Jill Orr

Performance Documentation 1978-1988
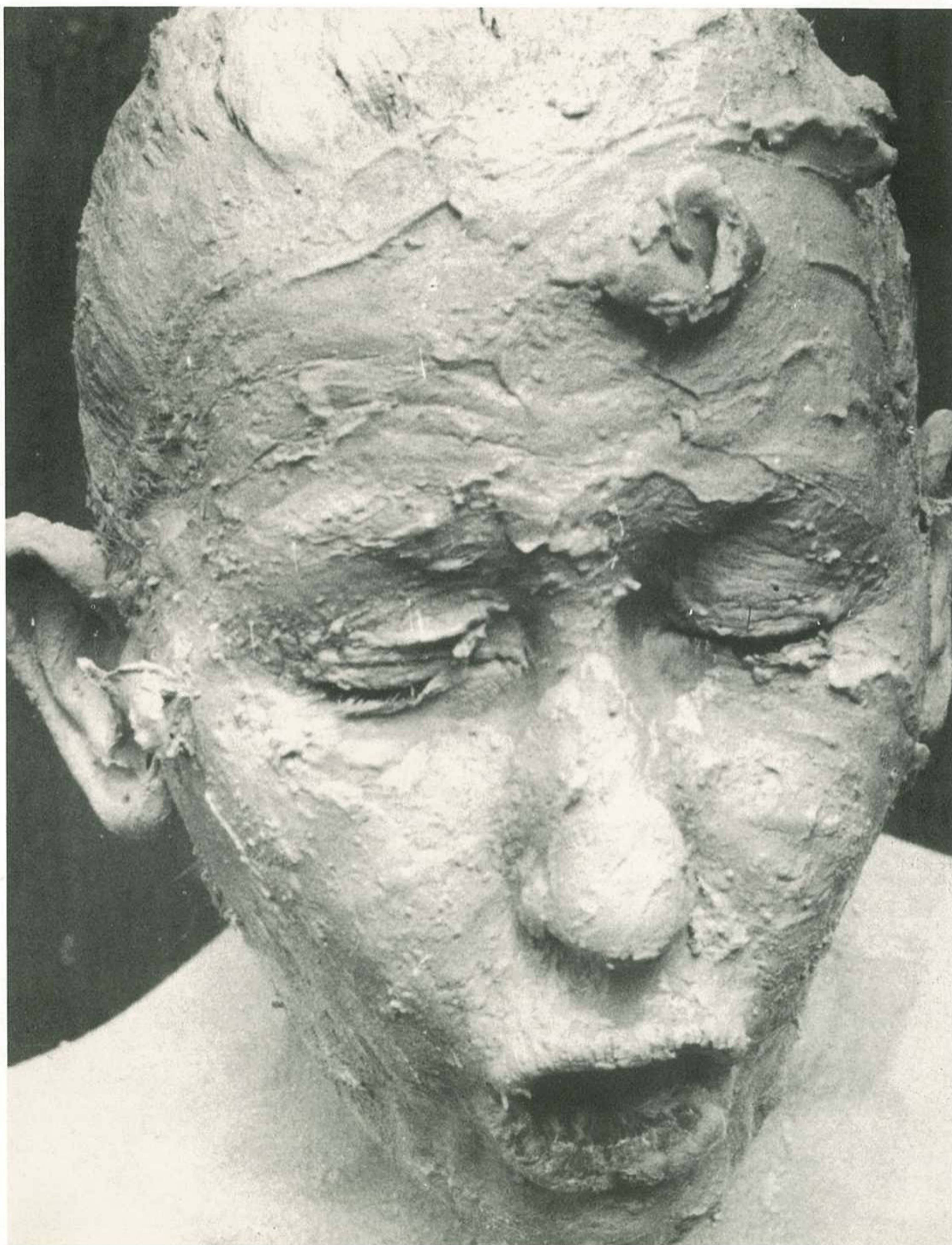
Split/Fragile Relationships, 1980 (photo: Elizabeth Campbell)

ACCA

THE 'I' IN THE GAZE:

aspects of the body and the self in performance works by Jill Orr

The desire for maximum growth requires the removal of obstacles and, in the human condition, this obstacle is fear ... In recognizing the state of fear, the actions of confrontation, understanding and 'letting go' are necessary. The resulting image of these actions is an 'opening', through which fear can pass.[1]

Jill Orr began work as a performance artist in 1976, her most prolific production occurred between 1978 and 1982; in the late 80s Orr also exhibits as a painter. Orr's work is representative of a generation, young in the 70s, sceptical of scientific progress, rationality and the atrocities performed in the name of culture. Living amidst a crisis of identity in the Western world, in the wake of a defeated 60s optimism, many artists turned to work on the self. The inward turn was a continuum of the sentiments expressed by the counter-culture of the 60s. Alternative therapies and an explosion of Eastern religions in the West were wider ramifications of a new humanism, acclaimed as a kind of psychic power against the exploitations of capital.[2]

The new humanism in art was part of a reaction against a cool and detached modernism; a resistance which represents one aspect of a post-modern shift in the 1970s. Critics have distinguished between 'types' of post-modernism: Robert Stern argues that there are two major streams; a post-modernism that breaks with the modernist tradition in order to reinscribe humanism, and a post-modernism that breaks with Western humanism to build onto the concept of negative commitment initially evident in the modernist notion of an avant-garde.[3] Hal Foster also outlines two streams: a post-modernism of 'resistance' and a post-modernism of 'reaction'.[4] According to Foster the reactive mode relies on a formalist interpretation of modernism which it reacts against in order to reposition narrative, ornament and figuration.[5] A post-modernism of reaction corresponds to Stern's reading of a post-modernism that returns to history: the humanist tradition and the centred subject of the artist. However, Foster prefers the resistant mode which he describes as a post-structuralist reading of post-modernism, where the reader encounters a 'profoundly antihumanist' critique which analyses representation itself.[6] Jill Orr's work which centres the spectator's gaze on the body of the artist represents a humanist reading of post-modernism.[7]

Body art represents a crisis of identity in emotive terms. It describes, often with an acute anxiety, an alienated individual within an automated and unsympathetic world. Irrationalism, intuition, madness and individual experience are argued to be the last stand against an impending rational order. The body artist aims to heal the Cartesian split between mind and body by focusing on emotion: fear, anxiety, desperation. Pain is a recurring theme. In body art the gap between art and life is bridged by the use of the body as object, representative of the position of the self in the world. The individual experience of the artist is descriptive of the human condition: an existential

subject lost in the world. The body artist addresses an audience desensitized by the electronic media and hopes to strike an empathy between artist and audience.

Jean-Francois Lyotard has noted that: "The idea of performance ... seems linked to the idea of inscription on the body".[8] Although this idea appears contentious if one considers the wide range of work produced under the umbrella title of 'performance art', it is pertinent in relation to the works of the body artist. The question of identity, which is intimately connected to the formation of the ego and the body image, is evident in all works where the body is represented as an object.

Jacques Lacan describes the formation of the ego as an Ideal unity, an Imaginary construct, in his famous essay on the mirror stage.[9] In Lacan's thesis the child looks into the mirror and a unified image is reflected back to the self; this image is contrary to the unco-ordinated state of the infant who has yet to master control over the body. The infant anticipates a unity and then retroactively perceives his/her inadequacy.[10] A split emerges at the formation of the ego where the subject is both fascinated by its self-image and alienated from it. Lacan argues that: "I is an Other"[11] and outlines the way in which "...the self becomes a subject with an identity by means of its relationship to a symbolic code".[12] This code is not transparent or disinterested since it actively shapes the interhuman; it is a cultural code operating in the unconscious.[13] As Juliet MacCannell notes the subjective nature of the Other is hidden since the Other is "...an inverse mirror-image of the narcissistic ego ideal".[14]

The role of the gaze, or the scopic drive, in the formation of identity is clearly outlined in the metaphor of the mirror. Spectacle plays a significant part in its relationship with the gaze. The self seeing the self being seen constitutes a spectacle. Following Merleau-Ponty, Lacan points out "...that we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world".[15] The concepts of the Other, the gaze and spectacle are played out in Jill Orr's work without analysis. The self seeing the self, in photo-documentation of her own body image, is presented to the gaze of the Other and the body becomes a spectacle. The idea that the unconscious is structured like a language[16] does not enter into Jill Orr's idea of the work, however, the unconscious nature of the cultural code infiltrates her performance.

Jill Orr insists that most of the performance works documented in this exhibition were not designed to address the position of woman. Orr maintains an ecological concern, one which links the body to nature. However, this concern can be exploited: the artist's use of her own body is literally representative of the female form. A dualism between woman/nature, man/culture is extended: the works are descriptive of conventional myths. In *Bleeding Trees* (1979) a mute and victimized body, strung-up crucifixion style, conjures images of an open wound. The passive, living body is the focus

Notes

1. Orr, J., artist's statement in ACT 3 Ten Australian Performance Artists, exh. cat., Canberra School of Art Gallery, A.C.T. 1982, loose-leaf folder, no pagination.
2. See Roszak, T., The Making of a Counter Culture, Faber and Faber, London, 1970, pp.124-154.
3. Stern, R.A.M., "The Doubles of Post-Modern", in P.H. Werhan (ed) Philosophical Issues in Art, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1984, pp.116-123 (first published in The Harvard Architecture Review, No. 1, 1980.
4. Foster, H., "Postmodernism: A Preface", in H. Foster (ed), Postmodern Culture, Pluto, London, 1985, p.xxi (first published as The Anti-Aesthetic, Bay Press, 1983).
5. Foster, H., "(Post)Modern Polemics" in H. Foster Recodings Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics, Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1985, p.121 (first published in the New German Critique, 33, Fall 1984 and Perspecta, 21, 1984).
6. ibid.
7. I have only outlined the two major streams of post-modernism here and have not considered irony, appropriation or allegory as post-modern strategies; arguably, these positions and others blur distinctions between types, however, they are not relevant to a discussion of Orr's work. See Owens, C. "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmoderns", October, 13, Summer 1980 and Crimp, D. "Pictures", October 8, Spring 1979. Both authors consider performance in their essays.
8. Lyotard, J.-F., 'The Unconscious as Mise-en-scène' in M. Benamou and C. Caramello (eds), Performance, Coda Press, Madison, 1978, p.88.
9. Lacan, J., "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience" (1949) in Écrits: A Selection (trans. A. Sheridan), Norton & Co, New York & London, 1977, pp.1-7 (first published in French 1966).
10. Gallop, J., Reading Lacan, Cornell University Press, Ithaca & London, 1985, p.85.
11. Lacan, J., "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis" (1948) in Écrits: A Selection p.23.
12. MacCannell, J.F., Figuring Lacan: Criticism and the Cultural Unconscious, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1986, p.61.
13. ibid., p.60.
14. ibid., p.69.
15. Lacan, J., The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis, (trans. A. Sheridan, ed. J-A Miller), Penguin, 1979, p.75. (first published as Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, 1973, first published in English by Hogarth, 1977).
16. The idea that the unconscious is structured like a language is fundamental to Lacanian psychoanalysis, ibid., p.203.
17. In this performance Jill Orr had initially decided to pierce her tongue with a needle, however, she decided against this action on medical advice. The simulated piercing involved biting on a capsule of blood that had been drawn from her arm before the performance.
18. Psychoanalysis has been described as the 'talking cure' by Colin MacCabe in his book The Talking Cure: Essays in Psychoanalysis and Language, Macmillan, London, 1981, See also Kristeva, J., "Within the Microcosm of 'The Talking Cure'", in J.H. Smith & W. Kerrigan (eds), Interpeting Lacan, Psychiatry and the Humanities, Vol. 6., Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1983, pp.33-48.
19. See Eagle, M., "Shrill rites and quiet reflection", The Age, November 14th, 1979, p.14. Eagle described Orr's performances as "...shrill rites of passage..."
20. Excerpts from the script, courtesy of the artist.
21. Ibid.
22. Jill Orr, taped interview, 24th June 1987.
23. Ibid.
24. For an analysis of the role of the camera as mirror see Krauss, R., "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism", and Marshall, S., "Video Art, the Imaginary and the Parole Vide"; both reprinted in G. Battcock (ed), New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology, Dutton, New York, 1978, pp.43-64 and pp.103-120. For a discussion of the role of the camera as mirror in performance art documentation see Phipps, J., "Films by Artists", Art and Australia, 18/1, September, 1980, especially the reference to the works of Mike Parr, pp.46-48.
25. Fineberg, J., citing a conversation with Mike Parr, in "A Critical Examination of the Artists' Current Work from an International Perspective", in An Australian Accent, exh. cat., PS1, New York, 1984, p.6.
26. Jill Orr, taped interview, 24th June, 1987.
27. Burgin, V., The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity, Macmillan, London, 1986, p.49.
28. See Althusser, L., "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in Lenin and Philosophy and other essays (trans. B. Brewster), Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971, p.176, his emphasis. For a psychoanalytic reading see Lacan, J., "A Love Letter", in J. Mitchell & J. Rose (eds), Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne (trans. J. Rose), Macmillan, London, 1982, pp.149-161. See also Lacan, J., "The agency of the letter in the unconscious or reason since Freud", in Écrits: A Selection, pp.146-178.
29. Vergine, L., Il Corpo come Linguaggio (La "Body-art" e storie simili), Giampaola Prearo Editore, Milan, 1974, p.3.
30. Lindsay, R. Relics and Rituals, exh. cat., NGV, 1981, p.1; reprinted in P. Taylor (ed), Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980, Art & Text, Melbourne, 1984, p.108. The artists included in the exhibition were: Tom Arthur, Warren Breninger, Peter Cole, Peter Cripps, John Davis, Kevin Mortensen, Jill Orr, Ewa Pachucka, Mike Parr, David Ryan, Stelarc, Peter Taylor, Stephen Turpie, Ken Unsworth, and Hossein Valamanesh.
31. Jill Orr, taped interview, 24th June, 1987.

List of Works

1. *Response*

1978: presented at the Seventh Mildura Sculpture Triennial
photographer unknown, (3 photographs)

2. *Lunch with the Birds*

1979: St Kilda Beach, Melbourne
photographer: Elizabeth Campbell
on loan from Jill Perry, (8 photographs)

3. *Bleeding Trees*

1979: presented at *European Dialogue*, Biennale of Sydney; Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; Biennale de Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris
photographer: Elizabeth Campbell, (6 photographs)

4. *Pain Melts I*

1979: Melbourne
photographer: Elizabeth Campbell
on loan from Jill Perry, (8 photographs)

5. *Split/Fragile Relationships*

1980: presented for the *Women at Work* Performance Festival, Ewing & George Paton Gallery, Melbourne
photographer: Elizabeth Campbell
assembled by Jill Orr, (2 photographs)

6. *She had Long Golden Hair*

1980: Adelaide Festival of the Arts, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide
photographer: Elizabeth Campbell, (4 photographs)

7. *Do You Speak?*

1980: presented at the *Mixage* International Performances, Installaties & Expanded Cinema, Rotterdam, Utrecht and Breda, Holland
Mixage photographer, (5 photographs)

8. *Headed South*

1981: presented at *Salon O*, Leiden, Holland
photographer: Celia Erins, (2 photographs)

9. *The Digging In and the Climbing Out*

1982: presented at *ACT 3 – Ten Australian Performance Artists*, Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra
photograph 1: Julie Higginbotham
photographs 2–4: *ACT 3* photographer, (4 photographs)

10. *Beasts Down Memory Lane*

1987: presented at *Evenings without Andy Warhol*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne; *Women's Season* at Arena Theatre, Spoleto Fringe Festival, Melbourne; Mildura Arts Centre
photographer: Virginia Fraser
art work: Jill Orr, (4 photographs)

11. *Walking on Planet Earth*

1988/89: Clifton Hill, Melbourne
photographer: Virginia Fraser, (6 photographs)

of the gaze, not the dead tree. A castrated body, head buried in the earth, the mouth an opening through which fear can pass. In one of the photographs of *Do You Speak?* (1980) the artist stands in a white shroud, naked from the waist up. In an action which simulates the piercing of her tongue the subject silences herself by inflicting an injury.[17] A phrenetic dirge, created by Orr's voice, repeats in thirty-two different languages: "Do you speak?, Milate Eiinika?, Parlate Italiano?, Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" There is no site for a talking cure in Jill Orr's prognosis.[18] Blood trickles from the muteness of the wound; the unconscious is a dark and secretive place, the artist provides rite of passage.[19]
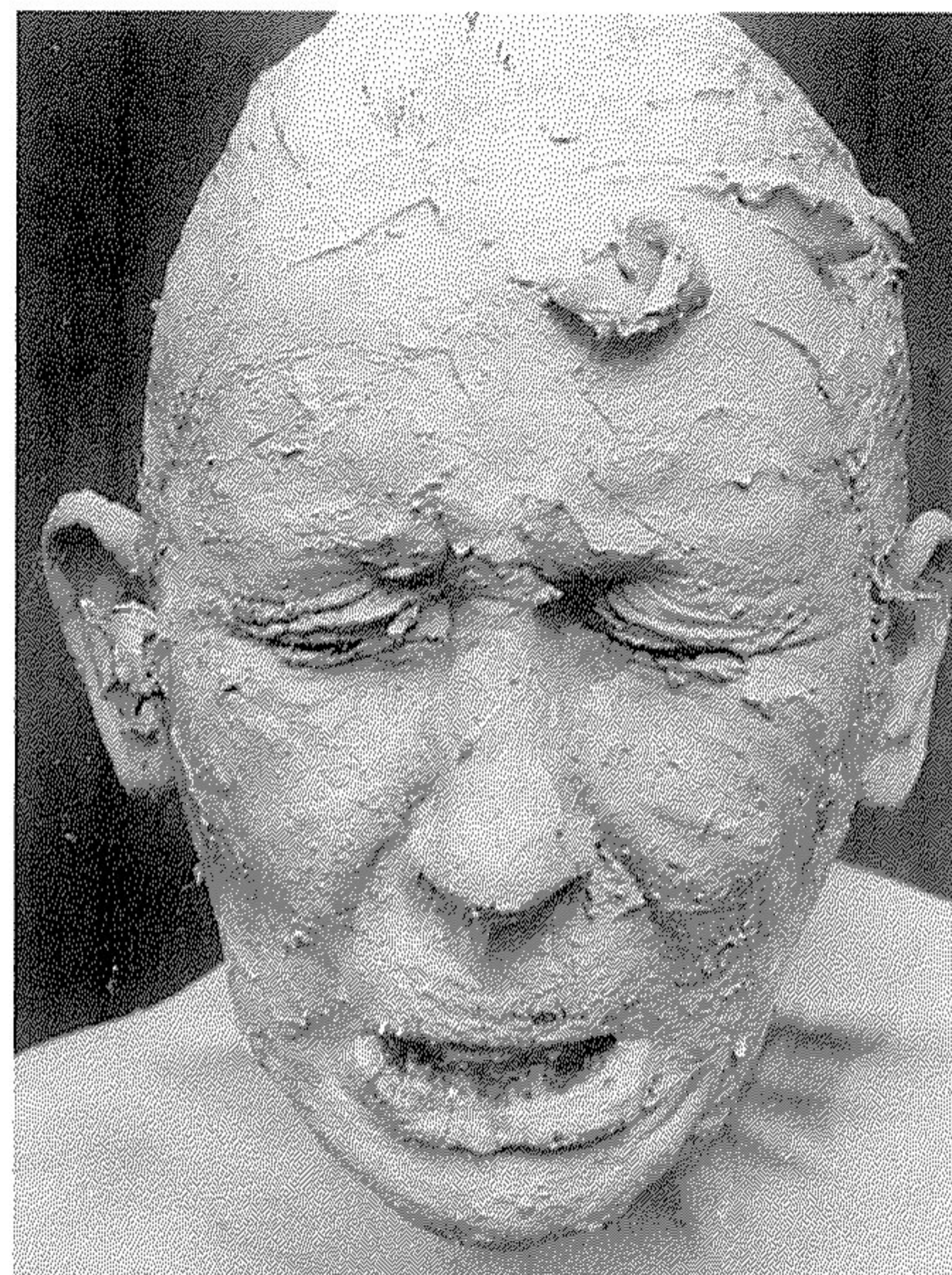
Split/Fragile Relationships, 1980 (photo: Elizabeth Campbell)

Lunch with the Birds, presented for the seagulls on St Kilda Beach in 1979, focuses our attention on the cultivated image of woman. Dressed in white, the figure of woman, the virgin bride, is mythologized. Loaves and small fish cover her body, a flock of birds approach the figure: woman is a vessel, a myth to feed from. In *She had Long Golden Hair* (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, mole, dyke..."[20] 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 the like. The hair was represented as fetish, members of the audience approached the artist and each cut a strand of hair close to the head. The loss of the long golden hair may have been a liberating event, designed as a rejection of established sexual codes. However, any hope for changing the behaviour towards the fetish object was silenced by the sharp, clear voice of a woman saying: "It will be the same

again. Things have not changed. It will be the same again".[21] Lamenting the loss of the gaze of the Other, liberation became a kind of inverted punishment.

Ritual practices are evoked in all the performance works. The use of fire, earth and water, juxtaposed with images of sacrifice and endurance permeate the performances. Danger was a real element in *Split/Fragile Relationships* (1980) where a large pane of glass was shattered to create a ground upon which the performer moved. In *Suspension* (1981) the artist was dunked in the harbour, witch-style, before being raised sixty foot in the air. *Pain Melts* (1979) and *Headed South* (1981) also represent the body at the mercy of a constructed balance.

Jill Orr's images are gestalts she has imagined, glimpses of preconscious thoughts. She says that: "There is a structure set up so that me, this body, can just be simply a vehicle of energy that can go uninterfered with".[22] The artist refers to 'gut reactions' and 'exorcisms of fear'[23] – the performances are cathartic actions: ways of expressing private horrors. Placed in the public site of the artworld the performances become images to be deciphered by an audience.

Orr's work is not a feminist analysis of woman's position in the world, however, the use of her own body underlines the issue of the female body: the sexed subject. In many ways the horror involved in this description of the sexed body is an anathema for feminism. In *Bleeding Trees* the artist offers-up her body to the gaze of the Other as evidence of the terror lurking behind our pleasure.

This exhibition is not an exhibition of performance art: it is an exhibition of photographs presented as evidence of past events. It is a collaborative exhibition, one presented by Jill Orr and the photographers. Elizabeth Campbell is a professional photographer and in this exhibition her work captures the attention of the viewing public. *Pain Melts, Lunch with the Birds, She had Long Golden Hair* and *Bleeding Trees* clearly show the empathy between artist and photographer: Campbell shares Orr's preference for the dramatic moment. The collaborative element evident in the documentation was enhanced by Orr's preferred method for recording events. Photographic sessions were often held before or after performances were presented in front of a live audience. In the most recent work *Walking on Planet Earth* (1989) Orr has dispensed with the live audience. The photographer, Virginia Fraser, reproduces the event for the public: *Walking on Planet Earth* is a performance for the camera.

The visitor to this exhibition is not necessarily viewing documentation of the performance event itself. In some instances the viewer is confronted by a carefully controlled process staged for the camera. Undoubtedly, this process creates clear pictures: compare Campbell's work to the series of photographs taken in-situ by the photographer employed to record events at *ACT 3*. The process of the event is more easily read by the viewer in *The Digging In and the Climbing Out* (1982), where the figure is blurred, motion is captured on film and the various stages of the performance can be seen. The relationship of the body to the eye of the camera is compounded in a private session by the one-to-one relationship between artist and photographer. The camera acts like a mirror, the artist performs for an Imaginary Other and a narcissistic relationship is intensified in the process.[24]

Although the closed-circuit system of the video feedback
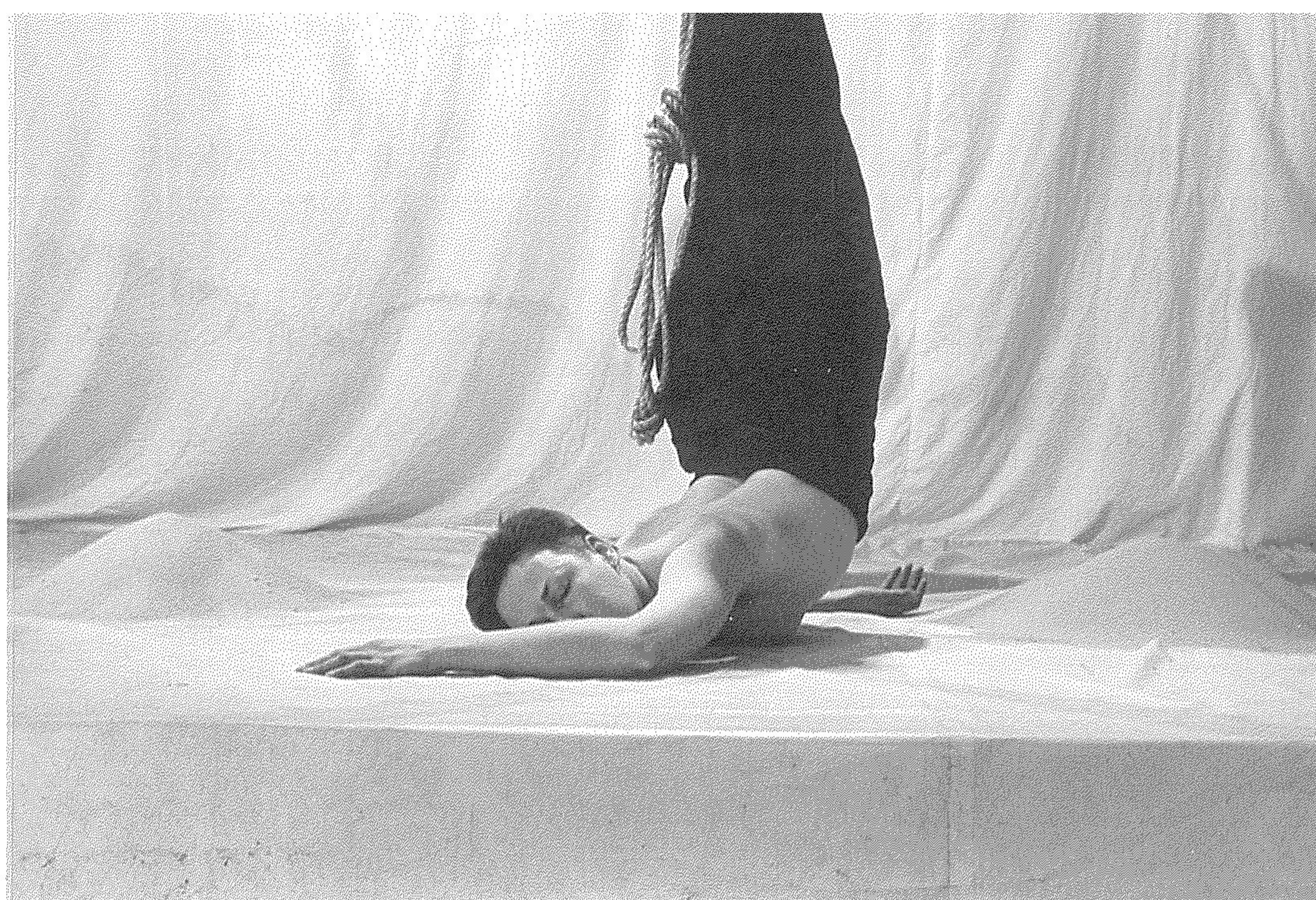
Headed South, 1982 (photo: Celia Erins)

loop employed by some performance artists is arguably a more obvious construction of the self seeing the self, such a relationship also exists in still photography of the body. The artist must create the pose and then select the images for exhibition. Mike Parr, another Australian performance artist, has spoken about this relationship explaining how "...he would reject certain photographs of himself because they had some quality that disturbed him".[25]

Documentation of body art where the body is framed by the camera, presents a centralized image. In Jill Orr's terms, the artist is creating a 'moment'; she argues that the closer she can come to her imagined 'gut reaction', the more powerful the image presented for the audience.[26] The body is an immediate vehicle for expression in Orr's work and she does not attempt to question the cultural construction of the body. Instead, she seeks to find a transparent, corporeal language which may be universalized and extended to the experience of the audience. Orr seeks a place outside language where images speak for themselves, beyond interpretation. In the late 80s, amidst a sophisticated theoretical language concerning culture, such a space has been contested: indeed, it may be an impossibility, an Imaginary void which does not exist. Victor Burgin argues that the post-modern subject is an "...effect of language, a precipitate of the very symbolic order of which the humanist subject supposed itself to be master".[27] Following Burgin's theory, there can be no 'outside' from which to speak. The subject is a social construct: in Althusser's thesis *"individuals are always-already subjects"*,[28] even before birth the subject is sexed.

Body art, with its preference for spectacle and presence in the aura of the artist, represented both a rupture and a continuum. The rupture was short-lived: body art emerged at a time when subjective identity was perceived as a possible site for truth, an experiential difference. It was argued that if identity was centred the self might seek transcendence. Ultimately this was an escape route from the material world, a utopian space. The continuum represented by body art is a humanist lineage, one rediscovered as a reaction against modernism. The Italian critic Lea Vergine, one of Europe's most enthusiastic supporters of body art, described body-centred performance as a new expressionism in 1974.[29] In 1981 Robert Lindsay curated *Relics and Rituals* at the National Gallery of Victoria. Lindsay argued that a return to narrative and personal myth-making had "...created a new expressive Romanticism".[30] Robert Lindsay was one of the first Australian curators to suggest a comparison between body art and neo-expressionist painting in the early 80s. In Jill Orr's work the link between body art and the more recent paintings is made explicit. In the words of the artist:

Painting can be a very private affair... I use a similar principle in painting as in performance..... it's not unlike dance movement... I paint best when I'm totally fast and dynamic... In that sense it's the same as movement. I rarely use brushes... I mostly do it with my hands. I try to keep as direct as I can, which is the same, in that sense, as my aim for myself in performance.[31]

Anne Marsh,
January, 1989.

JILL ORR

Born Melbourne 1952

Education

1970-75	Melbourne College of Advanced Education
1976-78	Study of Dance:
	Mildura Ballet Guild
	Ron Bekker Dance Company
	Lyn Golding
	Aleda Belair
1981-84	Study of Yoga: Anke Ten Hopten, Amsterdam
1986-87	Oki Yoga, Melbourne

Selected Group Exhibitions

1978 Seventh Mildura Triennial, Mildura: performance/earthwork La Trobe University Union Arts Festival, Melbourne: performance. *The Map Show* Ewing & George Paton Gallery, Melbourne: performance. *A.C.T. 1* Canberra: performance.

1979 *European Dialogue*, Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney: performance.

1980 *Women at Work* Performance Festival, Ewing & George Paton Gallery, Melbourne: performance. Biennale de Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris: performance *Mixage* International Performances, Installaties & Expanded Cinema, Utrecht, Rotterdam, Breda, Holland: performance. Adelaide Festival of The Arts, Experimental Art Foundation: performance.

1982 *Eureka – Artists from Australia* Institute of Contemporary Art, London: performance, documentation/performance Gallerie Theeboom, Amsterdam: painting. *ACT 3 – Ten Australian Performance Artists* Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra: performance/earthwork.

1983 *Continuum '83* Tokyo: performance documentation.

1987 *Evenings without Andy Warhol* Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne: performance. *Women's Season at Arena Theatre* Spoleto Fringe Festival, Melbourne: performance.

1988 *Australian Painters* 312 Lennox St., Richmond, Melbourne: painting.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

1978 Ewing & George Paton Gallery, Melbourne: performance/installation Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane: performance/installation

1979 Art Projects, Melbourne: installation and performance Photographic Documentation of *Lunch with the Birds* and *Pain Melts I*, Darwin College of Advanced Education.

1981 *Salon 0* Leiden, Holland: performance. *Suspension*, presented with seafaring cranes on harbour front, Amsterdam; in association with the Video Bank, Amsterdam: performance. Vrouw Centrum, B.B.K., Amsterdam: performance.

1982 Iceberg Gallery, Melbourne: painting

1983 Gallerie Theeboom, Amsterdam: painting

1984 Women's Art Movement, Adelaide: painting

1985 *Works on Paper* Christine Abrahams Gallery, Melbourne: painting The Performance Space, Sydney: painting

1986 Reconnaissance Gallery, Melbourne: performance

1987 312 Lennox St., Richmond, Melbourne: painting Mildura Arts Centre: performance

Collections

National Gallery of Victoria
Private collection in Australia, Holland, England and Germany

Grants

1979	Travel grant, Visual Arts Board, Australia Council.
1980	Invitation to the Paris Biennale, funded by Australia Council.
1986	Painting trip to Alice Springs, Victorian Ministry for the Arts.
1987	Pre-production costs for research, funded by the Performing Arts Board, Australia Council.

Artist in Residence

1978	Tasmanian College of Advanced Education
1978	Darwin College of Advanced Education
1983	Vrouw Centrum, Amsterdam
1984	Kunstlaar House, Germany
1984	Melkweg – slide performance, Amsterdam
1985	Women's Art Movement, Adelaide
1986	Artist-in-Schools, Exhibition High School, Melbourne

Publications

Lip no. 1, 1978-79, pp.10-11, *Map of Transition*, photographs and poem by the artist.

Experimental Art Foundation Performance Week, Experimental Art Foundation, March 1980.

Art Network, no. 2, Spring 1980, p.43, anonymous.

Women at Work, Ewing & George Paton Gallery, Melbourne 1980, p.30, photographs and poem by the artist.

Robert Lindsay, *Relics and Rituals*, exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1981; reprinted in Taylor, P. (ed) *Anything Goes: Art in Australia 1970-1980*, Art & Text, Melbourne 1984, pp.108-115.

Kent, J. & Marsh A. (eds) *Live Art: Australia and America*, self published, Adelaide 1984. *The Digging In and the Climbing Out* photograph by the artist, p.91.

Marsh, A. "The Interception of Performance Art and Feminisim in the 1970s" *Agenda* No. 2, August 1980, Special Supplement, pp.10-12.