
Spectacle, Community and Memory in the Performance Art of Brown Council

In October 2013, Australian art magazines and online art forums were excitedly promoting the forthcoming film installation by Sydney-based performance art collective Brown Council entitled *This is Barbara Cleveland*. According to the promotional material, the film would pay tribute to the life and work of the enigmatic feminist performance artist Barbara Cleveland who had worked ‘predominantly in Sydney in the 1970s and up until her untimely death in 1981’ (Brown Council, 2014). In published interviews and on their website, Brown Council lamented that ‘despite her significant output of work, Cleveland remains largely unknown in the canon of performance art internationally’ (ibid). They supplied a range of possible reasons as to why she had been excluded from historical documentation, including the socio-historic context of performance art and its emphasis upon the ‘dematerialisation’ of the art object, the ephemeral nature of the genre and its resistance to documentation, and most significantly, the lack of institutional interest in women’s work.

At the time the promotional material was released, the members of Brown Council were on a four-month pilgrimage around Europe and America, retracing the steps of Barbara Cleveland, who, according to Brown Council, had travelled extensively in the 1970s to engage with international practitioners and to perform at international galleries and performance spaces. They claimed to be travelling to the cities and sites where she had lived and worked, ‘exhuming her memory in an attempt to reinsert her into the history of performance art’ (ibid). I was struck by the

fact that four young women were going to such extraordinary lengths to bring a forgotten feminist artist back into public memory. I was also somewhat alarmed that as a researcher in the field of Australian feminist performance I had never heard of Barbara Cleveland.

I (like others perhaps) immediately googled Barbara Cleveland, which merely led me in a circle back to Brown Council. There seemed to be no record of her existence. For a brief moment I reflected upon how typical it is that an important feminist artist in Australian performance history has been so systematically erased from public memory. I thought of all the other female artists, writers and performers who have received so little recognition compared to their male counterparts and of my own research into feminist performance art as a student and my frustration at finding so little documentation. A single book, Anne Marsh's important study *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1962–1992*, published in 1993, is still to date the only manuscript that documents Australian female performance artists.

I soon realised that Barbara Cleveland is a fictive figure, an imaginative creation of the collective minds of Brown Council. With their initials that mirror one another, Barbara Cleveland *is* Brown Council. This is gestured to in the promotional image that appeared on the cover of the Australian arts magazine *RealTime* in which four female figures stand with their backs to the camera wearing identical brown wigs, blue jeans and white T-shirts, each posing as the elusive and faceless Barbara Cleveland. Through their extensive backstory and collection of fictional archival materials that provide a fragmented yet detailed documentation of the mythic Barbara Cleveland, Brown Council have created an elaborate hoax. However, the non-existence of Barbara Cleveland is somewhat immaterial since (in my case at least), by the point one becomes aware of the deception, the project's aim to raise questions regarding the absence of female artists from history and memory has already been achieved. This intent is further developed within the film installation itself, to be examined later in this chapter.

This is Barbara Cleveland (2013) was the first work in Brown Council's ongoing project 'Remembering Barbara Cleveland'. In 2016, under the company title 'BC Institute' the artists have continued to engage with the mythical feminist performance artist Barbara Cleveland as a platform to examine 'how feminist methodologies and alternative historiographical approaches can be used to reimagine past acts and events in the here-and-now' (BC Institute, 2016a). In recent projects such as *Making History*

(2016), developed for the 20th Biennale of Sydney, the artists have created participatory performances, re-enactments and lectures, employing queer and feminist methodologies to explore how history is constructed through a multiplicity of perspectives (Woolf, 2016).

The Barbara Cleveland projects from 2013 to 2016 are a continuation of Brown Council's longstanding interest in interrogating the role of the artist and the function of performance as a form of social and cultural critique, especially as it relates to gender and feminism. In each of their live performance and video works, created from 2005 to the present, Brown Council engage with the thematic and formal characteristics associated with feminist performance art, referencing and re-enacting performance art practices of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Their performances retain key political concerns of second-wave feminism, including the need for communality and collaboration between women and a rejection of the female body as an object of visual pleasure. However, they also reframe the discourses of earlier feminist performance art, using postmodern techniques. By parodying the earnest and polemical nature of second-wave feminist performance art, Brown Council simultaneously reveal the generational conflict and difference within contemporary feminisms *and* attest to the importance of establishing intergenerational dialogue and points of connection.

Brown Council's work reflects a queer approach to gender politics, in the broader understanding of queer, through its focus on unfixed, ambiguous and indeterminate states and identities. The artists' engagement with a queer methodology 'queers' feminism, countering the tendency towards essentialism in some feminist formulations. The members of Brown Council explain that for them 'queer is a provocation, a rupture, a fragility, a shadowing, a negation, a hope, an intimacy', and note that queer practitioners and theorists such as Emily Roysdon, Sharon Hayes, Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz, Jack/Judith Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz have had a great influence on their creative practice (BC Institute, 2016b). In the performances examined in this chapter, Brown Council invite multiple interpretations and employ a level of ambiguity that is in line with a queer framework. As with all of the artists examined in this book, Brown Council also amalgamate humour with politics using comedy as a genre with which to develop a feminist and queer critique.

This chapter will first introduce Brown Council's artistic practice and establish their position within Australia's performance and contemporary art scene before examining their first collaborative live performance and

subsequent video entitled *Milksbake* (2007). This performance illustrates Brown Council's feminist beginnings and introduces aesthetic concerns that are developed with greater complexity in their later work. The chapter then turns to a close analysis of three of Brown Council's works: *Performance Fee* (2012), *Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours* (2012), and *This is Barbara Cleveland* (2013). My analysis locates each of these works within the tradition of feminist performance art and examines the ways in which they reconfigure this genre via a postmodern aesthetic and a contemporary feminist and queer approach. The three works interrogate three distinct thematic concepts, respectively, that are central to feminist performance art: spectacle, community and memory. They also illustrate the group's ongoing interest in endurance-based performance, their aim to question the role of the artist and the spectator, and their challenge to established definitions of art.

BROWN COUNCIL AND THE INTERSECTION OF PERFORMANCE AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Brown Council are four young female artists, Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith, who met while studying at the College of Fine Arts at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. Since 2005, they have created collaborative performances across a range of genres and art forms including live performance, video art and gallery installation. Their work in some ways departs from that of the other companies and performers examined in this book, which is more clearly located within Australia's theatre scene. Brown Council's work is situated at the intersection of performance and contemporary art. While they characterise all of their work as performance, it is only occasionally presented in traditional theatre spaces. More often, their works are presented in galleries, site-specific locations and in video documentation that is specifically created for the filmic medium. Brown Council's practice reflects the growing engagement with performance in Australia's contemporary art scene, which is also evident in the work of artists such as Julie Rrap, Brian Fuata, Justin Shoulder and Parachutes for Ladies, who have all created performances within a contemporary art context. Each of these artists also works with the themes of sexuality and gender and I suggest that these themes are frequently central to work created within the performance/contemporary art crossover.

The rising presence of performance art in gallery spaces and multimedia outputs is reflective of the performative turn in the visual arts that has been gaining momentum internationally over the past half-century. This trend encompasses both the presence of live performance in contemporary art as well as the use of performative strategies and concepts in visual arts practice. This performative trend was identified by Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson in their 1999 book *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*. Borrowing terms and concepts from theatre studies, Jones and Stephenson argued that visual arts practices since the 1960s have consistently engaged with notions of theatricality and therefore require a critical methodology that gives focus to the performative qualities of art production and reception (1999: 1). This performative trend has been boosted in recent years by the increased accessibility and availability of digital technologies, allowing for performance to be recorded, mediated and exhibited in both online and gallery settings.

Conversely, much recent independent theatre practice in Australia conveys a growing interest in integrating elements from the visual arts, filmmaking and digital media, complicating a clear-cut separation between distinct art forms. For example, the theatrical performances of The Rabble, to be examined in Chapter 7, employ installation, film, sound recordings, photography and sculpture in their creation of a rich visual language. Such trends in Australian performance are consistent with the innovative approaches to contemporary theatre taking place globally in the work of theatre companies as diverse as The Wooster Group (USA), Dumb Type (Japan) and the Societas Raffaello Sanzio (Italy), who all integrate the bodily presence of the performer with non-verbal languages and multimedia technologies. As Rosemary Klich and Edward Scheer argue, an 'aesthetic evolution' has taken place in contemporary performance through the prevalent use of new audio-visual and information technologies in the theatre (2012: 1). The theatre world and visual arts world are therefore becoming increasingly intertwined.

The cross-disciplinary integration of contemporary art and performance practice has contributed to a resurgence of interest in performance art in Australia in recent years. In a discussion on the RRR community radio show *Smart Arts*, presenter Emily Sexton suggested that the prevalence of performance art was the dominant cultural trend in Australia in 2013 and questioned the reasons for this 'massive pull towards performance art' (January 2, 2014). There is no doubt a multitude of reasons for this 'pull', including the increased interest and funding invested in performance art

from Australian contemporary art galleries and institutions. However, I suggest that this trend may also be related to the recent preoccupation with sexuality and gender politics in Australian performance, since performance art has long been a privileged site for the exploration of feminist and queer themes and political ideas.

The relationship between feminism and performance art is characterised by a series of interconnected political, social and aesthetic concerns. Firstly, the presence, liveness and immediacy of performance art as a theatrical medium makes it a potentially effective forum for political activism that appeals to many feminist artists. In the 1970s, the practices of performance art and political protest were frequently interconnected, and this emphasis upon performance as a mode of feminist activism has re-emerged in recent years, as demonstrated by the protest performances of Pussy Riot, among others. The second key point of convergence is the centrality of the body to both feminism and performance art, and more specifically, a shared interest in the gendered and sexed body as a biological and social entity. As Katherine Meynell argues, the 'refusal [of performance art] to sidestep the gendered body, or to mediate its presence with more formal conventions, gives these performance traditions a powerful vested interest for women' (1998: 11). The other important issue that cannot be sidestepped within performance art is the function of the gaze. Whether the artist chooses to exploit, control, manipulate, return, refute or deny the gaze, there is of necessity some form of visual dynamic created between performer and spectator that can be utilised by feminist artists towards various political (or apolitical) outcomes. Issues relating to the gaze, visibility politics and spectacle in feminist performance art will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Another significant historical overlap between performance art and feminism is a common interest in autobiography. Motivated by the second-wave conviction that 'the personal is political', feminist performance art of the 1970s and beyond frequently mobilised personal stories to address political issues. In this regard, recent feminist performance art exhibits a notably different agenda and reflects the poststructuralist view that the subject is unstable, permeable and historically constituted by discourse and culture. While Brown Council often position themselves in their personae as 'artists' at the centre of their work, there is no sense of personal revelation or autobiographical authenticity. Rather, like all the works examined in this book, the individual and the artist are portrayed as social and cultural constructs.

Contemporary performance artists have also significantly reconceptualised the relationship between performance and liveness. Prior to the 1990s, although performance art could be recorded, its emphasis was upon the 'here and now' and it was thought that it could only be truly experienced as an ephemeral and live event. As performance practices became increasingly intertwined with multimedia technologies, especially from the 1990s, debates ensued in performance studies regarding how to define elements of performance that are mediated, mediated by technology or presented in pre-recorded forms. In *Unmarked* (1993b), Peggy Phelan maintains that the ontology of performance, its self-defining condition, is that it occurs in the present moment: 'Performance's only life is in the present', she writes. 'Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented or otherwise participate in the circulation of representation of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance' (1993b: 146). Other scholars have contested Phelan's ontological distinction between performance and mediated representation. Most notably, Philip Auslander's highly influential book *Liveness* (1999) provides a detailed critique of Phelan's position and presents his own view that 'the relationship between the live and the mediated is one of competitive opposition at the level of economy' and not one of intrinsic difference (1999: 11). For Auslander, the increased instances of mediation in live performance necessitates a theory of performance that understands the live and the mediated as mutually dependent rather than oppositional categories (*ibid.*).

In *Multimedia Performance* (2012), Klich and Scheer critically examine the arguments of Phelan and Auslander and propose that 'multimedia performance' provides a third option that resolves the opposition and functions as a broad term incorporating elements that are real and virtual, live and mediated (2012: 2; 4–5). Klich and Scheer's arguments derive from their observations of recent and emergent patterns of practice across the fields of theatre, dance, audio-visual media, multimedia installation, virtual art and performance art, in which they detect hybrid artistic practices that have altered the theoretical modes necessary for analysing contemporary performance. Their notion of multimedia performance provides a useful frame for understanding the cross-disciplinary performances of Brown Council, which employ a range of mediated practices, especially through the use of film and video.

In the field of performance art, the prevalence of multimedia performance has resulted in a redefinition of the art form and a shift away from

the primacy of presence and liveness as defining features. Over the past two decades, performance artists have regularly employed video production as a primary mode of representation, in conjunction with or in place of live performance. As RoseLee Goldberg explains, ‘performance videos of the nineties were frequently enacted in private, exhibited as installations and considered extensions of live actions’ (2011: 222). Goldberg cites as an example the videos of Matthew Barney, including *Cremaster 1–6* (1994–2002), a series of performance-films that were screened concurrently on six screens as a gallery installation. Like Goldberg, Auslander argues that Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle* should be classified as performance art rather than video art, especially because the actions that Barney performs in the work ‘are rooted in task-based performance and endurance art’ (2005: 93). This is also an accurate description of Brown Council’s performances created for video. For example in their video *Big Show* (2009), each of the members of Brown Council, wearing a dunce’s hat, performs a task-based act of endurance over one hour: one dunce ingests bananas to the point of retching, another has her hands and feet bound together with rope and attempts in vain to perform the trick of the escape artist, and the final two dunces slap one another across the face until they are wincing with pain. *Big Show* reveals the absurdity and pointlessness of the performance artist’s pursuit, making it a parody of the very art form it appropriates.

Unlike the endurance-based works of the 1970s that were grounded in the authentic presence of the artist, in *Big Show* the mediated aspect of the show *is* the show and the spectator is encouraged to question the relationship between the live and the mediated event. Diana Smith of Brown Council explains:

We’re very much interested in video and the idea of it being a document of a performance—an index or truth that this happened. So when we make video, the spectator should question: did that actually happen? Is it a constructed image? Why do you believe it happened? Does it matter if it happened or not? (quoted in French, 2015a).

Brown Council’s work therefore challenges the antiquated yet enduring notion that performance art and its documentation are rooted in notions of truth and authenticity. Presented as a mediated piece of performance art, *Big Show* is the result of the technical features of video production, including editing procedures that obscure the truth of what took place. The video is not presented in real time but in fragments, edited together

with black and white titles that indicate the duration of the performance from 'five minutes' to 'one hour'. The titles have the appearance of real, temporal markers but are included to lead the viewer into a false belief that timed acts of endurance are authentic when in fact the edits would only have required the performers to undertake the acts for relatively short periods.

However, in other works, Brown Council do perform actual feats of endurance. Continuing the theme of the performance artist as dunce or fool, in *A Comedy* (2010) the artists performed live for four hours, again undertaking a range of task-based performances including those performed in the video for *Big Show*. In addition, there were other acts drawn from the tradition of live comedy shows including stand-up, a dancing monkey and cream-pie throwing. The audience were provided with a list of acts and permitted to choose the order of the show, and each hour they were encouraged to hurl tomatoes at the performers who stood in a line blindfolded. Thus, where Brown Council's performance videos are subject to the intense control and manipulation of the artists, in their live works they reverse the dynamic between performer and spectator, placing a significant degree of control in the hands of the audience. Many of their works are created to be performed both live and in video recordings, which allow the performers to experiment with the different qualities of live and mediated modes of performance. This oscillation between the live and the mediated, as well as their integration within single works, is an ongoing feature of Brown Council's performances.

CRITIQUING POPULAR CULTURE: *MILKSHAKE*

Brown Council's first collaborative performance entitled *Milkshake* (2007) was performed live in a variety of fringe performance settings and then produced as a video. The performance demonstrates the group's emergent interest in endurance-based performance art, as well as their early feminist concerns, via a critique of the sexism inherent in the contemporary popular music industry. Wearing skeleton suits, and black and white make-up that turns their faces into deathly skulls, the four members of Brown Council perform a hip hop dance routine to Kelis' song 'Milkshake' (2003). The sexual connotations of the song's lyrics ('my milkshake brings all the boys to the yard'), along with Kelis' video clip that presents the female body as a fetish object, might be read as a postfeminist instance of women's complicity in their own sexual objectification. In Brown Council's version, the gyrating

dance moves, which mimic the familiar images of women in hip hop videos, are rendered comical and absurd as a result of the skeleton costumes and the dancers' sudden explosive movements. Halfway through the song, they stop dancing and pause to each drink a full litre of milk as fast as humanly possible. They then recommence the gyrating dance moves, this time while burping, vomiting and enduring stomach cramps.

Milkshake employs themes and techniques central to feminist performance art, including physical pain and endurance, a focus on the role of the artist's body as spectacle, and an interest in using performance as a form of cultural critique. By rendering Kelis' problematic lyrics literal and transforming the female body into a 'milkshake', the performance reflects the grotesquerie underpinning the construction of women in the mainstream music industry. It is simultaneously a critique of the sexism implicit in popular culture and a humorous piece that encourages the spectator to laugh at the ridiculously literal rendition and the obscenity of the body jiggling and retching. Unlike performance art practices of the 1970s in which the performer's physical pain evoked shock and horror, here it evokes laughter.

While early performance art practices rarely, if ever, combined physical pain with comedy, the use of humour and parody per se are not new features of performance art. Feminist performers throughout the 1970s and 1980s employed modes of comedy that were in keeping with the feminist politics of the time. For example, Martha Rosler's 'Semiotics of the Kitchen' (1975) is a very humorous performance video that depicts the artist holding up various tools and implements in her kitchen one by one and uttering the names of the objects with a deadpan expression to create an alphabetical inventory of the domestic sphere. In the 1980s Karen Finley created a range of darkly comical performances critiquing the cultural construction of femininity, including *A Constant State of Desire* (1986) and *The Theory of Total Blame* (1989). In the same period Bobby Baker's *Drawing on a Mother's Experience* (1988) followed by *How to Shop* (1993) both employed humour as a mode of catharsis (Goldberg, 2011: 220). All of these performances comically and critically parodied the patriarchal roles of middle-class women as housewives and mothers to reveal and challenge the limiting, derogatory and potentially damaging impact of these roles. Both Finley and Baker also employed an abject use of food to comment upon the abjection of the female body, especially as it is identified with the maternal. This engagement with the abject was a central recurring theme in performance art throughout the 1980s and

1990s following the publication of Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) which had a significant impact on artistic practices in numerous fields.

The abject remains present in contemporary performance art practices, such as in the work of Moira Finucane (discussed in Chapter 2), and in many of Brown Council's performances, including *Milkshake*, but the feminist politics of these works are notably different. In contemporary performance art, it is no longer the patriarchal gender roles of housewife and mother that are the focus of feminist critique. Rather, it is the continued systemic sexism and its manifestation in popular culture that is a key concern. This includes a critique of images of supposed female empowerment that are based upon a postfeminist logic that celebrates what Rosalind Gill terms 'sexual subjectification', a new form of subjectivity that celebrates notions of free choice and sexual agency (2008: 437). This logic also supports the discourse of individualism and its promotion of female rivalry: 'damn right, it's better than yours' sings Kelis of her 'milkshake', before the ultimate postfeminist addendum, 'I can teach you but I have to charge'. In this neoliberal, post/anti-feminist cultural environment everything is for sale, nothing is free and female 'empowerment' comes at a cost on both metaphoric and literal levels.

Unlike Kelis' film clip and its offering of the female body as an object of visual pleasure, Brown Council's *Milkshake* conceals the female bodies entirely, locating the spectacle within the embodied action of the performance. The artists put themselves and their performance on display, but they remove their own subjectivities by obscuring their bodies and faces with the skeleton costumes and black and white make-up. The highly visible female performer within the popular music industry is here contrasted with the near-invisible performance artist who is depicted as a cultural signifier rather than an autobiographical subject. *Milkshake*'s depiction of the artists as anonymous spectacle is a theme that permeates Brown Council's more recent work and is especially prevalent in their 2012 piece *Performance Fee*.

THE ARTIST AS SPECTACLE: *PERFORMANCE FEE*

Performance Fee (2012) was presented as an installation exhibit in the Gallery of Modern Art at the Queensland Art Gallery. In the performance, the four members of Brown Council sit blindfolded on stools wearing identical blue jeans and white T-shirts against a backdrop that reads



Fig. 6.1 Brown Council, *Performance Fee*, 2012, Live Performance. Installation view, Contemporary Australia: Women, Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art

(Photographer: B Wagner. Courtesy and Copyright of the Artist)

‘KISSES \$2’ (Fig. 6.1). They hold silver money tins which they shake throughout the performance encouraging audience members to pay the nominated fee after which they may procure a kiss. In the description on their website, Brown Council explain that ‘*Performance Fee* continues Brown Council’s interest in ideas of “work” and “product” in relation to the artist and performance’ (Brown Council, 2014). The performance raises a series of interesting questions surrounding the definition and value of art and the artist. To a feminist reading it raises further questions regarding its construction of the female body as an object of spectacle as well as its creation of an unsettling power dynamic between performer and spectator.

By proposing to perform an intimate physical act for (a very small amount of) money, Brown Council effectively ‘prostitute’ themselves to comment on the commodification of both the artist and the female body. The artists deliberately place themselves in a vulnerable and passive position, projecting responsibility for the ‘performance’ onto the spectator. The

spectator is given an ethical choice to participate or not to participate, as well to pay the fee or steal the kiss for free (since the artists are blindfolded). However, for those that do decide to participate, the power dynamic immediately shifts upon contact, for despite the artists' passivity it is ultimately they who control what is offered in this performance. Following the logic of the piece's political message, the spectator-participant is left to consider their own complicity in the processes of objectification and commodification, as well as their own status as a spectacle for the gaze of the non-participating spectator. Rebecca Schneider describes the space inhabited by feminist performance artists as 'a space at once exceedingly private, full of personal particulars, and radically public, full of social inscriptions—a fraught space' (1996: 159). It is within this 'fraught space' that Brown Council's *Performance Fee* exists, where the usually private act of a kiss takes place in a public space where it is transformed from an intimate, personal moment into an anonymous spectacle.

The themes and message of the performance are highly reminiscent of Orlan's 1977 performance *Le Baiser de l'Artiste* (The Artist's Kiss), which took place outside the Grand Palais during the International Contemporary Art Fair in Paris, and was considered scandalous at the time. This performance featured a life-sized photograph of Orlan's naked torso which was converted into a slot machine, behind which the artist stood on a pedestal. To get the attention of passers-by Orlan shouted the words 'Come here, come on my pedestal, the pedestal of myths: the mother, the whore, the artist.' Spectators who chose to approach could insert a coin and receive a kiss. On the surface, *Performance Fee* appears to be a very similar piece of work; however, there are two major points of difference: where Orlan shouted and returned the spectators gaze, in *Performance Fee* the artists are silent and blindfolded.

Brown Council's performance raises some issues regarding the politics of visibility and the politics of touch in artistic representation in a manner that is not entirely unproblematic. A second useful point of comparison can be found in a performance by dance choreographer Gideon Obarzanek entitled '100% Off' presented as part of *Arcade* (2001), an installation/dance project created by Australian contemporary dance company Chunky Move. Here spectators were led into a darkened room full of opaque boxes lit by neon lights that were inhabited by naked bodies. The spectator could place their hand through holes in each box to feel the unseen body parts of the performers. Like *Performance Fee*, the performance commented upon the anonymity involved in commodity production and the reduction of the

artist's body to an object of exchange. However, it might be argued that its political message was compromised or complicated by the potentially problematic dynamic it established between performer and spectator. Many agitated spectators questioned the morality of this performance and its offer of sensual pleasure as a form of theatrical experience and refused to participate (Rothfield, 2001: 33). *Performance Fee* in some ways avoids these problems by offering two modes of audience participation, allowing spectators to watch without tactile involvement, whereas one had to actively refuse participation to avoid being implicated in the politics of Obarzanek's piece.

However, as with '100% Off', it is the fusion of touch and invisibility that places the spectator in a precarious position. In both pieces the performers control the dynamic from a position of blindness, removing the possibility of a genuine interaction between performer and spectator, despite their offer of physical intimacy. In contrast to Orlan's piece, these works prevent the spectator from meeting the eye of the performer or locating the 'I' of the performing body. If the gaze ensures mastery over the image, as critics from Laura Mulvey (1989) to Peggy Phelan (1993b) have argued, to frustrate the spectator's gaze is to deny possession of the object. Thus while both performances purport to critique the relationship between cultural and economic capital by offering the artist's body as a commodity to be purchased and possessed, the spectator is in fact denied possession. The spectator may touch or kiss the body of the artist, who maintains an anonymous and elusive subject position that is absent and elsewhere.

In addition to denying the gaze, these performances also exclude the voices of the performers. By transferring the interpersonal relationship from the realms of sight and speech to that of touch, the performances produce an affective connection but eliminate the possibility of a subjective one. Indeed, this is the political intent of *Performance Fee*, which critiques the reduction of the artist to the status of anonymous commodity in a consumer-capitalist culture. A surplus of affect is offered at the expense of genuine human interaction. The use of sound in the performance emphasises this point: as the performers are silent, the audience hears only the sound of the coins as they clash in the tins.

The failure to achieve real human connection in the modern world was explored in a very different manner in an earlier live performance by Brown Council entitled *Six Minute Soul Mate* (2008), which employed the format of a speed dating night to explore 'the nature of love and romance within a contemporary quick fix culture' (Brown Council, 2014). *Performance Fee*

builds upon the ideas established in this performance by forming a link between the act of physical intimacy and the act of creating a work of art, both of which are shown to be valued only at the level of commodity exchange. Having established this critique of the absence of interpersonal connection in contemporary society and culture, it is significant that Brown Council's next work explicitly aimed to engender communality and community through a social engagement with performance.

FEMALE COLLABORATION AND COMMUNITY: *MASS ACTION: 137 CAKES IN 90 HOURS*

Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours (2012) is a performance-event that challenges the definition of performance and extends artistic practice beyond its usual location in theatres and galleries. The structure and aims of the work are aptly described by Brown Council in their promotional material:

Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours is a performative bake-off and test of endurance between the four members of Brown Council. Within the civic space of the Country Women's Association (CWA) headquarters in Sydney's Potts Point, Brown Council will bake around the clock for 90 hours in an attempt to cook every recipe in the iconic CWA cookbook *Jam Drops and Marble Cake*. Paying tribute to the CWA's 90-year history, dedicated to the empowerment of women, this monumental feat will explore culturally embedded notions of 'women's work' and the importance of intergenerational dialogue (Brown Council, 2014).

Brown Council created and adhered to a series of 'rules' for the event that were in keeping with the principles of the CWA who maintain notoriously strict standards for their baking. The rules stipulated that there must be continuous baking for the entire 90 hours, at least two members must be cooking at all times and all four members must be cooking during the designated opening hours to the public (periods of 5 hours per day). The members were to bake all cakes in accordance with CWA judging standards but if a cake failed they were not permitted to bake it again. Once each cake was complete, it was labelled, placed on display, photographed and uploaded onto a website that had been created especially for the event. The performance-event culminated in a cake-judging tournament in which the 137 cakes were assessed by certified CWA and Land Cookery judge

Alison Mutton, followed by an afternoon tea that comprised members of the CWA and members of the contemporary art public, thereby bringing together two disparate groups of people who would otherwise be unlikely ever to come into contact.

While there is no doubt a comical element to this performance that stems from the absurdity of the endurance-based nature of the task, Brown Council also convey a genuine intent to pay tribute to the women of the CWA, and a desire to engage in a meaningful way with an older generation of women. It is worth noting that this is the second instance in this book that contemporary Australian artists have created a work that engages in some way with the Australian Country Women's Association. In Sisters Grimm's *The Sovereign Wife*, discussed in [Chapter 5](#), the CWA was parodied and characterised as an institution of bourgeois elitism, racism and homophobia. The play's setting in the 1860s, as well as its focus on sexual and racial politics, prompted a critical perspective on the CWA, which was depicted as emblematic of the nationalist and xenophobic attitudes that have existed in the Nation's history, and that persist in some country areas of Australia. Brown Council's feminist focus provides an alternative perspective, suggesting that the women of the CWA form the backbone of Australia's rural community yet receive little recognition for their unpaid labour. Brown Council recognise the work of these women as an 'unseen act of endurance', which they emulate through their endurance-based performance (Smith, [2013](#)). The choice to form a connection with some of the members of the CWA also stems from the seeming impossibility of establishing points of convergence between two such different groups of women. As Diana Smith acknowledges, 'everything says that we shouldn't be able to connect to them'. She continues:

A lot of the women at the CWA are monarchists and they are mainly Christian, which is not our political or religious alignment, but we were interested in how we could come together. Surely there is a way we can have a dialogue between women of different generations and different social and economic backgrounds. It was about trying to find a common language (quoted in French, [2015a](#)).

That 'common language' is implicitly related to the gendered experience of women and to a shared feminist sensibility; as Smith explains, 'in a lot of ways they [the CWA] are an incredible feminist group and they just don't call themselves that' (*ibid.*).

By employing the title 'Mass Action' Brown Council created an activist dimension to the performance that emphasised their feminist agenda. The publicity for the event comprised a black and white photograph of the four members of Brown Council with intensely serious expressions, wearing work overalls and holding protest signs with the words 'Mass Action' (Fig. 6.2), an image reminiscent of documentary photographs of activist performances of the 1970s which often began as protests and took the form of direct political action (Marsh, 1993: 9). The image is immediately ironic for there is no 'mass' (just the four members of Brown Council photographed against a brick wall), no 'action' (the protest did not occur), and no political message. The photograph functions as empty pastiche that reflects nostalgia for a historical past when there was a stronger belief in the potential for protest to be an effective mode of political resistance. However, the image also gestures to the performance-event itself which does contain a political dimension through its creation of a temporary community brought together by baking and performance.



Fig. 6.2 Brown Council, *Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours*, 2012, Live Performance and Installation

(Photographer: Pia van Gelder. Courtesy and Copyright of the Artist)

This emphasis on community re-emerges throughout Brown Council's work and their creative practices illustrate a commitment to genuine collaboration that is consistent with their feminist politics. The group's process is non-hierarchical as all four members are equally responsible for all aspects of creation and production. In her series on 'Women and Performance' for the Australian arts magazine *RealTime*, Anne Thompson comments upon the 'central role of collaboration for women' in contemporary Australian performance, yet she also suggests that the collaborative process 'sits awkwardly with a market system that requires commodification of the artist, the creation of "stars"' (2013: 16). These comments emerged from Thompson's interview with Post, a Sydney-based collective of three young women (Zoë Coombs Marr, Mish Grigor and Natalie Rose) who also create performance within a feminist framework. In interview Post observe a contrast between the mainstream Australian theatre industry, which they suggest continues to adhere to hierarchical structures, and the work of their peers (including Brown Council) in the independent performance scene who mostly undertake collaborative work. For Post, as for Brown Council, the collaborative process is a specifically female driven one that is vital for the development of feminist ideas.

Diana Smith explains that Brown Council's collaborative relationship is central to the success of their work as well as to their politics:

As a collective of four women making work, it's already politicised. We give each other the confidence to be political and to be strong women. Initially it was an organic thing but the idea of collectivity has become so important to what we do. Thinking about how we might make work in a non-hierarchical structure and about how feminist methodology could be applied to practice is something we have been speaking about a lot. Trying to negotiate that with the art world is important (quoted in French, 2015a).

Collaborative processes stand in opposition to the dominant practices of the art world, which prefers to celebrate individual writers, directors and artists. The widespread embrace of collaborative practices within Australia's independent theatre and performance scenes, exemplified in the case studies discussed throughout this book, therefore suggests a desire to counter hierarchical processes in a manner that is aligned with the anti-hegemonic goals of feminist and queer artistic practice. In *Mass Action*, Brown Council's collaborative practices are extended through their interaction with the CWA and the broader community.

As a site-specific event that emphasises the live presence of the artists undertaking collaborative and community-based activities that sit outside usual definitions of 'performance', *Mass Action* has elements in common with the 'happenings' of the 1960s. As Marsh explains:

The happenings of the 1960s were collective events which challenged the hierarchical structure of art by making all the participants responsible for the work. Often there was no audience as such and the collective experience of the participants became the performance (1993: 8–9).

While the primary participants in *Mass Action* are the four members of Brown Council, the members of the CWA were involved in lengthy discussions leading up to the event; they provided advice on the baking, and they participated in serving the afternoon tea at the conclusion (through choice rather than by request). Thus the collective experience between Brown Council and the CWA became an important aspect of the performance as with the happenings. This practice challenges the hierarchical structure of art by largely reversing the usual relationship between audience and performer. Here the CWA are the invited audience yet they are the authority figures with the knowledge to facilitate the artists who are novices to the task at hand. The definition of art is also significantly challenged by this event.

However, there were two further audience groups whose presence serves to locate the event more clearly within the realm of performance. The first group is the live audience who were given the opportunity to view the performance at the set five-hour intervals over the 90-hour period. Given that the work was sponsored and promoted by Sydney's experimental art organisation Performance Space, it is likely that this audience would have been composed of people who regularly engage with contemporary art and performance and potentially follow the works presented by Performance Space and Brown Council. For this audience, Brown Council contextualise the event as performance and they also frame the CWA for the contemporary art public.

Despite the collaborative intentions of the project, in some ways an uneven power dynamic is established by the performance, whereby the artists inevitably obtain the power to name and mediate the identity of the CWA for the audience. Here the endurance-based nature of the event lends itself to two opposing readings. On the one hand, as discussed above, the act of endurance can be read as a point of identification in

which the artists symbolically re-enact the endurance-based labour that the women of the CWA have historically undertaken. On the other hand, as Smith acknowledges, by drawing out the task of baking, it becomes repetitive, laborious and ‘grotesque’ (2013). The work of the CWA is thereby converted into a grotesque spectacle and potentially a source of mockery.

However, this reading might be countered by the event’s finale. Firstly, the judging tournament returns authority to the CWA as Land Cookery judge Alison Mutton assesses Brown Council’s efforts. Here it is the artists who become the object of affectionate laughter as the majority of their cakes are deemed not to have met the CWA’s standards, and most have to be disqualified on appearance alone. Secondly, the members of Brown Council place themselves in a subservient position by serving the afternoon tea and framing the event as a tribute to the CWA’s 90-year history. Thus while it may be argued that the piece treads a fine line between respect for and derision of the CWA, it concludes on a tributary note and also creates a social event that fosters a genuine sense of community.

The final potential audience for this performance is an online community. The event was documented by live video and communicated via Twitter and continuous mobile uploads. Two writers, Ianto Ware and Jane Howard, were engaged for the entirety of the event and the promotional material explained that the writers would be ‘responding to events as they happen and blogging about feminism, baking, women’s work and much more’ (Brown Council, 2014). Those who accessed the event online or on Twitter therefore received a highly mediated version that was framed by the video camera and moderated by the writers who actively positioned the event in relation to feminist themes. Here the endurance elements also became more pronounced as the members of Brown Council and the writers discussed the impact of fatigue and sleeplessness on the mind and body. These mediated practices significantly alter the status of the event (distancing it from the live happening) and illustrate an instance of effective interaction between live performance and virtual communication. By linking the event to feminist themes, the online aspect of the performance created an ideological framework that enhanced the political agenda of the artists.

Mass Action adopts a range of features from the history of performance art, including a focus on site-specific (non-)performance, endurance and community, and brings these elements into a contemporary live and virtual performance. By creating an active engagement between two

generations of Australian women, the performance illustrates the need for young women to acknowledge and connect with their feminist (and non-feminist) history, even as they forge new and divergent identities. This engagement with the past is a vital aspect of a productive and politicised feminist practice and one that emerges again in Brown Council's film installation *This is Barbara Cleveland*.

REMEMBERING FEMINIST PERFORMANCE ART: *THIS IS BARBARA CLEVELAND*

As discussed at the outset of this chapter, *This is Barbara Cleveland* (2013) deals with the absence of female performance artists from the art history canon. The mythic Barbara Cleveland functions as a synecdoche for the female performance artists of Australian history who are largely missing from historical documentation. The performance was constructed as a film installation that was presented in the Sydney theatre and gallery space Carriageworks on a large cinema screen within a spacious darkened room. The film ran continually for the duration of the theatre's opening hours during the season so that spectators could arrive and depart at any point in the film or watch the film multiple times.

The film runs for just under 17 minutes and intertwines three distinct performance modes. The first consists of documentary-style footage in colour of the four members of Brown Council describing the life and work of Barbara Cleveland. The footage shows the artists in the act of thinking and remembering, often umming and ahing, as they direct their comments to an unseen interviewer just to the right of the camera. This use of the visual language of documentary filmmaking imbues their fiction with a believability that in turn serves to challenge documentary film's claim to authenticity. This footage is juxtaposed with (re)constructed images of Barbara Cleveland's performances in black and white, some of which are depicted in photographic stills and others in filmic form. 'Barbara Cleveland' is presented performing task-based acts, but in all shots her face is obscured by the camera, her hair, or a blindfold, and she is silent throughout. The focus of the images is upon her body (or rather, four different bodies performing as Cleveland) which is often naked (Fig. 6.3). The black and white images convey a sense of historical 'pastness', creating a (false) dichotomy between 'now' and 'then' which again undermines notions of authenticity invested in historical documentation.



Fig. 6.3 Brown Council, *This is Barbara Cleveland*, 2013, Single Channel HD Video, Duration: 16'42"

Courtesy and Copyright of the Artist

The interview footage and performance sequences are interspersed with a third performance mode consisting of Cleveland's 'performance-lectures' which Diana Smith claims to have discovered in an archive box, prompting Brown Council's engagement with Cleveland's work. The lectures are a compilation of fragmented and ambiguous phrases that are re-enacted by the four members of Brown Council and presented via static extreme close-up shots on the mouths of each of the performers. The film therefore creates a separation between body and voice by contrasting the silent images of embodied performance spectacle with the textual inscriptions relayed by the voice. The two sets of black and white footage are accompanied by an industrial score, created by Lucy Phelan, with sudden loud noises to punctuate the performance images and a drone to complement the lectures. Like the images, this soundtrack has a historical '1970s'

quality that gives the images a sense of urgency and gravity in keeping with the performance art aesthetic.

The status of *This is Barbara Cleveland* in relation to performance is complicated, for while it interrogates the nature of performance and is in its entirety 'performative', it lacks those elements that for many constitute the essence of performance as an ephemeral and temporal event involving the presence of an artist before an audience. All that is documented in the film was created specifically for the camera; there is no pre-filmic event and neither Brown Council nor 'Barbara Cleveland' ever performed before an audience. Despite this, I argue that *This is Barbara Cleveland* should be classified as performance rather than film, in the same way that Goldberg and Auslander locate Barney's *Cremaster* cycle in the context of performance. Similarly, in a statement that could be applied to *This is Barbara Cleveland*, Klich and Scheer argue that multimedia performance practices 'activate the participants or viewers in media spaces and virtual installation environments in performative ways' (2012: 3). At one point in their study, Klich and Scheer deal specifically with the case of multimedia installation and contest the argument put forward by Gunter Berghaus that video installations should not be classified as performance: 'the concept of installation as artistic "event"', they argue, 'places it within the field of performance practice. The efficacy of the work relies on the experience of the process of time in space, rather than on the object, product or narrative' (2012: 37).

This is Barbara Cleveland creates an 'event' for the spectator by replicating core aesthetic characteristics and principles of performance art and integrating these with multimedia practices. On the one hand, the mock video documentation with its focus on the body of Barbara Cleveland, illustrates the notion that the actor's corporeality is the central site of meaning in performance. Similarly, the use of sound emulates the affective qualities of performance art as it intrudes into the space with sudden explosions, reverberations and echoes that have the potential to affect the spectator on a bodily level. On the other hand, *This is Barbara Cleveland* is entirely mediated and its depiction of performance is reframed through the medium of film. For example, the extreme close ups, fast-paced editing and shaky footage while emulating the immediacy of performance art, also prevent the spectator from seeing the whole of the performance and the performing body. Thus the film works with the tropes of both live performance and mediation, using each to comment upon the other. The literal absence (and non-existence) of the artist also

engages with ‘the problem of the artist’s presence as the unique marker of meaning or the authorial, powerful voice’, which Marsh identifies as a central thematic feature of performance art (1993: 4). The performance therefore deals not with historical reconstruction as it appears to at first glance but with the central place of absence and invisibility in the history of performance art.

This is Barbara Cleveland employs two forms of visual language that are interconnected throughout: the language of performance art and the language of performance art documentation. The former is depicted through the emphasis on the artist’s body as spectacle and her performance of endurance-based and task-oriented actions, and the latter through the grainy film footage, hand-held camera movements and blurry photographs of the body in movement. In both cases Brown Council create a postmodern, fictionalised construction of history using parody, irony, self-reflexivity, intertextuality and meta-theatre. The images of Barbara Cleveland and the ways in which they are presented are at once familiar. For spectators with knowledge of the history of performance art there are concrete references to performances by artists such as Vito Acconci, Mike Parr, Jill Orr and Carolee Schneemann. We see footage of Cleveland blindfolded attempting to catch balls that are thrown at her from off-screen (a re-enactment of Acconci’s *Blindfolded Catching* (1970)) and a sequence in which she is smearing her body with paint (a reference to Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* (1975)).

The descriptions provided by the documentary footage similarly reference the performance art practices of the 1970s; Brown Council explain that Cleveland was influenced by the work of Australian performance artists such as Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy, that she was interested in ritual and did performances in the landscape (as did Jill Orr), and that she used symbolic gestures: ‘a stroke of paint, a hand print’ (as did Carolee Schneemann). At other times their descriptions are highly self-reflexive and double as a description of Brown Council’s own performances; for example, Cleveland is said to have performed task-based actions that tested the limits of the body. Indeed, *all* of Cleveland’s performances depicted and discussed contain either intertextual references to performance artists from history or self-reflexive references to Brown Council’s past performances. Cleveland’s performances are therefore appropriately conceived as pure pastiche with no original content, appropriately, because the film is not a reconstruction of a subject who can be known, even through her work, but an attempt to recall for the spectator the

history of performance art in toto. For viewers without the specific historical reference points, there is still a recognisable aesthetic that is reflective of the history of performance art in general and its incomplete legacy in filmic and photographic documentation. With its depiction of partial glimpses of Cleveland's performances, the mock documentation ultimately obscures more than it reveals.

In 'failing' to give concrete representation or understanding to 'Barbara Cleveland's' performances, the visual language of the video reflects the historical failure of the medium of performance art to adhere to documentary procedures. As Marsh writes, 'the peculiarities of performance art documentation include poor quality photographs, often because the artist did not want to spoil the ambience of the live event by allowing flash photography or video lighting' (1993: 3). The footage of Cleveland's performances emulates this poor quality of existing documentary photographs and videos. Thus even as the piece operates as a fictional feminist recovery project that proclaims to rewrite a female performance artist back into history, it also illustrates the impossibility of its own task by attesting to the fundamental unrepresentability of performance via the medium of film.

Despite some fragmentary glimpses of performance imagery, the precise content of Cleveland's performances remains largely enigmatic. Similarly, her 'performance-lectures' are deliberately incoherent, disjointed and uninformative. One of the members of Brown Council tells us that Cleveland intended for her lectures to be ambiguous with words missing to make the audience work to uncover the meaning, but even with this cautionary warning, it is difficult to derive any meaning whatsoever from the spoken texts. The lectures make obscure references to the themes of time and memory and they continually refer back to the performance itself in a meta-theatrical style, but the text functions as a series of empty verbal signifiers for which there are no concrete signifieds. When the text does appear to provide direction, it is misleading. For example, it proffers to demarcate time with the words 'this is the beginning', 'this is the middle' and 'this is the end', but the latter statement comes well before the end, and as the final statement is made, 'this is not the end. There is no end to this performance', the film does in fact end. The lectures imitate the stylistic qualities of existing written performance art texts that make historical reconstruction impossible; as Marsh again explains, the performance art historian must rely upon 'written accounts or artist's notes which are poetic or polemical and consequently of little assistance in

reconstructing the event' (1993: 3). Brown Council therefore present us with meaningless fragmented notes that they describe as 'performance-lectures' but which are not sufficiently theatrical to be performance nor informative enough to be lectures.

The lectures also reflect the popularisation of Zen Buddhism in performance art practices of the 1960s with paradoxical and obscure statements like 'this is an invitation . . . or is it a closed door?' and 'time has become thick, like mud. We are in a heightened state of being.' In the 1960s, phrases of this nature were seen to have existential relevance and to challenge western metaphysics and its basis in rationalist epistemology. In this contemporary representation, however, they are presented as ridiculous and meaningless 'new age' philosophies disconnected from politics or life. Cleveland's lectures also parody the relationship between woman and nature that was a feature of early feminist performance art, with statements like 'sometimes we are like animals and speak with our limbs'. The performance images further develop this parody. In one, 'Cleveland' stands over a bowl of milk, naked, and in another, she cups the milk in her hands. A series of images depict her smearing black paint over her naked body, and we are told that in one of her performances Cleveland covered herself in dirt and made animalistic sounds to illustrate her 'return to the animal-self'.

As with *Mass Action*, *This is Barbara Cleveland* is simultaneously serious and comedic in its intent. While it presents an argument for the cultural importance of retaining historical documentation of performance art and giving recognition to female artists, it also parodies feminist performance art by affectionately poking fun at its references. This dual focus is consistent with a contemporary feminist politics that recognises the need to both engage with and depart from the second-wave. Brown Council pay homage to feminist performance artists while presenting their essentialist tendencies as a source of parody. The feminist artists referenced in Cleveland's performances were themselves subject to criticisms in the 1980s and 1990s when the use of myth and ritual, as well as the association between the female body and nature, came under attack. The body art of feminist performance artists was criticised for its perceived complicity with the 'male gaze', as well as for its tendency to create a universal notion of woman as white, western, heterosexual and middle-class. In Australia, for example, performance artists such as Jill Orr, Catherine Cherry and Jan Hunter were criticised

for constructing essentialist representations of the body of woman (Marsh, 1993: 169). In the 1990s further critiques of essentialism linked the practices of female artists with the failures of some earlier feminist movements to acknowledge differences among women, especially in respect to race, ethnicity and sexuality. Thus, in referencing feminist performance art practices of the late 1970s within a contemporary setting, it is appropriate and necessary that Brown Council do parody this work as a form of contemporary feminist and queer critique, while also acknowledging the importance of its place in feminist history.

Brown Council's engagement with the theme of memory in *This is Barbara Cleveland* further illustrates their contemporary feminist agenda. On face value, the performance reflects the second-wave feminist interest in using memory as a counter-discourse to history. Brown Council talk of 'exhuming' Cleveland's memory and they wear and distribute T-shirts imprinted with the words 'Remembering Barbara Cleveland'. This emphasis on memory suggests that if history has failed to retain essential elements of the past, perhaps the discourse of memory will provide a correlative. Yet, this is not a second-wave work of art and while the performance reminds the spectator of this historical feminist concern, Brown Council's approach is more in line with a queer, postmodern project of deconstruction. As discussed above, there is no authentic autobiographical memory being reinscribed into the historical narrative. Instead, the performance illustrates the constructedness of all representations of the past. Historical documentations that appear to represent the past 'as it really happened' are full of gaps, silences and inconsistencies, they inevitably adhere to the political agendas of those who created them, and they reflect the ideologies of the social and cultural period in which they were created. Thus, in proving itself to be nothing but a fictional simulation, *This is Barbara Cleveland* employs the language of documentary authenticity to undermine the legitimacy of any representation that purports to represent historical truth.

The performances of Brown Council discussed in this chapter employ different art forms and take place in different settings. They are connected, however, by their engagement with the history of feminist performance art and by their ongoing concerns with the role of art and the function of the artist. Another consistent feature is their resistance to definitive readings. *Performance Fee*, *Mass Action* and *This is Barbara*

Cleveland all employ a critical queer ambiguity, and are open to a multiplicity of interpretations. They create a space for the exploration of feminist political ideas, while resisting a totalising or definitive political agenda. Brown Council's queer approach to feminism is shared by The Rabble, whose theatrical adaptations of historical literary texts, to be examined in the following chapter, also appropriate feminist representations of the past to create a contemporary feminist and queer critique of the present.