

“UNASSUMABLE RESPONSIBILITY”: WATCHING MIKE PARR

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Has a third dimension not been forgotten: the direction toward the Other (*Autri*) who is not only the neighbour and the collaborator of our cultural work of expression or the client of our artistic expression, but the interlocutor, he to whom expression expresses, for whom celebration celebrates, both term of our orientation and primary signification? In other words, expression, before being a celebration of being, is a relationship with him to whom I express the expression and whose presence is already required for my cultural gesture of expression to be produced.

Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense” p. 532.

WHAT ARE THE ETHICS OF THE SPECTATOR of live performance art? Especially, how might we think an ethics of spectatorship in durational performance involving pain, since the working of the work involves the spectator to be a watcher, but also perhaps, in ways that may even be unspecified—to try to truly be in the moment, to respond in some ways like a performer. And what about the *durée* of durational performance? How long is long enough to watch?

What might be the ethics of the necessary interlocutor? Is this spectatorship at all like that theorised by Mulvey, about being interpellated as spectating subject by a textual structure, positioned as a certain kind of (gendered) subject-as-spectator, in a subject-position essentially power-laden and unethical. Or, as we might hope, does something about the process or structure of (live) performance make a decisive difference? Can we hope to find in the different implicatedness of the performance spectator the relationality of which Levinas speaks.

What follows is a text composed for speaking, for performing, itself only slightly edited from notes originally written contemporaneously during my time attending the performance as I experienced and reflected on my experience of Mike Parr’s 2005 performance/installation/ordeal. The writing was, at the time, an attempt to capture the phenomenology of ‘being there’. The quotation (above) from Levinas was added at the time of the presentation of the text at A.D.S.A. 2006 for the panel titled ‘The Un-Ethical Spectator: Some Exceptions’. As an epigraph, it both reminds us of Levinas’s dominant theme of responsibility and perhaps more unusually for Levinas, suggests that, at least in the case of ‘cultural expression’, this responsibility may be ethically thought of as having a transitive aspect.

SATURDAY, 10.45 A.M., Artspace, Woolloomooloo, Sydney.

Mike Parr *Kingdom Come*—or, *Punch Holes in the Body Politic*

Out of the clear bright already busy Sydney summer morning into the dim cool space of Artspace—I have come by myself, don't know how long the visit will take—don't know much about what Mike is doing this time. Bare large Artspace room—nothing much to indicate what's going on—concrete floor, unadorned, unsign-posted: almost silent. One other spectator when I enter, video camera operator makes adjustments, images of Mike on laptop, other cameras—images to web?

Mike in orange suit—as I enter he is in one corner section of the room, shuffling back and forth along a line, catatonic (been here all night, single chair, hard floor. I imagine no real sleep). Obvious large electrode clipped to right big toe, orange shoe on left foot. Bucket on the floor, bare floor, single hard chair, one other spectator.

Traffic noise building outside—microphone on floor—what for?—bucket—for pissing? Quiet, stillness except for the shuffling—no obvious wounds—what does the “Punch Holes” refer to? Where are the punctures? (I can't help but have in mind his sewn face from last time . . .)¹

His area intensely lit, but no signs, no explanations—Mike's space lit, our space dim—his shuffling seems automatic, trance-like—an extremity of sorts already in the combination of closeness but no contact—no eye contact with him however close to the lighted space I stand.

Knowing Mike's ways I—we—suspect that ‘contact’—approach—is implicated in the structure of the piece but how? Can I speak to him? I feel for him, want to speak to him. As time passes it becomes insistent.

I feel bad. I have, in the past, talked to this man; why not now? What are the rules here? What kind of spectator do I have to be here? I have spoken to performers before mid-choreography and gauchely tried to interrupt (to me) painful sequences: I didn't want them to do those things if they were doing them for me . . . asked John Baylis not to drop to his knees from a high box if he was doing it for me, I was worried about his knees—I told Chris I'd had enough of him slapping Clare—not a spectacle I wanted any more of—here I just wanted to say “are you okay, mate?”²

But where does ‘his’ space begin and end? Does the lighted area show it? What happens if you go closer? (Remember, with Mike, probably something happens to him). It becomes insistent—to communicate—can he, will he, respond? When he was shuffling it seemed more possible—now he seems to be sleeping—he needs sleep, don't want to disturb his sleep.

Am I torturing him by silently watching? Is dumb complicity in his showing me his endurance part of this? Does the silent spectator also endure with him?

How long should I stay?

If I go, and nobody comes, how long will he endure—without spectators? I feel the pressure of enforced non-communication build up in me.

Is this the point—I am reminded again of *First and Last Warning*—some souls turned back just not wanting to be unpredictably targeted—to do, be, witness, be implicated in whatever the warning was about . . .

If I am for him as spectator the one for whom expression expresses, is my response of caring not part of that circuit, but how can he know it? How can I become ethical, come into neighbourly relation, when I am here but excluded?

The installation set-up is both minimal at the human level and somehow very technical. One man, several machines, recording him—is that all? Not clear what does what, or where the images of several cameras are going.

Mike's body the same age as mine. He works it hard during these things, has told me about the perverse effects of no water (bloating, in fact), of prolonged dehydration, interrupted sleep—I hate not to sleep.

He is slumped, breathes lightly but noisily, and I feel how dry his mouth must be.

Are we actually supposed to be so quiet? Three or four more people have come in now, all quickly become silent, watch silently, sit, squat, pace—all very quiet—is it the cool space which is like a refuge from the street outside; is it like a church?

45 minutes in . . .

Suddenly something violent happens—a man (a gallery person?) walks suddenly into Mike's space and (I thought) stamped his foot hard—loud sharp sound—Mike starts awake—was this deliberate, what did actually happen?

Talking to the guy—a gallery staffer—who walked into Mike's space and (I thought) stamped loudly to wake Mike, I got a partial explanation of the set-up: spectators moving into Mike's space (the lighted area?) will set off 240 volt shock via electrode to his toe . . . some sort of invisible sensor system which picks up movement triggers the electric shocks and also simultaneously transmits images of Mike in shock (to where? to be projected somewhere? or into cyberspace?). Tomorrow apparently the electrode comes off, the file imagery is digitally 'treated'—'holes' punched in the images—and I'm left not clear what happens to the images.

. . . so Mike wants spectators showing 'empathy' by proximity to him to give him a painful electric shock? (shock just once, or for as long as in the space?) No warning provided to spectator, so the viewer will get a shock too—spectator trying to show empathy is punished?

So is this about punishing the spectator; or is it about people being willing or not to inflict pain (so no instructions . . . no warning . . . a behaviourist training of the spectator?)?

Gallery guy had stepped into space because Mike had asked that at least one shot, one image, should be taken while Mike was being shocked—so maybe nobody else had done it, at least for a while?

Mike's body lolls in the chair again . . . catatonic, or meditating? I think again about how he does not eat or drink during the performance and for some time before . . .

So now I know—if we spectators hold back—'withhold' our proximity, 'keep our distance', things are calm in the cool dim space—the shambling prisoner in orange will shuffle and pace but will not be shocked, but then a large part of the 'show' will be inactive too.

But the gallery guy's explanation has relieved some of my anxiety—my (ethical?) tension about 'just watching' . . .

Just after the shock I did try to speak to Mike—to make contact—but now I do not want to be drawn into the perverse contract of hurting through loving, shocking through wanting to comfort.

How long shall I stay? How long is enough (in the face of his commitment)?

He does not speak—why not?—not physically able, too wasted? Slumped in the chair occasionally his eyes flicker open—appear to scan—can he see into the dimness—see that people are here—who

is here, who is watching? Then back to slumped catatonia.

I am glad I came in while he was shuffling—that was more interesting—an absorbed mediative shuffling, it looked like he was silently counting the steps, so many that way then this way, diagonally across his space—why didn't his movement trigger a shock?

Is it crossing from our side of things—the 'spectator' side, dim and anonymous—to his side, lit and inward-looking. Does that do it, trigger the shock?

The shambling figure in the orange suit in the lit space is a compelling centre of attention, but how long can any spectator wait—will any of us wait with him all day, all night? Is he out-enduring us?

The intense continuous gaze of the cameras, surveillance, but also documentation—got to get that documentation—is this all going to the web? Is that where it is really happening?

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Levinas enjoins us to assume the 'unassumable responsibility', the responsibility to respond to the other, to allow ourselves to be hostage to their alterity. For their alterity to wound us, cut us. "We are all responsible to everyone for everything and I above all others."³

How to assume this responsibility in this situation? What becomes of relationality and ethics in this 'face to face'? Whatever this situation might metaphorise or thematise, conceptually refer to, what about my relation to the body of a guy I have talked to and liked, and in this situation, during this event, can only either watch dumbly and inertly, or hurt by my closer, intrusive presence?

Is the harshness of non-contact the Levinasian event here?

Eventually, after not very long really compared to his stay in this state I left of course, and afterwards heard various stories about what did and didn't happen—things I didn't notice—what people did and didn't get from it- tales of fuck-ups, things not quite working—Mike's stuff has that kind of durational life, too.

Notes

1. A reference to Parr's 2002 performance work *Close the Concentration Camps*, in which he had his lips sewn together and the word 'alien' branded into his thigh in solidarity with refugees in Australia's detention centres.
2. John Baylis, Chris Ryan and Clare Grant were performing in Sydney Front's *First and Last Warning* (1993), in which the actions referred to occurred and which also worked by implicating its spectators in situations calling into question spectatorial ethics.
3. This quotation, from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* is found often in Levinas' work, providing an epigrammatic encapsulation of one of his central themes.

Reference

Levinas, Emmanuel 2003 "Meaning and Sense" in Lawrence E. Cahoon (ed.) *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (second ed.) Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 521-539.

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