

# WHO'S AFRAID OF THE AVANT-GARDE ?

FATWHITESTRAIGHTBALDGUY

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## INTRODUCTION

Tony Schwensen's works are notoriously pared-down and involve repetitious acts, such as banging his head against a brick wall, or kicking a ball in the air, that are often stretched out for ludicrously lengthy periods.

What is the significance of such acts? They go to the root of performance art in which the body becomes objectified through its unrealistic focus on a particular act. Repetition, such as in the saying of a word over and over again, tends to empty out meaning, which, in turn, robs the word or thing of its initial purpose. So, in Schwensen's videos, unambiguous acts such as dancing or shifting about in a bath tub, become denatured, unfamiliar, strange, and, in so many cases, funny. The stark simplicity of the works resonates with perennial concerns of human nihilism and isolation. They are also inflected with an instinct of ironic resistance to worldly travails, whether that be in the name of a feeling of political powerlessness, or quizzical detachment from the dehumanising forces of mass culture. Whereas mass culture dehumanises us with all forms of manipulation, mendacity and trivia, these performative acts cast the artist as an alternative subhuman; marginally superior, because at least he is fortified by irony.

In his masterful *Chess Novella* [*Schachnovelle*], the great Austrian writer Stephan Zweig tells of a 'Dr B.', confined by the SS Gestapo to a hotel room empty of anything but a bed, desk, chair and washbasin. He is spared the concentration camps because he is numbered among those deemed too useful, counted among 'the prominent' either for their wealth or their access to information. But this Dr B. soon despairs of the 'vacuum' to which he has been committed, "hermetically sealed from the external world", and envies the camp internees, for although they perform hand-bleeding labour by day and are packed against one another at night, they at least see faces, a field, a tree, a star. Within the "black ocean of this muteness" and, the "soundless depths", all he is left with is agonizing solitude. He comes to the conclusion that "there is no greater burden on this earth for the human soul than the void". Before one of his interrogations he manages to pilfer a book of chess moves that he memorises before turning to the psychosis of playing games with himself in his head.

This story brings to mind Tony Schwensen's *Lag* (2004) where he uses the device that prisoners in solitary confinement use to entertain themselves: removing a button and searching for it repeatedly in the dark. Blindfolded, Schwensen shuffles around the room on all fours like a desperate dog.

But I didn't go to the trouble of abridging Swig's Zweig's story for the sake of elucidating one work. The preoccupation of confronting a desperate blackness lies underneath all of Schwensen's performance video work. From the sombrely pitiable to the tongue-in-cheek to the outright hilarious, all of Schwensen's works share a process of gaming with no recognizable beginning or end, just simple rules. Oscillation is the most fundamental of game structures, but when you think about it this way it also makes you think realise how stupid games can be, except that, mercifully, they kill time for a while before they eventually kill you. The oscillation never really ends:, except you die eventually so the best you can do is make the best of a boring world. (Ah, so much time, so little to do!) A sartorial boredom fills Schwensen's work. We see an act played out over and over again as compensation for the un-nameable nothing. The works have a guileless pared-down quality, which is always in conflict with itself: the artist is trying to make something more. But like Tantalus, as soon as he lowers his head, the water level lowers, and he is condemned to perpetuity.

These videos are as denuded, as bereft, and depilated as the skin on the artist's skull. But it is probably a mistake to call Schwensen a Minimalist, except insofar as Minimalism does deal with the perennial quality of the human encounter with the void. For Schwensen's work also tells of the human body's inescapability from worldly things. One of the resounding aims of Minimalism was to make the object seem transcendently free of intention, purified of all arbitrary gestures and locutions. Schwensen's videos are not about transcendence (except insofar as any work of art that aims at excellence aims at some kind of aesthetic elevation). On the contrary, Schwensen's works are, in a more conventional sense, hostile to transcendence. They are indelibly, one might say grossly, there, as fleeting and as pointless as anything else. His works are mired in the world. It is a world either stultifying or stupid, if these words don't already recommend themselves to one another. The artist encourages you to laugh at him, though you soon don't know whether it is 'at' or 'with' or even 'at you'. In the works that join our gaze with his, it is hard to tell whether it is he or us who is the scapegoat of this repetitious conundrum.

Schwensen's work suggests a roll call of artistic progenitors. Most immediate is Warhol's *Screen Tests*, in which a variety of people stare at the camera for a set period of time. The satire, the whimsical self-deprecation, the enviable instinct for self-parody and irreverence of within Schwensen's work also calls to mind William Wegman. (The video *Bounce* is overtly Wegmanesque, although in one of those curious and fortuitous artistic atavisms Schwensen produced it before he knew anything about Wegman.) The work of Viennese Actionist, Arnulf Rainer is perhaps less pronounced but just as present in that of Schwensen. Rainer is best known for photographs of himself in states of contrived pain: his face is so overly distorted that you think it is going to fall off and assume the shape of Michelangelo's flayed skin in his painting, the *Last Judgement*.

Rainer and the Actionists were playing out what they believed to be the frustrations and repressions of Austrian society, then as now, a society whose recognition of its role in the Second World War is selective, sporadic and dangerously cosmetic. The Actionists brought the legacy of Expressionism and *Sturm und Drang* to a convulsive climax. If their work was about subjective expression, it was expression used in a far more allegorical way than the Expressionists of the early 20th century, for whom the subjective experience was at a premium. The Actionists believed in subjective truth solely as an avatar of collective ennui. Schwensen's work is devoid of the ironic faux-heroism or theatricalised violence of the Austrians of the 70's, but it does have the same complex relation of individual to collective. And like the Actionists, Schwensen's works speak openly and clearly of a contemporary national condition, in this case Australia.

## 'UNAPOLOGETIC DULLNESS'

The unburnished simplicity of Tony Schwensen's videos speaks to a culture that appears to have given up on complex ideals, and which in many respects has regressed dramatically in its political outlook. At first, Schwensen appears the quintessential Australian artist, in the sense that he plays out 'Australianness' in all its uncritical and crushing mediocrity—the very quality that artists seek to escape, ignore or fight against. The artist unflinchingly presents himself as a paragon of the inconsequential Aussie blunderer; in some works he will even offer you a smile. There is nothing in these works that speaks of excellence in any way. In fact it is the very avoidance of anything that smacks of elitism and success that drives the viewer to look again, searching for the elusive penny in the glutinous pudding. But there is no penny. As opposed to media dross dressing up mediocrity as if possessing flair, here we have the artist, laid bare, insouciantly dull.

And this is where one of the great strengths of Schwensen's work lies. This dullness is so unapologetic that it becomes interesting, and in some cases, arresting. The paradox of Schwensen's work is that in its unfaltering 'Australianness' it is tenacious in its critique of the bogus notion of Australianness itself, or for that matter, any atomised national identity. What Schwensen's work reminds us, in a subtle way, is that nationhood is built on the principles of paranoia and oversimplification. I see all of Schwensen's works as metaphors of the way in which people simplify their world in order to make sense of it, and in order to fortify themselves against metaphysical terror: chaos, uncertainty, ignorance and death. Nationalism is insidiousness in that it blames others for an uncertainty that is central to human experience. Nationalism fixes everything into its *Weltanschauung*, or world-view. If something doesn't comply, it is distrusted, even hated. In Schwensen's work we find a simplified world simplified ten times over. Take the Aussie-prom experience of the *High School Shuffle*, an innocent two-step so uncannily familiar to anyone who was an average pimply youth: after your first laugh, you sense that Schwensen has cast this trivial event into purgatory. Depending on how you choose to interpret it, Schwensen's works are like being beaten over the head with 'tradition', except his traditions are far from grand ones, they are the crude, the humble and the pointless traditions that belong to the ubiquitous universe of fat, straight, white bald guys.

One of Schwensen's first forays into the video genre, *Having a Good Hard Look in the Mirror* (1999) acts like a coda for much of the work to follow. Here the artist is sitting staring at himself for half an hour. Its title is a pastiche of the avuncular corrective to 'take a good hard look at yourself'. This soulless and therefore non-introspective model of Australian ockerism was also famously satirised by the Sydney media personalities Roy and H.G. who would regularly exhort an offending party to "Take his pants off and go into the room of mirrors". But Schwensen avoids the onanistic side of this allusion to when a young lad was sent to his room to have a good think. He suggests instead that we are still in a cultural adolescence where reflection is either untaught or actively made redundant by the exigencies of rationalization. Australia, when it is not beating its chest about sport, is at its best condoning mediocrity and emasculating excellence as 'poofy'. It is often the case that Australians in the so-called 'culture industry' feel that they are forever speaking to themselves, preaching to the converted, closed in the prison house of some ineffectual spiral. Schwensen's work celebrates this malaise as much as it mourns it. It is jovial and melancholic, light-hearted and dour. It is both culturally esoteric whilst being everything that culture abhors. His technique is to offer a form that is continually collapsing in on itself. Instead of the studied depths of romantic soul-searching, all that Schwensen leaves us with is human tautology in its most agonizing banality: I see me, so what? I'm here, I'm there—then what? Keep looking. (I see me. So what? Well, I see me. So what? etc. etc. *ad infinitum*.)

In *This is Where We Live* (2003) we are presented with the face of a guy, Schwensen, from the bare shoulders upward, staring at us, just staring, staring. Nothing happens. Just a guy: staring. There is nothing special about this guy. He's bald and has a couple of moles, but there is nothing special at all here. Then out of the blue, he gets slapped. There is faint surprise in the artist's eyes that he quickly controls before resuming his forced stasis. Although not stated in

the title this time, the Australian disciplinary moral to which this work alludes is 'Wake up to yourself!'. Schwensen's stark liberalizations expose an anxiety that is as relevant to lonely minorities such as single drunken men or the alarmingly large quantity of suicidal adolescents in this country—groups who in no way have an adequate communicative outlet for their complaints. The ethical and emotional box of tricks upon which this country is supposedly built is found wanting.

Anxiety is chronically exacerbated when it exists in a climate that denies its existence, where the anxious are ridiculed for having an imaginary disease. So if social panaceas like 'Taking a good hard look at yourself', or 'Wake up to yourself' do not quite work, then it is only those fortunate enough to have a supportive inner community who are likely to avoid being fully cast into an emotional abyss. Australia is a country that currently copes with the challenges of population increase and diversity with policies of omission. It is a country that actively downgrades values of community support and communication with minorities and the less articulate. This is now a country where many feel mute and impotent, where many feel sad and tired. Like Schwensen's blindfolded detainee, in the absence of effective, positive solutions, we try and find games to keep ourselves sane—or is it a diversion into a stylised insanity? The intense perplexity of Schwensen's work makes a comedy of something that he has no choice but to dignify, whether that be an inimical political state, or just life's drudgery.

## 'THE ART OF MEDIOCRITY IN A 'CAN'T DO' CULTURE'

Tony Schwensen's work makes you reflect upon the way in which mediocrity is diverse and rich, we might even say exciting and riveting in its own mediocre way. We need only look at the simian smile (take *Hamburger Boygroup*, 2000) in many of Schwensen's dancing videos to see the face of the fool who brooks no denial, no counter-argument, simply because the fool is incapable of it. Try arguing with a stupid person, try foisting channels of logic on a fool. The irony of argument and reasoning is that it is easier to win an argument with an intelligent person than with someone who is not. You can't play chess when the other side insists on manoeuvring his pieces like checkers. This is a frustrating, soul-destroying dynamic quite different from playing with a child, since by and large the child is conscious that there may be more out there to learn.; They are usually conscious of your knowledge, whereas the mature lunk-head, the grown dolt, the full-grown fool (also read: lacklustre culture) is proudly secure in all his ignorant glory, like a bigot who flouts his bigotry, an ignoramus who makes a virtue out of everything that he has never made the effort to find out. (Just watch reality television for ten minutes!)

Mediocre art is different from the art of mediocrity. The semantics are fine, but be patient with me while I make this point: the art of mediocrity has a complex role to play with arts of imagination, conceptual rigor, of transcendence all told. What if we considered that Schwensen does mediocre art very, very well? It is one thing to excel at mediocrity by dint of inadequacy, but what if one were to try to distil the nature, the modality of inadequacy and to nurture it into its own blown-out, pathetic entity? To stretch it to its paltry limit?

This is easy to theorize in the technological age, since technology changed the terms of reference for notions of skill and talent within art as they grew out of the Renaissance and reached their institutionalised apogee in the 19th century. Technology's major effect on art was to displace the emphasis on skill and to place a greater focus on the artist's ideas, the critical reflective qualities that come with self-reflection (something technology lacks). Abstract Expressionism marks an important watershed in this process, in which the non-mimetic gesture took over from the figurative mark. Abstract Expressionism was a celebration of subjectivity through the enunciation of individual will, but also of human arbitrariness, hence human error. Abstract Expressionism was proudly messy, and at its best unruliness was kept in curious balance with controlled elegance. From artists like Clyfford Still to Jean Dubuffet, it was considered a virtue not to be able to draw. The basic philosophy of deskilling has its roots both in the Western fantasy of 'primitive' cultures, and in Rousseauian dreams of a child freed of inhibition. According to the expressionist philosophy at its extreme, to be able to draw inhibits the artist into a system of conformist replication, whilst to be free from teaching is to be free to express one's individual subjectivity. In looking at expressionist art the viewer experiences individual otherness, that quiddity, major or trivial, that divides one person from another.

There are two poles of the notion of 'what the viewer cannot do'. In the case of the, academically trained artist of the 19th century, drawing was a basic part of artistic initiation and the result of years of grueling training. The end result was a precision with the hand and eye that made clear distinctions between professionals and amateurs. The merit of the work of art was to a large extent judged according to the skill in which the forms resembled those of 'natural' reality. As we know, photography changed all that. While it did not eradicate naturalistic painting as it was thought to do, it made painting reflective of its mode of presentation and forced it into a close dialogue with its photographic counterpart. Nevertheless the criterion of what 'couldn't be done' in terms of the beholder became problematised, although slavish skill is revived from time to time as a reactionary policy and is usually an index of rampant neo-con philistinism (the inflated adulation that Ricky Swallow has recently received is a case in point). This photography/painting relationship constitutes a whole chapter of art history, but suffice to say that technology gave painting an out clause by incapacitating it. And the only means of escape was the other form of 'what the viewer cannot do'.

This is the gesture, the signature. While we are used to viewing the individual mark in its most



elevated form as the expression of unique will, we tend to forget the blind spot which is its very condition. This is the opposite of hypostatisation, of elevation. It is the abject. The reason why we are all asked to sign our names on the dotted line is because we are congenitally incapable of writing exactly like a machine which, it is assumed, passes off a better, more ideal, because standardized, form of orthography. What is being valued, then, is our repeated ability to get something wrong within certain parameters, in this case, signing our name. Each person's signature is different but they are all recognizably the same. This ritualisation of error runs into the Romantic myth of the genius and the madman: the artist is the one whose 'errors', like the psychopath, are so extreme that no-one can repeat them, or would imagine doing so. We might say that with the achievements of technology, artistic achievements are retrograde and in a state of perpetual decay toward no fixed point; an eternal diminution.

Schwensen's video works can be seen as a translation of this ethic of retrogression and decay that characterises art in its confrontation with technology. The biggest distinction to make, however, is that his work not only exists as a consequence of technology (which is also the case of gestural expression as we have seen), but exists within technology as well, as a shadow within the machine itself. Schwensen returns to the ethic of 'what the viewer cannot do' as the blind fact of announcing presence: I am here and you are there; I am doing this, doing this, doing that; you are not. But here is the rub: Schwensen's work announces to the viewer what 'the viewer cannot do' in the least elevated and most mediocre fashion, because what the viewer sees is simply an echo of Schwensen's own incapacities, because Schwensen cannot draw. While many artists embark into territory by default as a result of weaknesses—I am sure there are countless performance artists out there who are performance artists because they cannot draw—Schwensen makes inadequacy the touchstone of his practice.

It is one of those merciful ironies that Schwensen is unrepeatable, uncopyable because he takes the subjective signature and isolates its pathetic, abject core, the side that the avant-garde and Romanticism, from Courbet to Pollock, wanted to suppress. (Or should we say that artists like Courbet and Pollock welcomed the diseases active within their style, it is just that progressivist art history finds it easier to sanitise what it touches.) It is relatively easy to pastiche Courbet or Pollock, but next to impossible to pastiche Schwensen. Schwensen is uncopyable. His actions are already readymade and he is remaking them over and over again. His work is a *déjà vu* to the power of 1002. You might try to copy him but then you might realise that you are just copying yourself. If not, you'll just end up looking like an idiot. I know very few artists who have carved out such an excellent niche of feckless idiocy as Schwensen.

So the difference between the gestural avant-garde and Schwensen is that the former still reserve for themselves claims to a higher realm. If this is not resolved within the artist him/herself (inner 'monastic' transcendence), then it is in the object, which is reified through readily transforming into a commodity (the abstract value given to the unrepeatable object from a unique person announcing a fixed point in space and time). But with Schwensen one encounters the gesture, if you like, outside itself, at one remove. He is gesturing without marking. I prefer to view this for the moment in terms of painting and drawing rather than performance because performance works within the conditions of its own ephemerality, while painting and drawing (and other media) fight against it. The contrast with painting and drawing also serves my argument that locates Schwensen's work in the realm not just of what you the viewer cannot do but what the artist cannot do himself (*viz.* can't draw or paint). We are told that the people of the U.S.A. are 'can do' people (actually an assertion of neo-imperial, capitalist arrogance); well, *mutatis mutandis*, Schwensen is a 'can't do' person; can't do as much as he tries, can't do because he couldn't be bothered, can't do because his circumstances and his culture don't give a toss.

So let's list them. According to what his video works show us, Schwensen cannot: meditate, manage to catch a train, get an idea (banging your head against a wall), get anywhere, dance, catch a button and keep it, decide which thumb is better, avoid getting a slap... and indeed, we might go so far as to say: work jazzy effects on a computer-editing program or avail himself of decent film/video stock. It is one thing to say that something isn't good enough, Schwensen's videos cover this from all angles.

## 'MAKING THE MOST OF LAZINESS'

On the surface of it, Tony Schwensen's work is easily achieved. The settings are simple, and if the contrivance is strong, there is no overt, or studied staging of things. On the contrary, many of his settings are profoundly bad, the worst maybe being *Having a Good Hard Look in the Mirror* (1999), with the artist in a suburban garage staring into a mirror supported by two gammy, white, cheap plastic stools (that God-awful cheapness that is the last resort of the poorest student who wants something other than a milk crate to sit on). Schwensen has spent the greater part of his career exploring the poetics of laziness, the easy slap-dashery that no high school art teacher would let him get away with.

Early in his career, in the 90s Schwensen had some association with the grunge artists of Sydney, but to ascribe his output in terms of grunge is to miss the point somewhat. Grunge, as it is generally understood, is a reaction to an economic condition. Economics have very little to do with the work of Schwensen, who, even when he was particularly poor and stretched in his artistic life, was prone to impute economic difficulties to much deeper malaises. His preoccupations are existential and ethical. But the elevated philosophical baggage of these words should not hide the fact that Schwensen's interest is within a specific area. It is a base existentialism, and the ethics are default. Schwensen's work exudes an aesthetics of laziness, the last turn before you turn the corner and make nothing at all.

But the only reason that Schwensen doesn't turn the corner, it seems to me, is that the artist who doesn't make art is reserved for the state that Nietzsche described as pure transcendence from competition and productivity, from the narcissistic need to reflect one's ego in the matter of the world and to have it reflected in the eyes of others. It is the assumption of true power, which both Nietzsche and Schopenhauer fantasized in terms of Brahminic self-abnegation. This, to Schwensen, would be aiming too high, going a bit overboard. He (he knows) is not worth the trouble, nor is the world. He knows better than to make his kind of art, but he does so anyway. It would be too much effort to take things further. It would be too much effort, in fact, to do nothing, because to do nothing really well, to lord over underachievement is a very hard thing to do. It is much easier to be an artist and to make 'fillers' for the time being rather than to make the real effort. It is better to be lazy and not cause too much of a fuss.

The parallel between Schwensen and other 'grunge' artists may be conducted by the fact that both espouse an aesthetic that avoids finish and high-grade materials in favour of the debased, cheap, easy, even slipshod. (And it is funny to see that 'grunge' artists of his generation and the younger 'funk post-grunge' artists respond to him so easily and as if he were of their own. He isn't. Schwensen dislikes groupiness and derides the clan mentality of the art world.) But grunge's economic response is understood in terms of the diminished standards of living in urban centres and consciousness of the divide between rich and poor. This divide is widening, which is why it is a style that shows no sign of waning (although each generation that works within the style thinks that their rebellion is fresh and new). But Schwensen would still be doing his kind of work if the divide were not as wide, and if times were good. This is one of the things I value so highly about Schwensen's work, that it would be the fly in the ointment even if everyone else in society were joining hands and chanting about paradise. His work is an Orwellian 1984 in reverse: if the world were really good and nice, the world we 'all' aspire to, he'd rebel against it. Schwensen would do this work rich or poor (as he has), which can only mean (I repeat) that the work is less to do with material circumstances than it is to do with an inescapable condition. Australia's lapse into unrepentant conservatism only tends to bring his work into sharper relief; we can use his work as a lens with which to perceive Australia as a complacent state, but that is not all. For any work of art that is motivated by an inner disequilibrium (which it seeks interminably, perennially, inexorably and fruitlessly to set aright with any permanency), and when these motivations are ardent and particular, then this art will always be more political than work that responds as an epiphenomenon of the outside world. While both positions are based on an ontic illusion—either that the self comes first in the former, or the world in the latter—the second position is always more tenuous, since it views itself as an effect of the outside: it is a process that is always condemned to be reaction to forces



outside itself. The true basis of politics has its roots in an inner subjective condition, namely, what does it mean to endure this life and what does it mean to share this expression of endurance with others? And why should anyone listen?

In his 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit', Samuel Beckett speaks of art that turns from it "the particular 'plane' of the artistic maker" in disgust, weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road. The alternative to hitting your head against this brick wall, if I can borrow a metaphor from a work by Schwensen, is simply to hit your head against a brick wall *knowing that you are doing so*. It is hubristic for an artist to think he or she can do anything else. Thus Beckett prefers the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. You nailed it again, Sam.

Later in the same text, speaking of his friend Bram van Velde, Beckett acknowledges that artists are unable to escape the repetition of acts. Once one has embraced that there is nothing more to be done except doing, then action and inaction become one: "The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint. The act is of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint." I would emphasize here that Schwensen 'cannot paint' because he actually *can't* paint. His works enacts a kind of double impossibility, an excessive ineptitude, and a fulsome laziness.

"The situation is that of him whom is helpless"—the repetition of acts to which artists are condemned is not just of course confined to artists, except that with artists it is a law that is more evident within the act itself, since the desire to make art is not to make anything that is necessary in the utilitarian sense, nor is it to indulge in anything progressive, at least from the rational or scientific point of view. The artist, the producing artist, once he relinquishes the sentimentality of regarding one work as better than another becomes a slave to the equivalences with his own production. And the more the artist acts, the more he does and makes, the more there are expressions of him. Hence the subject becomes as diluted as it is asserted. Schwensen's repetitions are his reply to artistic production as the standard of genius. His repetitions are a production twice removed; production turned in on itself like a glove; production of production of production; the eternal return but without the will to power. But is that possible? Duchamp was the great lazy artist, and we can say this without contradiction since he produced so little in such a long period of time.

Is it possible to produce lazily? Is it possible to work hard at being lazy? To give it your best shot? Or to put this in 'Schwensenese', is it possible to be intrinsically lazy and to produce at the same time? The only answer to this is in repetition. The waiting pieces have to be seen as a culmination of the two-step and dancing works since, in fact, in the waiting works stasis is repeated. Schwensen devises his own Zeno's paradox where intervals are infinite because no metrical intervals are evident, except a heart beating, the biological metronome.

## ‘REPETITION, WILLING AND THE ‘UN-GOOD’’

In works that are repetitive but don't involve a wait, such as *Straightening Up, Thinking About Manipulating a Fluorescent Tube, One for You and One for Your Dog*, (all 2005), we witness Tony Schwensen experiencing a sombre test of his will. They differ from the ‘waiting’ videos insofar as they anticipate an end point where the performer can no longer endure the action. (In the exhibition *FATWHITESTRAIGHTBALDGUY, This is where we live*, chronologically dated between the waiting works and the ones above, was placed on a monitor above head height in the hallway. Every once and so often a slap rang out and Schwensen quickly adjusted his face to default impassivity. The slaps were infrequent. Is this work a wait video or more an endurance work? Luckily it was housed in-between.) These works are more characteristic of performance works per se, whose parameters are fixed in terms of the body (weight, size, pain threshold etc.) or time, or both. (To impute temporal limits to the waiting works is to miss the point completely: the looping of the video is crucial here.) All of these works are wars of attrition. *Straightening Up* is about the establishment of a bruise which in its way is a metaphor for ‘knocking yourself into shape’.

One of the qualities of repetition is to diminish the properties of before and after with the net effect of causing meaning to collapse. Performing relatively harmless and uncomplicated acts like twisting thumbs from side to side reflects a world where if, everything hasn't happened previously, then at least it has been decided. The repetitions are expressionless expressions of someone who has been treading water on his own predetermination.

After the philosophy of Stoics, the most famous treatise on repetition is by Kierkegaard. One of Kierkegaard's central motivations for theorizing repetition was to refute the philosophy of Hegelian *Aufhebung*, sublation, progression through synthesis and development. With repetition things do not alter, they just realize their own immanence, their inner potential, in and for themselves; things actualise their implicit content for the way they always-already are. In his most recent book on and around Deleuze (*Organs Without Bodies*), Slavoj Žižek engages in a brilliant exegesis of repetition indicating how Kierkegaard is really the only ‘true’ and rightful inheritor of Hegel by showing that it is only through effective repetition in rememoration that development becomes possible. Žižek then argues, via Deleuze, that ‘true’ repetition can only operate in terms of difference and vice versa:

The standard opposition of the abstract Universal (say, Human Rights) and the particular identities is to be replaced by a new tension between Singular and Universal: the Event of the New as a universal singularity. What Deleuze renders here is the (properly Hegelian) link between true historicity and eternity: a truly New emerges as eternity in time, transcending its material conditions. To perceive a past phenomenon in becoming (as Kierkegaard would have put it) is to perceive the virtual potential in it, the spark of eternity, of virtual potentiality that is there forever. A truly new work *stays new forever*—its newness is not exhausted when its ‘shocking value’ passes away. For example, in philosophy, the great breakthroughs—from Kant's transcendental turn to Kripke's invention of the ‘rigid designator’—forever retain their ‘surprising’ character of invention. (14-5)

One of the tenets of Schopenhauer's philosophy is that representation allows for the venting of the will. The body as we see it and perceive it is nothing other than the will made perceptible. This is evidenced in the way that everything that is effected upon the body is exacted directly upon the Will (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 167). This also forms one of the basic tenets of performance art. It uses the body's thresholds to trace the minimal point between body and mind, brute sensation and conceptual knowledge. This is true of Schwensen as it is of many other performance artists, except that Schwensen uses the body in order to slow progress, in order to mute the mind, in order to stave off difference.

This is the irresolvable conflict that Schwensen seeks to resolve: to make art that is different about not being different, a work that is good about not being good, a work that is about

mediocrity that is somehow not mediocre. The difference between an artist who spends his life at a turnbelt and someone else who also spends his life at a turnbelt is that the artist, to be called an artist, has to do work that is 'good'. If it is not good then it is better not to do it and if one is not going to, it is better to do so in the capacity of a Nietzschean *Übermensch* than a dork because there are plenty of them around already (as well as dorks who think they are *Übermenschen*, they're possibly the most dangerous). So this is the Schwensen 'un-good'. It is art worthy of its name but not about the good.

This is what divides his work from the major Australia performance artist of the preceding generation, Mike Parr. With Parr the assertion of the will is used as a vitally defiant act against cultural philistinism, and as a cathartic voice against hypocrisy. The politics within Schwensen—and they should never be underestimated—are bereft of heroism, but this lack is not seen as deplorable or worth mourning over. Rather, his work says that the 20th century is well and truly over and that if there was an aristocracy it exists as a commercial dream, or in Technicolor films or in flamboyant costume dramas, and even they just announce to us everything that we are not. For Schwensen, the age of genius is not just dead, genius is humdrum. I might indeed cite one of Parr's titles: *We are all monochromes now*. Schwensen allows us never to forget that you can even be Nicole Kidman, and that you can take a girl out of Lane Cove, but you can't take Lane Cove out of the girl.

Schwensen's work is a reminder that there is a little bit of Lane Cove in all of us. It can be okay to strive high for mediocrity.

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