



*Antipodean Epic: Interloper*. Mildura Palimpsest, 2015. Photograph Christina Simons for Jill Orr, © Jill Orr.

# THRESHOLDS TO OTHER WORLDS

JILL ORR'S RITUAL PERFORMANCES  
ANNE MARSH

On the borders of our own dwelling, thresholds will prepare a meeting with the other: thresholds on the horizon of a world allowing us to leave it and to welcome the other, thresholds also on the border of oneself, if it is possible to distinguish between the two.<sup>1</sup>

**S***haring the World* is one of those utopian texts that have become popular in the light of the hope propagated by philosophers of new materialism. Of course, Luce Irigaray is not really a new materialist, she rose to fame as a radical [feminist] psychoanalyst in the heyday of post structuralism and post modernism, but her work has survived the negative reaction against the cultural turn and the theoretical overload that many associate with that period. For a new generation of feminists she is compelling because of her work on sexual difference, but *Sharing the World* reads more like a secular

parable about how to care for each other—woman, man, child / self, same, other. It talks about the abyss between us, and the difficulty of bridging the divide, crossing the boundaries, and borders that we create, inherit and maintain.

The practice of ritual-like performance art has explored some of these relations over several decades. Although ritual is conventionally used to mark social rites of passage, in the hands of artists it has a broader spectrum. Some women artists who have explored female experience through the body, or alternative histories, stories and practices associated with the roles of women in society, have used ritualistic actions since the 1970s.

In Australia Jill Orr established her place as a pioneering body artist with a suite of work produced in 1979, including *Bleeding Trees*, *Lunch with the Birds* and *Pain Melts*. All of her work since this time has focussed on the gender



*Southern Cross to Bear and Behold – Burning, 2007.* Photographer Naomi Herzog for Jill Orr, © Jill Orr.

complexities of the female body and/or ecological issues and the impending devastation of the planet. For Orr, the feminine and nature as life force are intimately related physically, socially and mythologically.

In this article I want to look at a series of performance works spanning several decades, where recurring symbols and ritual actions are used in a shamanistic way. I am not suggesting that Orr is a shaman in any traditional sense, she is not trying to heal anyone and she would not trespass on ancient languages as a colonial woman. But she does explore ritual tropes and she merges these with the traditions of body art.

In *Pain Melts* (1979) Orr is suspended in front of a high brick wall graffitied with the words 'Pain Melts'. Large blocks of ice that are hanging over small fires counterbalance her body and as the ice melts she is lowered to the ground. On one level the action appears as a female crucifixion, a feminist statement where woman is inserted into the visual narrative of the Christian tradition, where she has been denied a divine identifier.

Historically the performance is aligned with the end of second wave feminism, which embraced various forms of alternative spirituality including Goddess worship and an interest in witchcraft and ritual. The period 1973-83 is neatly bookended by Mary Daly's woman-centred theology *Beyond God the*

*Father* and Lucy Lippard's interest in ritual most explicit in her book *Overlay*.<sup>2</sup> Orr's work can be seen in relation to both these texts but it is also explicitly connected to the practices of the body artists of the 1960s and '70s. She was active in the Australian performance art scene from 1977 and was resident in Europe in the early 1980s.

It is clear from the issues that arose in her early work that Orr was seeking to represent a female voice that could be heard amidst what was then a male and pale avant-garde.<sup>3</sup> *Pain Melts*, *Bleeding Trees* and *Lunch with the Birds* (1979) all put the female body at the centre of the action. The crucifixion image recurs in *Bleeding Trees* and the Christian parable of the loaves and fishes is played out on the body in *Lunch with the Birds*. But there is also the dialogue between woman and nature, one that will be developed throughout Orr's career as she explores the body's relation to the earth and its landscapes. In an artist's statement printed in the catalogue for Robert Lindsay's exhibition *Relics and Rituals* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1981, Orr wrote,

I am always aware of a connection with the earth; things born of the earth, return to the earth, life needing the earth, but also its femaleness, mother-earth, upon which we establish rituals of living and coping: surviving.<sup>4</sup>



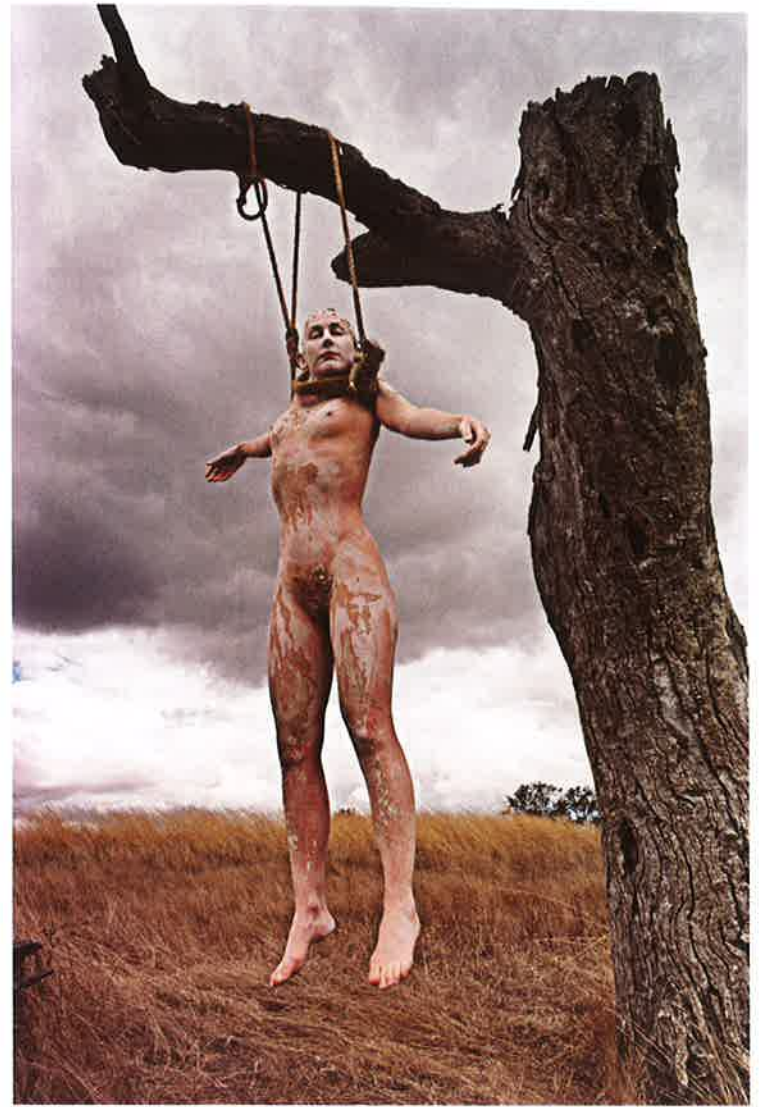
clockwise from top: *Antipodean Epic: Awakening*; *Hunted*; *Hunted Dark Dawn*. Mildura Palimpsest, 2015. Photographer Christina Simons for Jill Orr. © Jill Orr.

Orr represented the female condition under patriarchy in many performances. *Lunch with the Birds* (St Kilda Beach) sees a flock of birds descend upon a woman dressed in a white wedding dress covered in loaves and small fish. In *She Had Long Golden Hair* (Adelaide Festival of Arts, Experimental Art Foundation, 1980) Orr used a provocative soundtrack of male voices jeering at women in the streets. As the callers chided ‘Wanna fuck? Ya need a Man? ... witch, bitch, moll, dyke ...’,<sup>5</sup> an elegantly dressed woman entered and slowly tied her long hair to seven chains suspended above. The soundscape was interrupted by female voices narrating acts of punishment associated with head-shaving and other sacrifices. At Orr’s invitation the audience cut her hair free from the chains that bound it.

Orr creates live performance events but she also exhibits series of photographs, and more recently video, of ritual actions made in the environment where there was no on-site audience. *Walking on Planet Earth* (Northcote, 1989) was probably one of the first of these photo-performances made for camera and shown exclusively as a series of photographs. A series of eighteen colour Polaroid photographs show the artist dressed as a colonial woman holding an umbrella as a sunshade. She walks over the top of a barren red earth embankment to encounter a huge earth-moving machine that has been brought in to clear the land for development. As she moves past the bulldozer’s massive scoop, Orr enacts a shamanistic response and her umbrella bursts into flames.

In 1979 the art critic, Mary Eagle, described Jill Orr’s performances as ‘shrill rites of passage’,<sup>6</sup> suggesting that the artist was involved in some sort of initiation rite or shamanistic practice. Although the ritual and shamanistic nature of the work has been written about, it has not been broadly acclaimed. This may be due to the dominance of the cultural constructivist position in the postmodern era that tended to ignore work that juxtaposed woman with nature or displayed the naked female form. The constructivist position was particularly strong within academic feminism in the 1980s and ‘90s, and it sought to annihilate the ‘essentialism’ then deemed rife within the cultural and activist feminism of the 1970s. The focus on women’s experience, which celebrated their difference from men, was rejected in a bid to gain equal rights for women (equality with men). In this scheme, women’s difference, especially her biological difference, was an obstacle that had to be overcome. It was argued that gender identity was culturally defined by (patriarchal) language in the social sphere. As a result it would only be possible to critique this through scholarly theoretical enterprise within that cultural sphere—there could be no outside, no alternative. As a result the female body tended to be foreclosed upon, it was just too politically risky and too tempting for the ‘male gaze’.<sup>7</sup>

Much has been written about the generational waves of feminism and how the daughter perpetually challenges the mother. Ironically this has tended to support a desire to reinvent the present, perpetuating the cult of the new, instead of building on the past to create an enriched history of feminism.<sup>8</sup> This



from left: *Pain Melts*, 1979; *Bleeding Trees*, 1979. Photographer Elizabeth Campbell for Jill Orr. © Jill Orr.

has become a self-defeating move that duplicates modernist and patriarchal paradigms. The analyses undertaken by performative and queer theorists, and the new materialists, point to different conclusions or pathways and a renewed interest in the debates over difference and identity have led to a debunking of the 'essentialism' issue. As a result the issues that compelled feminists in the 1970s are being reconsidered, most importantly the nature/culture binary, the ecological state of the planet and activism.<sup>9</sup>

In step with the concept of a performative sexuality in the 1990s Orr produced two significant works. *Marriage of the Bride to Art* at the National Gallery of Victoria and *Raising the Spirits* at Heide Museum of Modern Art, (both 1994) present a fluid sexual identity and question binary sexuality. In *Marriage of the Bride*, Orr engages with the representation of gender in art history by using two well known sculptures from the collection that represent the polarities of traditional gender identity: the archetypal image of woman in Henry Moore's *Seated Woman* (1957-58) and Rodin's homage to phallogocentrism seen in his sculpture of *Balzac* (1898).

Marcel Duchamp is referenced through his *Large Glass: The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (1923) and his experiments with transvestism when he adopted his female persona *Rose Sélavy*, photographed by Man Ray (1921). Orr follows Duchamp's example and employs masquerade in order to break down the fixity of male-female gender polarities. In the live performance the figures of the joker, the bride, and the gender-blended

seducer appear sequentially. In *Marriage* Orr sexualises the audience by having them encounter a slit in a wall that offers a view into a stairwell. Here the figure of the veiled bride with breasts exposed dances erotically for each voyeur.

In the 1990s Orr started to intensify her exploration of the narcissistic and voyeuristic aspects of performance by including more photographic projection and video in the live work. The screen became a kind of mirror that facilitated the fragmentation of the self at the same time as it allowed multiple selves to be created. Orr was particularly interested in shifting gender positions and started to create works in which her female and male persona could be developed.

*Raising the Spirits* (1994) was the most complex performance in this series. It involved seven characters, both video persona and live personalities, six of whom were played by Orr with the seventh character, the disembodied bride, represented by a white wedding dress. Orr describes the performance as a 'rite of passage' but one that gives rise to multiple possibilities through the fragmentation of self, place, myth and memory, made apparent in the live performance and screen interactions.<sup>10</sup>

In the final dramatic dreamlike sequence, the artist appears as veiled bride wearing a phallic prosthesis that allows her to simulate urinating into a large pond, made in a mound of earth inside the gallery. As she does, the dripping white wedding dress appears, as if it has levitated from the dark unseen water into the light of the world.



*Marriage of the Bride to Art*, 1994. Photographer Antonia Chaffey for Jill Orr. © Jill Orr.

The image of the woman is fractured in *Raising the Spirits* in various ways. Firstly, she becomes multiple personalities, masculine, feminine and non-binary, shot through a narcissistic gaze made possible by the camera. Secondly, woman disappears in the form of the androgynous bride.

The performative sexuality works from the 1990s appear to follow the wisdom of the day as espoused by Judith Butler in her books *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*. Although Orr has certainly read some of this material and is aware of the gender and difference debates within feminism, she is not an artist who gets fixated on specific theories or positions. Being interested in dreams and liminal states means she could never be a card-carrying constructivist.

When I first interviewed Jill Orr in 1987 she said that her performances were like moments she had imagined, much like preconscious thoughts. Describing the performance process, she said: 'There is a structure set up so that me, this body, can just be simply a vehicle of energy, that can go uninterfered with'.<sup>11</sup> More recently she said to me that many of these images come to her as she is waking from sleep, when she is in a threshold or liminal space between states of consciousness.<sup>12</sup> This is like the space the shamans talk about at the dawning of the day and at dusk, when they say it is possible to pass from one world

to another. For the traditional shaman this is a time of spirit travel when s/he can shape shift into another world and into another being, often with the help of an hallucinogenic substance. For the Western performance artist invested in capturing dreams and visions, the liminal space between REM sleep and waking is another avenue for crossing between different states of mind.<sup>13</sup>

The difficulty for secular rationalists and cultural constructivists when they look at Orr's work is not simply that the works appear ritualistic but the performances often have lengthy improvised movement sequences. These sequences disturb the central dream images that are captured on camera; the photographic moments that preserve the work for art history. I sometimes feel I want to just stay with that image. When I reflect on this I think it is the hysterical affect that interrupts the image that disturbs me, the manic body. It is as if she is out of control, as though she is undoing herself and the image, and maybe that is the point: the ability to include this uncertainty. This opening to the undoing and the way this discombobulates people may well be what puts Orr on the threshold in the first place. Her willingness to be here / there in that space between two worlds: hysterical, mesmerised, in a trance-like state perhaps. Somewhere between the complete image that she has imagined, and attempts to capture it through still photography or edited



clockwise from top left: *She Had Long Golden Hair*, 1980. Photographer Elizabeth Campbell for Jill Orr. © Jill Orr; *She Had Long Golden Hair*, 1980. Photographer Elizabeth Campbell for Jill Orr. © Jill Orr; *She Had Long Golden Hair*, 1980. Video still from Experimental Art Foundation documentation of Adelaide Performance Week 1980.

video, and the visceral body that she inhabits as the image, a character or figure which she becomes. In these movement sequences the artist may well be experiencing a liminal space between the psyche and the physical.

And how can we feel whole in this universe of sutures? This tracery of scars? And what kind of love remains behind? What kind of wound always yearns to flow out and to be bound up?<sup>14</sup>

Orr engages with ecological and social issues as well as rites of passage and gender. She speaks out against discrimination, war, violence and society's tendency to construct the other as enemy. She has consistently put her own body on the line by exposing herself to danger and ridicule in order that people may come to assess their responses to these actions and thus better know themselves.

*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters – Goya* (Artspace, Sydney 2002) was Orr's cathartic response to the terrorist attacks in New York. In this performance she went back to art history, specifically to the radical series of etchings made by Goya in 1799.<sup>15</sup> *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* was a bloody performance in which tons of carcasses were strewn on the

floor of the gallery. This was the raw material that Orr would work with for twelve hours. Dressed in a simple apron reminiscent of a medieval surgeon or butcher, Orr proceeded to bind the bones together creating distorted human and animal forms. This produced a bloody and smelly abstract narrative of bodies dancing in the dim light of the once clean gallery space. Bodies that had been tortured and maimed: ugly, misshapen forms of life that presented the body as an abject horror.

The action was set against a series of paintings produced with pigment that glows in the dark for a short period of time after it has been exposed to bright light. The paintings were gestural renditions of abstract bones. After making each of the bloody forms Orr stood in front of the paintings, exposing herself and the canvas to an intense light for a few seconds. This produced ghostly images of Orr's body and the bloody creatures on the painting's surface. In the edited video of the performance this doubling was enhanced through special effects and a soundtrack reminiscent of a screeching body and technological collapse. It was as if these creatures were falling from a building.

*Ash* (at Eltham, Nillumbik Shire, Victoria and Mass Gallery, North Fitzroy, Melbourne 2002)<sup>16</sup> was a quieter and more reflective event. In the wake of the Bali bombings and the shooting of students at Monash University (both

in October, 2002), Orr became death itself. The audience was confronted with her body, laid out funeral style, on a rough-hewn bench. Again there was a religious tone to the performance as, reminiscent of the body of Christ, Orr lay motionless, dressed only in a small cotton bodice and loincloth, her body whitened with a clay wash and covered in hand written texts. The writing presented a duality: notes from Orr's diary, kept during her residency at a bush studio in Eltham, recorded tranquil memories of the landscape, the light, the sound of birds, and the beauty of the place. Other tracts presented statistics about violent crimes, suicide bombings, the injuries of war, and asylum seekers in detention camps in Australia. The writing marked a passive and inactive body: a body presented as a memorial. This was an intimate viewing experience as people moved along her body to read the text in an enclosed space which brought the prostrate body close to the viewer.

In these performances, Orr's body operates as a conduit through which, in her terms, fear can pass. Drawing on major social upheavals and responding quickly to them, Orr offers herself up as an in-between body, a self or energy 'that can go uninterfered with'.<sup>17</sup>

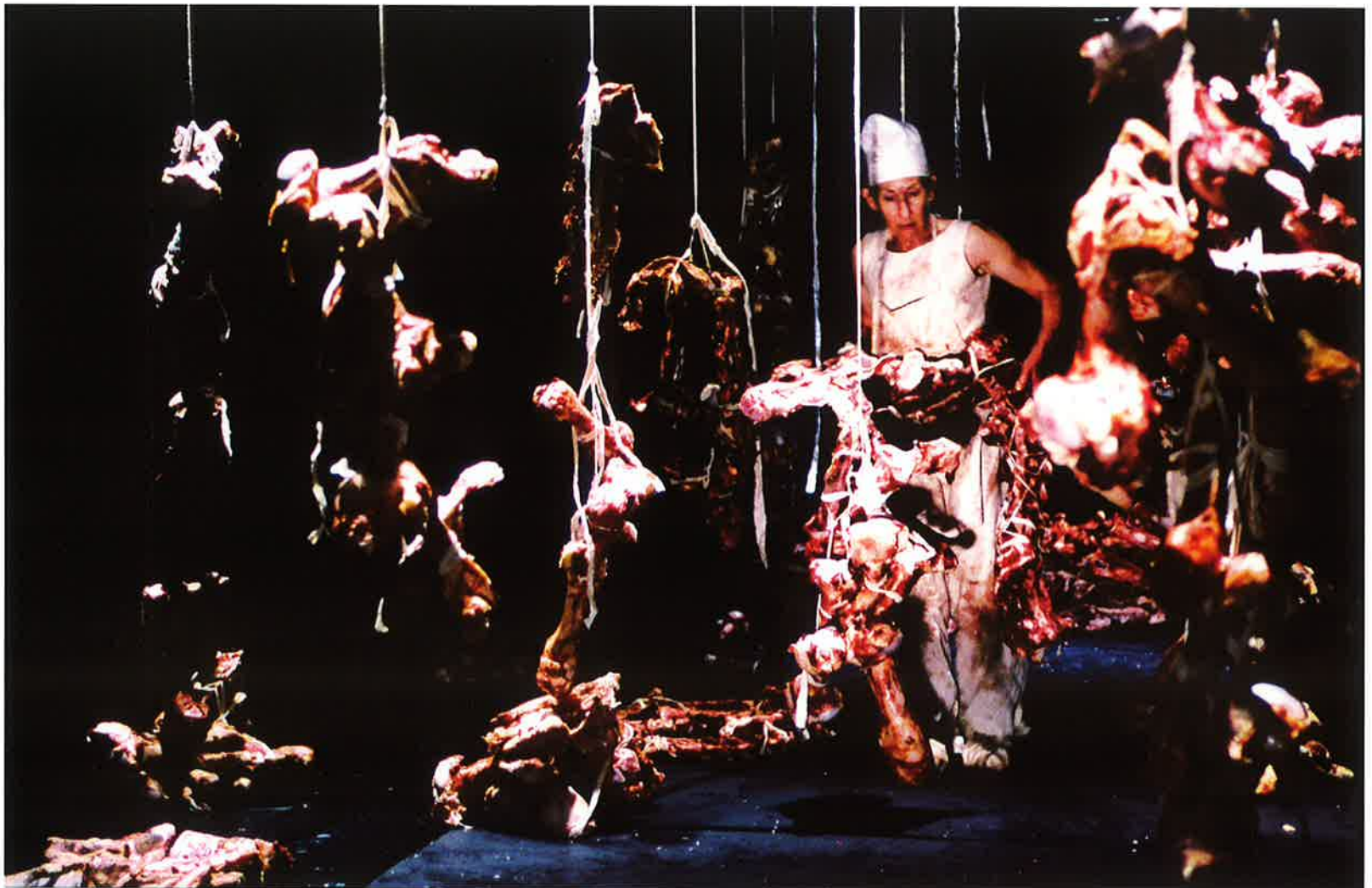
The image of the colonial woman and the burning umbrella, which first appeared in Orr's work in 1989, recurs in 2007 in a photo-performance series titled *Southern Cross to Bear and Behold* performed at Mitre Lake, a natural salt pan in the Wimmera district of Victoria. In this work, Orr is dressed in a long coat with high collar and pantaloons underneath. The calico material absorbs and reflects the environment. The outfit blurs gender codes and the viewer could well read the figure as a colonial clergyman. The character walks

across the fragile white surface of the salt and with each step sinks into the oozy black clay leaving a trail of dark footprints across the pristine lake. As she approaches the viewer the umbrella bursts into flames and the calico costume assumes a tangerine colour.

Both *Walking on Planet Earth* and *Southern Cross* address the devastation of the landscape. In the later work the flaming umbrella is a poignant signifier of global warming. An everyday accessory used since its inception as a personal shelter against the weather, becomes a symbol of human protest and gives the tiny figure a shamanist presence.

From the mid-2000s Orr was able to apply high production values to costumes, filming, editing and printing thanks to more affordable digital processes. *Antipodean Epic* (Mildura Palimpsest, 2015) is her most ambitious work to date in terms of scale and integration of video and live event. The on-site performance was filmed in the huge open spaces of a Mallee wheat field and a Gypsum Mine in the Sunset Country and projected during the live performance.

On screen, Orr as bird-woman is buried under a mound of seed dumped on her from a huge harvester. She emerges from what must have been a painful experience and skips across a field of stubble. In the next frame she is seen tied by her hands and feet to a pole carried on the shoulders of two hooded men. The soundtrack is dominant in the video and incredibly loud during the live version. As the men slowly carry the prone bird body across the straight sun kissed horizon, a strong digital pulse builds over a softer wind noise and an occasional bird twitter.



*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* – Goya, 2002. Photographers for Melbourne Performance Bruce Parker and Joanne Haslam. © Jill Orr.



*Raising the Spirits*, 1994. Photographer Antonia Chaffey for Jill Orr. © Jill Orr.

The unfolding narrative evokes seed, food production and genetic modification. The white coverall suits that the men wear are given out to the audience to wear during the performance. They signify contamination either by the seed or the human, or both.

Costume is used to dramatic effect in this performance. In the Gypsum Mine a shamanistic figure performs a ritual in a white straw body suit and headdress gesturing across a pale sandy landscape with the aid of two wand-like sticks. The following sequence shows the shaman coming over the horizon and crossing the threshold between day and night. Kicking up red earth as she advances towards us, she pauses as her image doubles. The soundtrack emphasises the ritual aspect of the actions with a resonating gong. Behind the ghostly dance of the 'strawman' dark smoke arises from a raised metal sphere.<sup>18</sup>

The video performances were screened on the wall of a derelict railway shed where the old raised metal platform served as Orr's live stage. The audience, initially gathered in another location, had walked across town dressed in hooded coveralls to the performance venue.

After the first video, Orr as bird-woman was spotlighted and winched off the platform high up into the ceiling. The lighting changed and the second

video showed the strawman ritual in the landscape. Afterwards, Orr appears as the shaman figure, gesturing with her wand-sticks as she moves along the platform. At a designated spot she stops and removes the straw costume and headdress. Now in a short body suit she moves on and then stands still whilst an enormous amount of cold water is poured on her head from above. This elicits slow rapturous movements from the artist and one imagines how these moments were transforming into video and still photographs as the performance was being made. After this baptism or transcendence ritual Orr continues to the end of the platform and walks down onto a large circle of grain. She lies down at the centre and the audience does the same until the circle is filled with white hooded bodies surrounding the artist.

Whilst this performance has a political narrative about the ecology of food production, it also has a strong poetics. It asks us to be curious about other ways of understanding. Orr, embodied as shaman, shows us strong performances of other-worldly characters crossing thresholds, moving across the horizon of a world, and we are asked to welcome them and interpret their messages. The work gestures to cosmology, the immensity of the land and something ancient and forgotten, but it also offers human scale and significance. The languages of ritual, shamanism, and magic resonate throughout.



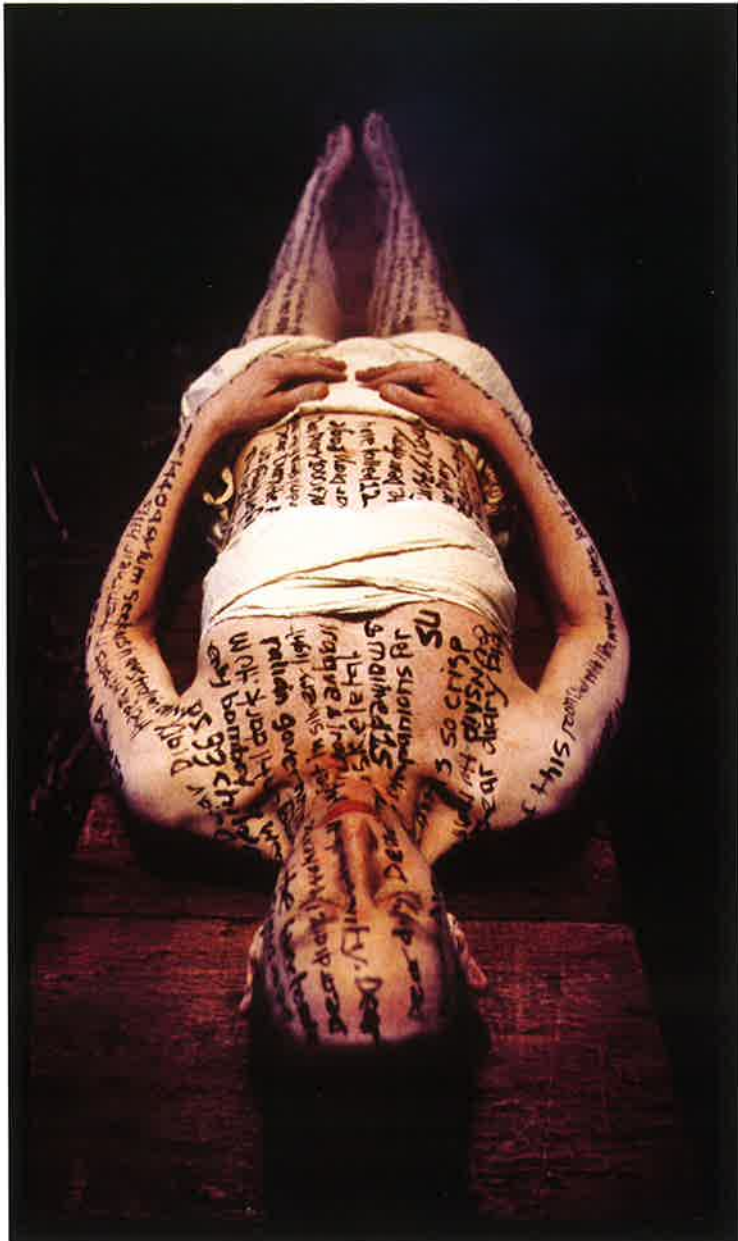
There are several things that have kept Jill Orr's performance art practice contemporary for so long. Her enduring interest in the female body, her continuous engagement with the Australian landscape, her interest in dream imagery and ritual, and her political opinions about the state of the Western world. Orr has the ability to bring all these aspects together by creatively utilising the relationship between performance, photography and video. The way that these media have been consistently used to enhance the performance event cannot be underestimated.

Video is often used as a performance tool capable of mirroring and doubling the artist's body and enabling other presences in the work. But, like photography, video is a medium in its own right and Orr uses both as vehicles for reproductions of the performance. These images are made from the live action, on location and staged for the camera. Sometimes a photographic image exhibited in a gallery may be an amalgam of live and staged footage. This kind of remediation of performance art has made Jill Orr's work accessible to a very wide audience and she has been doing it since 1979 when she produced *Bleeding Trees*. Although this early performance was live, it depended upon a series of images directed by Orr and shot by Elizabeth Campbell. These were projected during the performance and there are no surviving images of the live event. Although the well-known photographs are often referred to

as documentation of *Bleeding Trees*, they are really a series of photographs showing Orr's first performance for camera. A remediation of performance art fifteen years before the term was introduced to scholarship and the ontology of performance started to be debated.<sup>19</sup> Orr has certainly maintained her place as a contemporary artist since that time and the mix of ritual otherness and lens-based technologies has helped to enable this. ✨

#### Notes

1. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, Continuum, New York, 2008, p.9.
2. Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Theory of Women's Liberation*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1973 and Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, Pantheon Books/Random House, New York, 1983. Although Luce Irigaray's text *Devine Woman* could be cited here, it is unlikely that Orr would have read this text before its translation into English by the Sydney-based publisher Local Consumption in 1986.
3. See Nancy Marmer, 'Art and Politics '77', *Art in America*, July 1977, pp.64-66.
4. Jill Orr, 'Artist's Statement' in Robert Lindsay, *Relics and Rituals*, *Survey 15*, ex. cat., National Gallery of Victoria, 1981. Reprinted in Paul Taylor, (ed.), *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*, Art & Text, Melbourne, 1984, pp.108-115.
5. Excerpts from the script courtesy of Jill Orr.



from left: *Ash*, 2002. Photographers Joanne Haslop and Bruce Parker for Jill Orr; *Walking on Planet Earth*, 1989. Photographer Virginia Fraser for Jill Orr. Images © Jill Orr.



*Lunch with the Birds*, 1979. Photographer Elizabeth Campbell for Jill Orr.

6. See Mary Eagle, 'Shrill Rites and Quiet Reflection', *The Age*, 14 November 1979, p.14.
7. The term the 'male gaze' was enshrined as a critical trope in Laura Mulvey 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16:3, Autumn 1975, pp.6-18.
8. For a popular critique see Susan Faludi, 'American Electra: Feminism's Ritual Matricide', *Harper's Magazine*, October 2010, pp.29-42. For scholarly appraisals see Iris van der Tuin, "'Jumping Generations": On Second- and Third-wave Feminist Epistemology', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 24:59, March 2009, pp.17-31; and Clare Hemmings, 'Generational Dilemmas: A response to Iris van der Tuin's "Jumping Generations"', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 24:59, March 2009, pp.34-37.
9. Key texts include: Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2007; and Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011.
10. Jill Orr in conversation with the author, 29 October 1998.
11. Jill Orr taped interview with the author, 24 June 1987.
12. Jill Orr in conversation with the author, 20 July 2017.
13. See Carlos Castaneda, *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, Penguin Books, Middlesex, pp. 90-91. For a lucid overview of shamanism see Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987.
14. Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, trans. Joanne Collie and Judith Still, The Athlone Press, London, 1992, p.101.

15. *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* is the title of one of Goya's etchings from the series *Los Caprichos* (first exhibited in 1799). The series presents a bitter critique of the Spanish aristocracy, the clergy and human nature and covers topics such as child sexual abuse, witchcraft and prostitution. See [http://www.eeweems.com/goya/sleep\\_of\\_reason.html](http://www.eeweems.com/goya/sleep_of_reason.html) Accessed 21 October 2017.
16. The Eltham performance of *Ash* was presented as part of Orr's artist's residency with Parks Victoria and the Nillumbik Shire in 2002. *Ash* toured regional galleries in 2003.
17. Jill Orr taped interview with the author, 24 June 1987.
18. In the photo sequence Jill Orr titles this figure 'the strawman'. See <http://jillorr.com.au/>
19. See Peggy Phelan, 'The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction' in P. Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, New York and London, 1993. For an overview of how the debates unfolded see Anne Marsh, 'The Problem of Presence: Liveness and Performativity' in A. Marsh, *Performance\_Ritual\_Document*, Macmillan, South Yarra, 2014, pp.23-50.

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