

MIKE PARR

*Kingdom Come and/or Punch Holes in the Body
Politic*

Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney
artspace.org.au
Performance 6 pm Friday 8 April–6 pm Sunday
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JACQUELINE MILLNER

A man in a well-cut suit, strikingly orange with matching shirt and shoes, sits in a nondescript chair towards one corner of the gallery. He is surrounded by cables and electronic paraphernalia, so that it takes some effort to make out that his right foot is bare, the second toe clamped and attached to a piece of equipment. The man is still, his expression neutral, his eyes mostly closed. A small audience sits bunched in semi-darkness on a couple of benches on the other side of the gallery, expectant, watchful. The man remains still for what appears to be a very long time.

Suddenly, the man's eyes fly open in alarm and he jerks violently in his seat. A projection of his face flickers behind the audience, on the walls of the adjacent gallery spaces, showing the unmistakable grimace of pain. Gradually, the man regains his composure and returns to stillness, as the audience wonders what triggered the shock.

The more intrepid audience members take a closer look, to better understand and engage with the scenario, only to discover that it is their very approach that causes the man pain. The system is wired so that when a certain invisible barrier is crossed, a current passes through the man's body and a camera yields close-up testimony of the effects on a screen. It rests then, upon the audience to decide whether to trigger the pain mechanism. Few do, but those who remain seated rely on the action of those few to initiate the spectacle. There is a palpable pressure on the audience to complete the circuit, as if this is the whole rationale of the performance, the role that has been scripted for them. For without that interaction, there would be no 'work' as such, nothing to see.

In his latest work—part of a series that continues a long exploration of endurance and suffering—veteran Australian performance artist Mike Parr has designed a system with the potential to inflict pain that relies on the audience's volition to render that potential, reality. The performer himself is passive, the performance itself a non-event without the agency of the audience, an agency that gradually comes to full cognisance of the necessity of sadism.



In her moving study *The Body in Pain: The making and unmaking of the world* [1985], philosopher Elaine Scarry notes that in torture, pain is made visible to those outside of the person's body, so that the pain is rendered communicable in a way that is atypical of pain more generally. Furthermore, with torture the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power. In light of this analysis, Parr's work can be seen to explore the communicability of pain and the point at which the witnessing of pain—not purely its infliction—becomes the wielding of power. Such questions inevitably put us in mind of the [frequently self-destructive] drive of torturers to document their acts, as if the communicability of the victim's pain and humiliation through evidence is necessary to consummate sadistic pleasure. This phenomenon was brought into sharp focus recently by the acts of USA officials in Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq, but its implications are much broader, given our culture's proliferation of images of violence and our overwhelming passivity in the face of those images.

Parr's work necessarily raises questions about the power of performance art in the current time to engage with such urgent moral issues. It is illuminating to ponder the position of another prominent performance artist, Mona Hatoum, whose endurance performances from the 1980s were documented at the Museum of Contemporary Art, while Parr was subjecting himself to electric shocks. Hatoum abandoned her endurance works some years ago for object-based practices, observing that while performance once had a subversive position, in time, through institutionalisation, it had lost its critical force, coming closer both to entertainment and to other, readily commodified art forms.

Parr's bodily proximity to the audience, particularly to those who trigger the current of pain and who are therefore palpably connected to him, renders this an unusual form of interactive artwork. In this unique proximity lies the possibility of intimacy and empathy. One cannot but be struck by the performer's excruciating vulnerability, evident in the tired, lined face, the thinning hair, the bucket of urine that recalls illness and incapacity. The performer, who has surrendered his agency, places himself, in all his abject powerlessness, at our mercy, but expects us to hurt him. Even if we scoff that this is pure artifice, that Parr, unlike a genuine torture victim, has chosen this and can exchange his electrodes for the comforts of home at any time [indeed the performance stopped a few hours short of its advertised span], the material fact of his pain and our complicity compels us to confront the morality of the so-called innocent bystander, as much as that of the person who lives up to expectation and does his/her duty.

Left: Mike Parr, *Kingdom Come and/or Punch Holes in the Body Politic*, 2005
Photos courtesy the artist