



Tony Schwensen

Love it or leave it

Blair French



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Tony Schwensen, Rise, 2007, performance, Artspace, Sydney, courtesy the artist and Artspace, Sydney.

opposite, clockwise from top left

Tony Schwensen, Sea of love, 2000, performance, Rotterdam, courtesy the artist, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, **Tony Schwensen,**

Hamburger boygroup, 2000, performance, Rotterdam, courtesy the artist, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney,

Tony Schwensen, Prime beef export quality, 1999, performance, Sydney, courtesy the artist, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, **Tony Schwensen, Rotterdam**

hooligan training, 2000, performance, Rotterdam, courtesy the artist, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

As his contribution to the Biennale of Sydney's 'revolutionsonline' website, Tony Schwensen offered a link to a recording of Gil Scott-Heron's spoken word classic 'The Revolution Will Not Be Televised', released in 1970, the year of Schwensen's birth:

*You will not be able to stay home, brother. You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out ... The revolution will not be televised, will not be televised, will not be televised, will not be televised. The revolution will be no re-run brothers; the revolution will be live.*¹

Nostalgia comes into play here: nostalgia for a time of apparently clear choices, when anger and frustration found obvious, identifiable targets, when relativism appeared less insidious; nostalgia for a time that never was. In this context Scott-Heron's track is a form of historical document urging the renewal of cultural consciousness in an age of burgeoning infotainment consumption. It appears both raw and prescient, passionate and yet forlorn. For the revolution will, of course, be televised (or webstreamed) wherever it is played out. And, as I suspect Schwensen would hasten to add, it will also be live – banal, painful, quotidian – but alive and real.

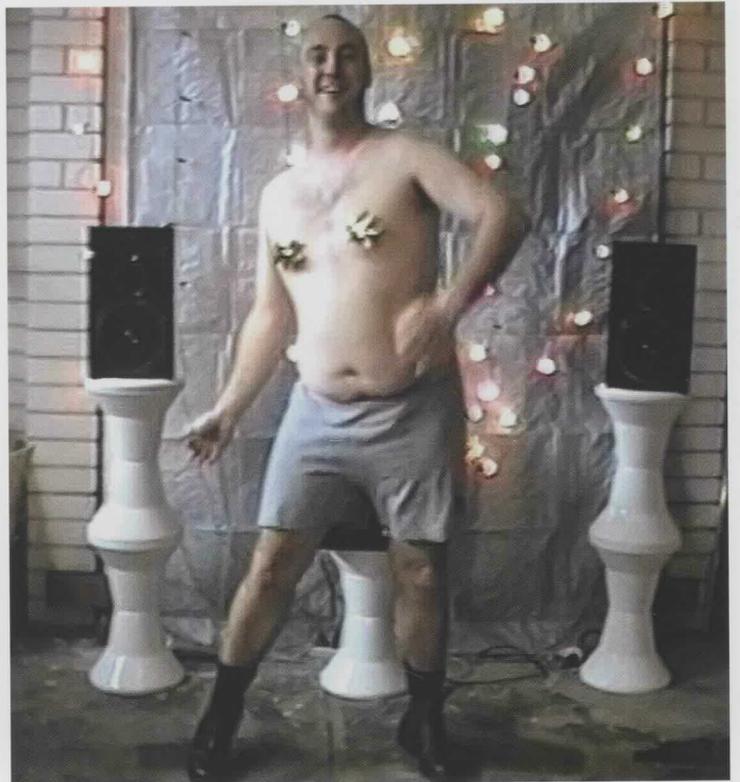
Tensions evoked in Scott-Heron's text can be found underpinning Schwensen's own, very different, physical practice (driven always by performance even when finding final exhibition form in video and installation): tensions between the committed impulse to resistance and an awareness of the likely limited impact of such a stance; between belief in the potential and fundamental good of society and anger at its complacency and stupidity; between the oscillating efficacies of the real and its representation. Such conundrums fuel Schwensen's work. His practice is predicated on the urgent need to engage with the social and political complexity of the world – of people – with his own body and through extended periods of time. (Remembering that this is a world in which millions of individual assertions of presence and identity are platformed instantaneously via the virtual, 'don't touch', 'never connect' conventions of MySpace, YouTube, Facebook and the like.) And yet it is a practice that assumes residual apathy as a key condition of the populace at large, in part because it itself stems from such a condition.

Schwensen's practice has a rare and singular, we might say appropriately 'elite' quality to it – no-one else of his post-conceptual generation in Australia is making durational performance of such intellectual ambition and formal rigour – yet it is resolutely of the culture that both nourishes and frustrates it so. In particular, the work acknowledges opposition to self-reflection, to change, to independent (as opposed to self-interested) action as a default setting within Australian society. Nevertheless, it openly, even fondly, partakes in an Australian vernacular. Speaking from within, it conveys a form of fury with cultural lethargy, with a devaluation of social, political and intellectual capital that is amplified in the microclimate of the art world. As such, it is not afraid of becoming the target

of its own critique. Yet crucially the work never pretends to offer the ultimate agency to enact real social or cultural change. It poses questions and picks at scabs. It offers neither solutions nor salve. Schwensen's practice is a form of cultural resistance that never loses sight of its own probable ineffectiveness. But such a sense of futility provides no reason to cease work. As Schwensen spelt out in adhesive tape on the floor of the demountable hut housing his *The art of watching (after Vermeer): Thorpe's feet, Pittman's knee, Bradman's house, Schwensen's arse* performance of 2006: 'FAIL AGAIN FAIL BETTER'.

This Beckettian dictum – treated seriously – could well serve as founding principle for Schwensen's early performance video works, begun in 1999 in Sydney just before the artist took up a residency in Rotterdam. He pursued this in earnest during the Netherlands residency and continued his project back in Australia and elsewhere from 2001, culminating in a small survey show at Performance Space, Sydney, in 2005, 'FATWHITESTRAIGHTBALDGUY: Tony Schwensen Videoperformance Work 1999–2005'. During the 1990s, Schwensen had established a reputation as a young installation artist working with found or industrial materials to make structures and interventions in gallery spaces that engaged or confronted the physicality of bodies moving about the space. In Rotterdam the artist was faced with new limitations of financial and material resources as well as insider access to the working structures and psyche of European culture. Treating these constrictions as the new parameters for his practice, and working within the confines of his small studio space with minimal, rough and ready props and his own body as art object, Schwensen set about producing a set of repetitive, durational performances before his single fixed camera. By turns banal, tedious and absurd, yet also obsessively engaging, even funny, these works feature the bulky mass of the head-shaven artist in grey boxer shorts (occasionally set off by black workboots) pushing himself through a set of seemingly aimless actions: rhythmically dancing on the spot, arms swinging and face grinning (*Hamburger boygroup*, 2000); more delicately dance-stepping around an upright pole fixed in a bucket (*Sea of love*, 2000); or dressed in the local football kit kicking a football back and forth on an elastic rope (*Rotterdam hooligan training*, 2000). *Hamburger boygroup* reworked one of Schwensen's first forays into video performance made in a Sydney garage the previous year – *Prime beef export quality* – but this time without the nipple tassels.

Later works further extended the conversation between tedium and meditation in these performances. There is a tension between the apparently meaningless reiteration of the body's objecthood in a basic grammar of movement (such as *Banging your head against a wall*, 2001) and hints of the underpinning consciousness driving these actions as forms of commentary on states of solitude, cultural exclusion and frustration at the absurdities and contradictions of contemporary life. Evidence of this authorial consciousness is particularly found in a number of 'waiting' works where whatever is suggested





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Tony Schwensen, *Weighty weight wait*, 2006, performance, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 11 hours duration, 3 channel installation, commissioned by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, courtesy the artist, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

by the title, the camera simply represents the artist sitting, attempting with the utmost seriousness to remain still (*Waiting for enlightenment* and *Waiting for a train* – existential and prosaic sides of the same coin – both 2002; *Be alert but not alarmed*, 2003; and *Thinking about manipulating a fluorescent tube*, 2005). Some of these are the most overtly communicative of Schwensen's early works by virtue of them taking on the form of 'live' portraits: faces existing with all their details and flaws and quirks of movement, appearing to stare back at the viewer. This makes their sudden and random receipt of violent slaps (*This is where we live*, 2003) or their double index finger gesture of abuse at the camera (*One for you and one for your dog*, 2005) all the more mesmerising.

With all these works, the exhibited video is of the same length as the original performance; as long, that is, as Schwensen's body endures. This experience of duration as a form of self-consciousness is strongest in what is, at least to date, Schwensen's last major work involving a filmed performance within a 'closed' setting. *Weighty weight wait*, 2006, features the artist perched motionless on a large green exercise ball, itself positioned on a large set of scales in the packing room of the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), Sydney. For eleven hours he sits, an extreme exercise in waiting. This is, quite literally, a study in the relationship between time and mass (observe whether the artist's weight alters while he 'waits'). At the same time it is a portrait of the artist infiltrating and inhabiting the bowels of one of the nation's stately art institutions. (The work, crucially, was made for exhibition upstairs in the AGNSW as part of the 2006 Anne Landa Award exhibition.)

In exhibition form *Weighty weight wait* is a three-channel installation made on high definition, 16:9 video format, emphasising the pictorial presence of the artist. In this regard the representational, if not conceptual, ambition of the work is new. Although working with a one-to-one temporal match between live action and video, Schwensen's work consistently evidences a developing investigation of relationships between the live and mediated body, between the human body and sculptural forms, and between physical and screen-based viewing encounters themselves ranging from 'cinematic' installation projections to monitors as sculptural objects and surveillance camera footage flickering furtively on the computer screen. More than most practitioners working with video and performance, Schwensen seems to understand that each artist brings with them – or comes encumbered with – their own representational conventions and modalities of experience.

The relationships between action, documentation and representation in particular have deepened in Schwensen's work of recent years as he has increasingly undertaken major performances outside the studio in live gallery and non-gallery settings. These have subjected the work to a range of unscripted audience interactions, with *The art of watching* a significant

example. Commissioned by Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) as part of the artistic program for the 2006 Commonwealth Games, *The art of watching* involved Schwensen viewing every moment of Channel Nine's television coverage of the games from his prefabricated cabin on the gallery forecourt (having paraded through the city streets to his cabin wearing a tracksuit and carrying the sign 'SCHWENSEN'). Here, sitting on a mat, leaning against his exercise ball, he consumed over 180 hours of jingoistic and nationalistic coverage. Through the cabin's window he conversed with an estimated 400 visitors, undertook radio interviews and was even interviewed by Channel Nine. (A planned live webstream did not take place, but Schwensen was filmed by surveillance-style cameras throughout the performance, with selected footage posted onto the ACCA website each day.)

Having discussed this televisual projection of an aggressively insular Australian identity with a range of visitors through his cabin window during *The art of watching* performance, Schwensen made three subsequent performance works in 2006 that sought to manifest and absorb the reflection of a particularly strident and visible form of Australian nationalism. That sport provides the platform for such critique in a number of works is hardly surprising given its agency in populist discourse regarding Australian identity. Moreover, Schwensen has long held an interest in this area of recreation – one of his first performance video works made in a suburban garage and entitled *Having a good, long, hard look in the mirror*, 1999, featured the artist in an Australian one-day cricket cap doing just that: mulling over the inadequacies of his own nascent 'performance'.

Responding to the paucity of Channel Nine's coverage of New Zealand competitors during the Commonwealth Games, despite a large local diaspora, Schwensen travelled to Auckland to undertake *Complain to an Australian about Australia Day*, 2006, in which he sat in the gallery Michael Lett dressed in sombre black, inviting visitors to sit down next to him and do just that. For *Neighbours*, performed at The Great Escape festival on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour, Schwensen – attired in tracksuit bottoms, T-shirt, an Australian flag for a cape and a frightening plastic Southern Cross mask – forced his audience from the room, one by one, with the aid of a petrol-powered leaf blower. That the symbolism is clear does not detract from the visceral potency of the act. In *C'mon*, 2006, performed at the ANTI Contemporary Art Festival in Kuopio, Finland, Schwensen in his daggy dark green 'Australian' tracksuit relentlessly served, retrieved and served again a single tennis ball for eleven hours, trudging from end to end, screaming 'c'mon' after each shot – an empty exhortation to himself against the drab backdrop of a tenement building, forlorn trees and grey European skies. The work is fingernails-down-the-blackboard material – an excruciating manifestation of the ugly Australian abroad.

KUNST = KAPITAL



YOU KAPITALIST KUNTS



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Tony Schwensen, Fat corner (Buoys/Beuys), 2008, vinyl text, 2 channel video 16:9, shelving units, fat, performance, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, courtesy the artist, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

left

Tony Schwensen, The art of watching, 2006, performance, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, courtesy the artist, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.

right

Tony Schwensen, Fundrazor (fuck you pay me) or who gets to sit at the pointy end of the plane?, 2008, performance, 16th Biennale of Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, courtesy the artist, Uplands Gallery, Melbourne, and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney. Photograph Greg Weight.



Schwensen made three major new performance works through 2007 before he left the country in the second half of the year to embark first on a residency in Paris and then to take up a position in Boston teaching performance. *Rise*, 2007, the most ambitious of four works made by Schwensen at ArtSpace, Sydney, over a five-year period, was intended, in the artist's own words, as 'a hundred-hour meditation on stupidity, nationalism, delusionism, the devaluing of manual labour in the Western world both socially and financially, and the rampant and thoughtless consumption that has accompanied it with particular attention to its manifestations in contemporary Australia'. Political in intent, it formally confronted Schwensen with a new performance conundrum: what to do when there is literally nothing to do.

The artist inhabited a large gallery space for one hundred hours, dressed in blue overalls, framed by a quote from Samuel Beckett writ large on one wall – 'Hopes: None, Resolutions: None' – and on another the aggressively nationalistic Cronulla riot cry – 'Love It or Leave It'. This latter statement echoed at regular intervals throughout the space via a recording of the artist's voice (accompanied by close-up video images of his mouth) ensured the most uncomfortable of environments. Schwensen had originally planned to process one hundred litres of salt water through a hand desalination pump, while also processing a more internal liquidity: as ever-increasing numbers of empty water bottles were strewn across the space, so rose the levels in his urine containers to highlight the energy inefficiency of desalination. However, the pump malfunctioned on the first night, leaving Schwensen with little to do but simply exist in space, pace the gallery, banter with the occasional interlocutor and attempt to ignore the large numbers of late-night visitors banging on the gallery windows (the gallery opens out onto a busy street, with an iconic fast-food cart across the road). The initial hundred-hour performance period was followed by a further week in which another monitor was placed among the performance detritus in the space, screening in real time those seemingly interminable one hundred hours again. Shot with a fixed camera that could not fully track his wanderings about the gallery, the footage did not always feature Schwensen; nevertheless the forlorn weight of the 'failed' performance (that was, in turn, the crux of its success) was magnified in this dogged revisitation of the artist's basic waiting-out time.

Rise was bracketed by two works undertaken in Schwensen's original home territory of Sydney's western suburbs, and in direct dialogue with his own family history. In *Plowing back*, 2007, Schwensen retraced the steps of his transported great-great-great grandfather, Thomas Plows, who on arriving in Sydney in March 1817 was assigned and marched to Collingwood House near Liverpool as a convict labourer. Dressed in fluorescent orange road-worker overalls, Schwensen restaged the walk from Circular Quay to Collingwood

House, now home to Liverpool Regional Museum (and temporarily to the offices of Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, commissioners of this work), where for a week he slept in the reputedly haunted basement cells and undertook convict-style labouring tasks about the property. In a companion work of sorts, *Harrowing Plow from the Plough and Harrow*, 2007, commissioned by Campbelltown Arts Centre, Schwensen walked through the nearby suburban streets to the local cemetery where he spent the day and night 'haunting' the Plows family burial site.

These recent works crystallise the manner in which Schwensen's practice fundamentally constitutes a form of being in the world. The artist performs a type of subject-object conundrum via his carefully planned actions (which are, without contradiction, often a form of failed action, even inaction). In Schwensen's work the artist is both a labourer – and labour is a crucial motif throughout – and a formal figure subject to his own experiments in action and duration. Both performance and installation forms of work are also manifestations – or shadows – of intellectual labour. Schwensen's work never looks effortless because it never is. It never looks easy because there is never ease. There is difficulty, awkwardness, even boredom. Just like the world.

Which brings us back to resistance, revolution and the 2008 Biennale of Sydney. In response to the biennale's inability to fund his initially proposed durational performance work, Schwensen set up a fundraiser performance project – *Fundrazor (fuck you pay me) or who gets to sit at the pointy end of the plane?*, 2008 – operating a sausage sizzle outside the Museum of Contemporary Art during vernissage to cover the costs of his own presence, with surplus 'profit' being donated to the biennale to assist in funding future artists' projects. In a practical sense, the action is again infused with a degree of utility with regard to economies of scale, but the gesture itself is vital, as is the recognition of a type of everyday community solidarity in the form of the sausage sizzle. Most pertinently, the labour of the artist sets out to supplement government funding, patron programs, corporate sponsorships and international funding partnerships. In so doing it points to the limited income from such sources available to Australian artists when considered in an international context and to the bureaucratic art-world priorities dictating its dispersal.

In his typically laconic yet acerbic manner Schwensen appears to pose the question: might any more than just a few Australian artists aspire to be other than the volunteer labour pool servicing the 'big ticket' events of the local art world? Satire hits harder when played for real. And in the work of Tony Schwensen, playing for real means undertaking solid, thoughtful, propositional actions through time in the world. The revolution will be live.

1 www.bos2008.com/revolutionsonline/