euphemistic argot of the day, "fleas." After each day, the soap figurine and dress are installed in the gallery, tagged as prosecution exhibits. There is a resonant interplay between the literal and figurative materiality of the dresses, soap, menses, and knife, and the piece's dilatory duration, and physical gesture; the work is rendered at once textually dense and diaphanous as Campbell painstakingly traces biography as a kind of gradually amassing circumstantial evidence, building with an exquisitely glacial momentum.

Linda Sproul's *Which Side Do You Dress? Parts One and Two* also worked through a rarefied language of costume and gesture. In *Part One: Victor*, the artist stands in a transparent parody of a man's suit playing out hypertrophied, stylized sporting gestures in a "routine" which is both comedic and piquant; in *Part Two: Victoria*, the eroticized female body is the focus of the performance as the artist enacts the seductive gestures of the nightclub artiste. The cards distributed by the artist at the end of part two saying "words cannot express" and "ever remembered" are, as mute crypto-feminist ciphers, a thousand times more eloquent than the high-decibel diatribes hurled at the audience by American performance artist Karen Finley (with whom Sproul

has been compared).

Lyndal Jones, along with Joan Grounds and Stevie Wishart, contributed complex, resonant, and conceptually sophisticated texts of sound, image, and installed elements. Amanda Stewart and Anna Sabiel produced striking sound works, bringing into sharp relief the moribundity of a number of other contributions—including a facile two-bit hoax perpetrated by the Post Arrivalists, and a couple of works which, in a spooky bit of morphic resonance, both featured electric guitar and jejune texts ("sung" and projected, respectively). If there was a scintilla of interest in these anodyne pieces, then it passed me by.

The forums provided a

critical focus for the sprawl of "25 Years": juxtaposing a range of often conflicting positions on performance art gave the event a kind of cantankerous frisson, helped along by the alternately banal, existential, and paternal *Philosophie der Rechts* of performance declaimed by Mike Parr and Noel Sheridan. While the audience and speakers stopped well short of fisticuffs, the definitional and conceptual dissensus on performance art elicited by the rantings of these latter-day *rois* suggests that if agonism impels production, there's life in performance yet.

ANNEMARIE JONSON

Linda Sproul, *Which Side Do You Dress? Part 2*, 1994, performance.

