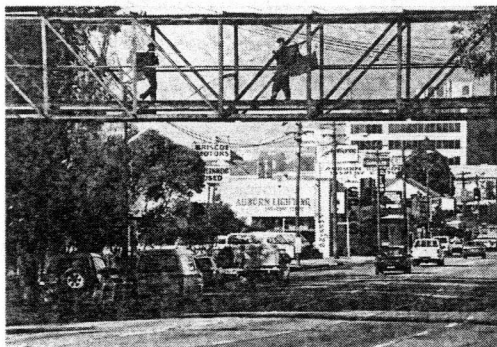


Strange attractors: shared perversity

Jane Goodall surveys De Quincey/Lynch performances across Sydney

Compression 100: 100 performances in different venues and sites around Sydney during May; artists Tess de Quincey and Stuart Lynch performing with a wide variety of collaborators, from dancers to writers to musicians to visual artists.



Parramatta Road

Mark Rogers

True to its name, *Compression 100* was actually 111 performances. The first and last days (May 1 and 31) began on Compression Highway—Parramatta Road—the most loaded space in Sydney. I live just off Parramatta Road and commute on it every day, trying not to think about it. Since May, though, I feel differently towards it. I've moved from dissociation to mild fixation. I've developed a perverse sense of attachment to this roaring, ugly, clashing, hot, polluted environment. I've taken to walking along it, sometimes for

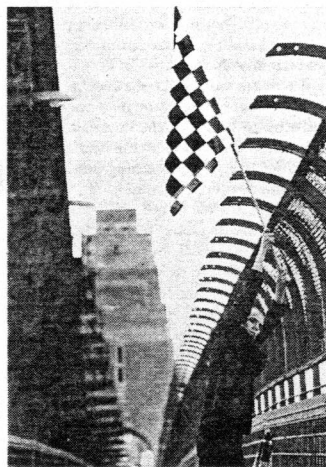
two hours at a time, to writing about it and to driving down it in preference to using the freeway. Now this is perverse and *Compression 100* was, amongst other things, a shared exercise in sustained perversity. Its legacies are likely to be random and widely dispersed. Perhaps all over Sydney there are people who are experiencing altered relations with particular spaces.

As an exercise in perversity, *Compression 100* is firmly in the tradition of performance art where endurance and purposelessness and risk have worked together to effects that criticism has been at a loss to define. Not for want

of trying, of course, which is part of the sport. To do several performances a day, every day for a month, with dozens of different collaborators, some of whom you have never met before, in places where you will have little and sometimes no control over the conditions, to audiences gathering at random who will sometimes not have a clue what to make of whatever it is you are doing, begs a lot of questions. And the questions came like some kind of inflamed outbreak, a virus that everyone caught. What is it? What's it for? Who are they? Who do they think they are? What are they doing? Why? Occasionally, some stray explanatory statement would be in amongst them. They're making a commercial. He's a fruit. Must be for TV. It's a witch, mum. They should be in the zoo.

Compression 100 did go to the zoo, and of all the places it went—including the cemetery, the Opera House, the dog pound, the jail, the top of Centre Point, Observatory Hill, and an assortment of tunnels—that was where it seemed most to belong, amidst an array of strangely

determined behaviours, all on show for an audience. Everywhere else, the performances looked liked pieces of escaped behaviour, serving to generate awareness, perhaps, of the extent to which behaviour is category confined: related to gainful employment, the fulfilment of need, or the pursuit of identifiable forms of leisure. A version of behaviour labelled "performance" has wide currency, but this is conditional on its conformity with established categories. Audiences at the Opera House, well trained to tune into performance, responded readily to something that looked like it, happening on the steps outside. But this was escaped performance: not performance of anything, just the performance principle gone feral and hyperbolic amongst a group of people apparently possessed by it, posturing in derangements of operatic costume. "Is it Butoh?" someone asked me, his face almost aglow with the pleasure of catchment.



Martin del Amo, Sydney Harbour Bridge Mark Rogers

As performance, most of *Compression 100* was exploratory and erratic, but there were emergent moments that created an intensity of attention sufficient to kill the question virus stone dead. Lynch and de Quincey take off into pure virtuosity improvising movements to a sound track made by John Gillies—a collage of rhythms from traffic and instrumental percussion, that just keeps on producing inspired shifts in direction. Nikki Heywood, barely visible and standing in several inches of water in



De Quincey/Lynch, Kingsford Smith Airport

Mark Rogers

the tunnel at St. James railway station, generates stray bursts of sound and movement which fuse quite suddenly into miraculous familiarity as the cadences of *Che Faro...* from Gluck's *Orpheo*. The idea of producing the voice takes on an uncanny meaning. The line of the melody is breathtaking, the voice swells into it, and then it's gone again, perversely, like some kind of apparition that you know won't come back. Isn't this what the opera is about? Maybe we heard the definitive performance of *Orpheo*.

Compression 100 had a mixed reception. That's a cliché, and how could anything else have been expected? There was a lot of discussion and some agonising about reactions to the performances throughout the series. But much more interesting than what people thought of it was what it made them do, by serving as a strange attractor, drawing them away from their regular business, into unfamiliar parts of the city at weird times of the day and night. How do you get three office-bound workaholics to find their way onto Bondi Beach in the middle of a weekday afternoon and stay there until the light fades? How do you get a bunch of performance artists to the Opera House? What if you walk the Parramatta Road, the whole way, from Parramatta to Sydney? The perversity principle is a catalyst which has most effect when generated within strictly designed parameters. It's only the most experienced and disciplined artists who can get it going, set it loose and leave it to reverberate. I'd credit de Quincey and Lynch with that.