

TONY SCHWENSEN

THE ART OF WATCHING (AFTER VERMEER) THORPE'S FEET,
PITTMAN'S KNEE, BRADMAN'S HOUSE, SCHWENSEN'S ARSE

AUSTRALIAN CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART FORECOURT, MELBOURNE

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Tony Schwensen's recent performance entailed watching the entire coverage of the Commonwealth Games from the confines of a building site office. An interest in sport has fuelled much of his artwork, such as the memorable 1997 performance *Australia A (all apologies) for Brian McKechnie* at Artspace, Auckland. There the artist evoked a solitary midnight feast by indulging in a six foot Subway roll naked—the work was intended as an apology on behalf of Australia for the underarm bowling incident. When I visited Schwensen's most recent performance, his partner was delivering a meal, also from Subway, a fitting thread of continuity from the 1997 performance.

In this instance it is Schwensen's political antennae that have driven him to view the televised version of the Commonwealth Games. When I first read of the proposed performance, I was reminded of Tom Marioni's description of *Allan Fish Drinks a Case of Beer*: 'I had a TV set, my easy chair, a tape recorder, a refrigerator and a can opener hanging down on a string from the ceiling'.¹ I assumed that this would be a similarly laid-back affair: a sort of lounge room, with the artist reclining and enjoying the entertainment. Far from it, the interior design of Schwensen's container was guided by austerity—it contained only a yoga mat, a fit ball, a bucket and a television. No visitors were allowed inside the container. The artist had a notebook and pen for recording observations, and was prepared to make work on the interior walls of the container.

When I visited the installation, Schwensen was dressed in an



Tony Schwensen, *The Art of Watching (after Vermeer) Thorpe's Feet, Pittman's Knee, Bradman's House, Schwensen's Arse*. Performance still. Photograph John Brash.



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emblazoned tracksuit bearing the title of the work: *The Art of Watching (after Vermeer) Thorpe's Feet, Pittman's Knee, Bradman's House, Schwensen's Arse*. The title derives from a work by Vermeer called *The Art of Painting*. The artist explained, 'as my work was partly a meditation on the art of watching, taking the title and paying a tribute to its origin were necessary'.² There was a circuit of gazes operating within the work. The artist gazed upon the television. Underneath the beige and white curtain that sealed the container visitors stood gazing at the artist, waiting to discuss the work with him. The artist could also watch these viewers watching him watch the television. Finally, after seeing the work, the viewer's later experiences of watching the Games on TV at home were distorted by their reference to this prior experience.

The procedure of this work certainly recalled the marathon and the artist himself, with his ascetic surroundings, suggested the aura of the Nietzschean superman. But it was an unconventional interpretation of pain that was to be conquered here: what Schwensen faced was the fear of uninterrupted banality. Performance art, throughout its history, has shown a tendency to sadistic practices. But these have usually been expressed through a more brutish self-inflicted physical pain. While, in this work Schwensen did subject himself to cruel and invasive devices, these were derived from no more than an amplification of some rather ordinary rituals of dull, domestic pleasure.

When I visited the work again on the final day of the Commonwealth Games, the scene was considerably different. Schwensen had destroyed himself. He was raving, and estimated about 400 visitors—all of them wanting to talk with him, had visited the work. He had documented all the ads too, remarking upon the frequency with which Victoria advertised itself as the 'Home of World Class Performances'. On the walls were a number of beautifully constructed gaffer tape works—one slogan inspired by Samuel Beckett read 'fail again, fail better', which referred to the artist's disgust with the petulance of the Australian swimming team. Schwensen spoke with dismay about the general lack of sportsmanship surrounding the event. On another wall were the names of countries: Scotland, Jamaica, Kenya, Wales, Uganda, Kenya, England. These were the only other countries apart from Australia to have their anthems played. Despite victories, India, New Zealand and Canada failed to have their anthems played at all. The artist also spoke of the levels of deluded significance that are attached to such sporting events, of the ephemeral nature of world records. But his greatest disgust stemmed from the way that a comprehensive arts festival had been tacked on to this major sporting



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notes :

1. Lea Vergine, *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language*, Skira, Milan. 2000, p.144.
2. Conversation with the artist, March 2006.

event seemingly as an afterthought. He saw this as a bold affirmation of our culture's persistent elevation of sport above art.

Bernard Smith famously remarked that if Australians paid as much attention to art as they do to sport, then we would surely be in the midst of a great Renaissance. Schwensen's work extends this point beautifully. The pleasure of watching sporting events is in itself, a flimsy thing: something that when coupled with base displays of national pride becomes a source of disgust. After such a heroic effort, we should laud Schwensen as the 'martyr to the mundane'.

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