

MIKE PARR

DECAPITATIONS AND PROTESTATIONS— CUT, BURN, STITCH AND DRAW

Australia's veteran of visceral performances has survived four decades of ravaging his body and the status quo.

By Michael Young



Mike Parr during the installation of *Here, 1975-2008*, at *Detached*, Hobart, 2008. Photo by Paul Green.

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Testing the limits of his physical and mental endurance, Mike Parr has cut, branded, stitched, burned and nailed his body in the pursuit of his art. The blood that covers him during his performances is not always his own—some of his works have involved beheading roosters and stringing their bodies up in rows. Such visceral performances garner him the most attention from art critics and the mainstream media alike, but he has also worked with sculpture, drawing, printmaking, photography and video, through all of which he examines his identity and major political and cultural mores of the 20th century, ranging from his disability to Marxism, refugee crises and the structure of language.

Parr's reputation in Australia is well established. Two years ago at a talk he gave at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, young artists and students crowded around him seeking autographs—Australian painter Adam Cullen and video artist Shaun Gladwell also number among his fans. "His popularity among this group has as much to do with the rigors and discipline that anchors the work as the spectacular body art itself," says Tony Bond, senior curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Meanwhile, on the international stage Parr's reputation remains somewhat limited. This, however, is by choice: long ago he decided to focus on working in Australia and on cultivating a vital environment in which his art could flourish independent of international trends.

Parr's studio is located in Alexandria, a suburb of Sydney that was distinctly undesirable when he moved here 20 years ago but has been rapidly gentrified in recent years. It is not the huge, state-of-the-art space that one expects of a successful artist; rather it is a small, windowless and unrenovated warehouse space of white-painted brick walls and uncovered floorboards. Drinking tea at a large but simple table, Parr is dressed completely in black with his thick gray hair swept back above a pasty, square face that bears no signs of the piercing, lacerating and stitching to which it has been subjected. An urbane man of great charm and fearsome intellect, Parr is extraordinarily well-read and he talks with an easy eloquence about his work.

Parr's life began in Sydney in 1945, as the second child of five. Born with a deformed left arm, Parr has been haunted by the trauma of his disability ever since. During a recent medical examination, Parr's doctor thought that a scalpel mark on the end of the foot-long stump of his left arm might indicate that it had been "cleaned up" by a surgeon at the

time of Parr's birth. The lingering uncertainty over how his arm came to be this way surfaces in Parr's discussion of his work: "How can you make things when you've got one arm?" he quips. Parr's father was a failed medical student whom he recalls being obsessed with grammar and given to correcting his children's speech—a habit that had a profound influence on his understanding of language and, like his arm, was another key influence on the development of his work. His mother had trained to be an artist but never practiced and instead looked after her husband and children at their home on a poultry farm. From the late 1940s to the early 1960s, Parr's father repeatedly moved the family around the country to establish new business ventures, ranging from a jewelry business to a banana plantation, each of which failed. The stress of these moves, compounded by financial difficulties when their bank foreclosed on their home in 1961, led to the breakdown of the family.

Although Parr was a good student he abandoned his arts and law degree at the University of Queensland and drifted into a life of drinking, taking drugs and partying during the 1960s, also writing verse in the manner of the American Beat poets. By 1966 he had begun his career as an artist in Sydney even though he lacked formal training. He kept poverty at bay by working as a cleaner. Strongly objecting to the war in Vietnam, he refused to register for the draft, introduced in 1964, even though his disability would have kept him from the front line. The climate of anti-war protest instilled Parr with a sense of being an outsider challenging authority. During the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s he voraciously read the work of 20th-century intellectuals such as German philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse and Austrian-American psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, absorbing their accounts of authoritarianism, exploitative behavior and the restricted nature of liberty in Western societies.

The performances he staged at this time were unique and groundbreaking refutations of the status quo of the Australian visual arts scene, which was then a backwater predominantly focused on landscape painting. In 1975 at the Performance Room in Newtown, New South Wales, Parr performed *Identification 3: Totem Murder*, during which he lay on the floor of a white room dressed in white, surrounded by posters of Marx, Mao and Lenin on the walls. Assistants decapitated a white rooster with an axe, sprinkled its blood and feathers over him and held



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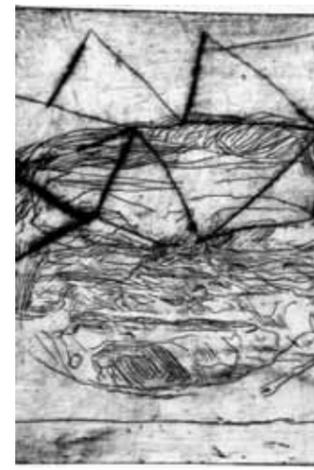
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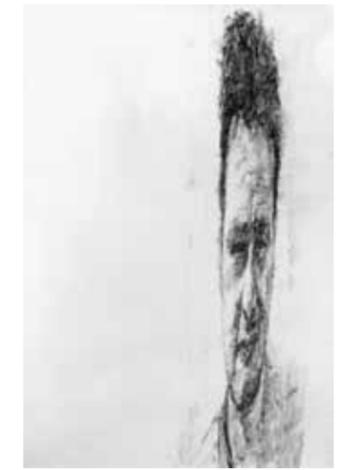
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1. **CLOSE THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS**, 2002, 16 mm film stills. Photo by Mark Bliss. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney/Melbourne.

2. **UNTITLED SELF-PORTRAIT**, prints from (*ALPHABET / HAEMORRHAGE*) *Black Box of 100 Self-Portrait Etchings*, 1, 1992. Printed by John Loane. Photo by Paul Green. Courtesy Viridian Press, Melbourne.

3. **UNTITLED SELF-PORTRAIT**, 1986, one of 16 framed drawings (1983-1988), 39.6 x 30.7 cm each, Photo by Garry Sommerfield.

4. **UNTITLED SELF-PORTRAIT**, 1981, HB pencil on typing paper, 25.5 x 20.3 cm. Photo by David Paul.

5. **THE ANAMORPHII OF GOD (1. SELF-PORTRAITS—TOWARDS THE OTHER SIDE 5 & 6)**, 1985, from a set of seven drawings, charcoal pencil on Rivers paper, 41 x 30 in each. Photo by Fenn Hinchcliffe. Collection of The First National Bank, Chicago.

6. **UNTITLED SELF-PORTRAIT**, (a) 1982 and (b) 1981, HB pencil on typing paper, 29.7 x 21 cm each. Photo by the artist.



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8b



8c

7. IDENTIFICATION NO. 5 (TOTEM MURDER # 1), from *Rules and Displacement Activities Part II*, 1975, 16 mm film stills.

8. HAVE A BRANDING IRON MADE UP WITH THE WORD 'ARTIST.' BRAND THIS WORD ON YOUR BODY, from *Rules & Displacement Activities Part I*, 1973, performance documentation.

9. CLOSE THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS, 2002, 16 mm film stills. Photo by Mark Bliss. Courtesy Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney/Melbourne.

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the rooster's bloodied body up in front of the posters. Parr describes this act of ritualized violence as a form of displaced patricide, alluding to the isolated poultry farm of his upbringing.

By the mid-1970s, his interest in poetry had faded, but his fascination for the structure of language endured and at times he fused it with his performance work. "I wanted to turn words into things," he says. "I actually think my first performances were some sort of bizarre attack on language." However, the attacks on language soon gave way to shocking performance pieces that made his body and the limits to which he could push it the focus of attention. In *Rules & Displacement Activities Part I* (1973) he branded the word "ARTIST" in capital letters into his right calf and invited audience members to step forward and have the word seared into their flesh too. There were no volunteers.

In order to endure the physical pain and psychological duress of his performances, Parr makes careful preparations that include consultations with a doctor in the weeks prior to the event, a dieting regime that initially reduces his intake of food until he consumes liquids only, as well as prolonged sessions of meditation. Details, such as how he should be approached during a performance or how the photographer should work, are all carefully set down in an attempt to diminish the element of chance creeping in. But as Parr notes, "In all performance there is the risk of failure." He recalls how in Adelaide in 1980 he prepared for *(Day and Night) Performance Art as the Water of Consciousness, Smiling, Visible through Ice Melting, 24 hours* (March 23–24, 1980), for which he planned to smile for 24 hours without sleep. Two minutes into the performance the smile became a grimace—"a sort of rictus set in," he says—and he knew he had failed although he stayed the course.

Parr not only has to tolerate the physical and psychological demands of his performances, but he often faces popular backlash against his work as well. Recently he successfully weathered the furor over the inclusion of 17 of his most demanding and daring videos pieces in a retrospective that covered 33 years of his career at the 2008 Biennale of Sydney. Among them was *Rules & Displacement Activities Part II* (1975) and its depiction of a live chicken being beheaded drew the ire of the media and the guardians of popular morality. "Police warn Biennale over chicken video," screamed a headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. "The controversy was ridiculous," Parr says. "Yes, it is a genuinely disturbed work, but it



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was a way of revealing tensions within my family. I think the media shot themselves in the foot on that."

Faced with backlash of this kind, Parr is non-apologetic about the political dimension of his work, though he concedes that it can be terroristic. In early 2001, Australian prime minister John Howard was adamant in his rejection of the "boat people"—a tanker ship containing hundreds of asylum seekers from the Middle East and Southeast Asia who were attempting to reach Australia—and ordered their incarceration in refugee camps on remote Pacific islands including the Republic of Nauru and Manus in Papua New Guinea. The affair was subjected to Parr's blowtorch of ridicule and exposure when he stitched his eyebrows, nostrils, ears and lips together in a bind and sat still with the word "ALIEN" branded in capital letters into his thigh for the six-hour performance *Close the Concentration Camps* (2002) at Monash University Museum of Art—a self-harming act of protest against the government and a self-muting statement of solidarity with the disenfranchised victims.

Parr's recent works may not have left marks on his body but his explorations of physical endurance and linguistic boundaries still resonate. In November 2008 in Hobart, the capital of Australia's most southern state of Tasmania, Parr held "The Tilted Stage." This two-venue exhibition occupied all four floors of the Bond Store—a harborside building dating from 1823—and formed the inaugural show at Detached, a new nonprofit cultural foundation established by new-media collector and patron Penny Clive. Videos of several earlier works were on display, including the literally in-your-face *White* (2003), a video projected onto a large screen hanging just inside the entrance to the Bond Store. The sound of Parr retching the white liquid from his trembling lips, his quivering, putty-like face filling the whole screen, tore at the silence of the venue. The sense of isolation and suffering, the ultimate human condition with which he is obsessed, was acute.

This mood of isolation pervaded the top floor of the Bond Store as well, where he held his performance *Cartesian Corpse* (2008). There, Parr stood in a corner with his head protruding through a seven-by-five-meter sheet of polished jarrah wood tilted from floor to ceiling, his eyes glazed over and his expression unmoving. While his head was bathed in a theatrical pool of light, his body was shielded from view, an enactment of the quintessential Cartesian duality of the separation of



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These concerns resonate in a suite of two prints and one photograph displayed in his solo exhibition “We Are All Monochromes Now” at Sherman Galleries in Sydney in 2003, now hanging on the wall of his studio. Presented side-by-side, the print on the left shows the first page of *Camera Lucida* (1980)—Roland Barthes’ book on the relationship between image and language in photography—enlarged to a meter or so in height. “...life consists of these little touches of solitude...” reads one line of the text. In the center is Parr’s reductive response: a print of identical size but erased of words, with only punctuation marks articulating the page. The structure of language is made obvious, but the meaning, like the words, has been lost in the creative process. To the right of these two is a large photograph of one of Parr’s own jackets with the left sleeve tucked into the pocket—a haunting self-portrait pregnant with Parr’s absence.

Self-portraiture has been a consistent element in his practice. He has produced thousands of drawings and prints over the last three decades, most recently shown in a solo exhibition at Anna Schwartz Gallery’s space in Melbourne in spring 2007. “It’s a sort of start-again situation, an attempt to know the unknowable,” he says. Ever since the early 1980s, he has begun his self-portraits in a conventional manner, looking at himself in a mirror and trying to capture a likeness. As the drawing progresses it triggers a memory of a time, a place or an idea, and Parr lets his pencil or etching tool run free in an attempt to record a concept related to the work. “The self-portraits show this crucial problem. I labor away intensively with the interesting possibility of a portrait emerging and then I start to remember something and it will come to me in the entanglement of line.” For Parr, the process of perception is indistinguishable from that of remembering, and the struggle is in how to reconcile the workings of memory, sight and thought.

The last two years have been frantically busy for Parr. On top of his preparations for the Biennale of Sydney, the solo show at Anna Schwartz Gallery and the two exhibitions in Hobart, he has been compiling and editing a huge book on his performance pieces, *Mike Parr Performances 1971 – 2008*, published by Schwartz City in 2008 to coincide with his 2008 solo show that inaugurated Anna Schwartz Gallery’s new space in Sydney. To put this book together he had to conduct a review of his entire work and spent months clearing out years of accumulated detritus from his studio. The slate has been wiped clean and Parr now has the opportunity to think ahead. When asked about works in the pipeline, he says he has turned his attention to the enormity of climate change and the prospect of producing beauty from pollution has captured his interest. “I am waiting for a kind of condensation. I see in my mind colored pollutants poured into oceans, washed by the tides, making calligraphic gestures along foreshores.” Work of this nature and scale, even if it is to be made using biodegradable materials, will no doubt elicit as much knee-jerk outrage as it does reasoned critical appraisal.

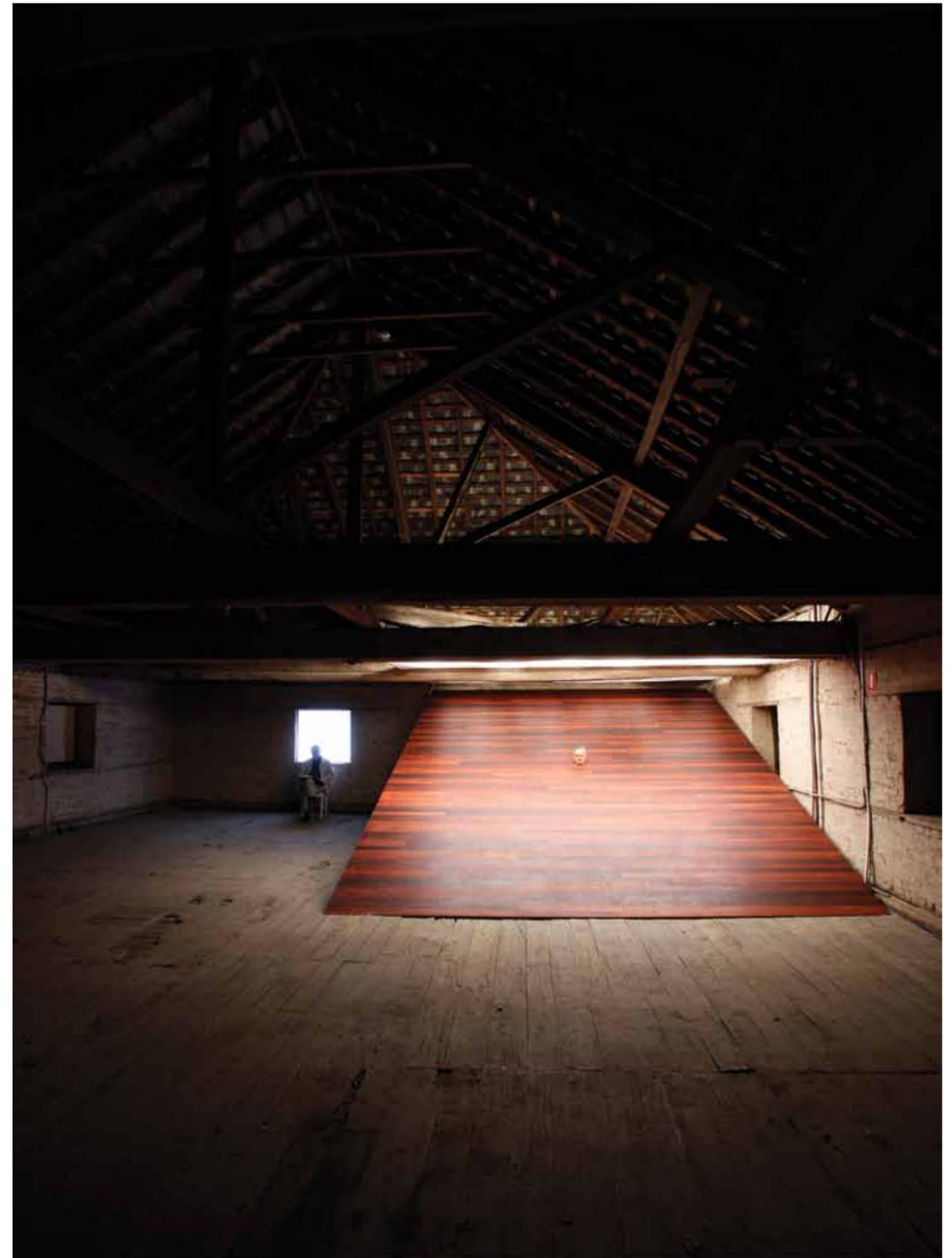
However, Parr has decided not to schedule any projects for 2009, and for his first sabbatical in 40 years he will drift through Europe visiting old friends and work on new dry-point etchings. Now 63 years old, he says that he is reconsidering the extent to which he can push his body after half a lifetime of self-inflicted trials of endurance and trauma.

10. (Detail) **WE ARE ALL MONOCHROMES NOW**, 2003, photograph on Kodak roll paper, 27 images, 99 x 74 cm each. Photo by Paul Green.

11. **CARTESIAN CORPSE**, 2008, performance for as long possible by artist and Anthony Bond at Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, Hobart. Photo by Paul Green. Courtesy Detached, Hobart.

mind and body. Every two hours an assistant approached Parr, unfolded a small towel, donned felt slippers and climbed onto the stage where he would mop the perspiration from Parr’s forehead, offer him a sip of water and then withdraw, carefully dusting his footprints from the wood as he did so. During this ritual the assistant would speak only two words—“two hours,” “four hours,” “six hours,” and so on—simple verbalizations of Parr’s journey through time that allowed the artist a sense of the performance’s progress. All other communication was by gesture. When he concluded, Parr refused to speak or meet anybody other than his wife, who quickly whisked him away.

Here, the ghost of the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett lurked in the wings. “What interests me about Beckett is his extreme minimalism,” says Parr. “He takes language to an extreme position. *Cartesian Corpse* produces a kind of Beckettian void, articulating almost nothing, filling time, post-language.” This is the realm of Parr’s practice, a physical and conceptual terrain where endurance co-exists with a language that has become everything other than that which is spoken.



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