MISHKA HENNER and JILL ORR
Performing to the all-seeing eye

Helen Vivian on Jill Orr and Mishka Henner in new work for the Mildura Palimpsest Biennale #10.

*Mishka Henner* Contrada Vallecupa, Colonnella, Abruzzi, Italy, 2012. From the series No Man's Land

*Mishka Henner* Levelland Oil Field, Hockley County, Texas, 2013, archival pigment print. From the series The Fields
The gathering of meaningful material is a human need.
Mishka Henner, 2015

In the age of social media and reality TV, there is an unseemly rush to perform our own lives to camera. There is also an apparent willingness to expose the raw edges of life that is of course highly manipulated and controlled. We seem to want it real even when it is fake. There is so much manipulated or “virtual” reality on show that we have begun to experiment with manipulating reality for ourselves. Internet artist Mishka Henner has an interesting take on this. “I’ve been wondering lately if the only territory left for us to explore is each other’s identities. We’re almost there if you think about it. When we rent an Airbnb apartment, we’re renting a space in someone else’s life. That will also eventually be true of other people’s identities. One day I might pay to experience your life. I’ve started to see social networks as a seed for that possibility. We’re only a small step away from surrendering our identities to others. It seems like a logical step from where we are now.”

The brave new virtual world is keenly observed by Henner, who works exclusively with surveillance technology.
on the Internet. Henner questions the very act of perception. Big Brother is definitely watching but there seems to be something wrong with his eyes. Henner reveals, codes and represents images captured by the all-seeing eye (global satellite imagery from Google and Google Street View). In the process, he creates surprisingly intimate portraits of our world. Like a sculpture made from found objects, Henner’s utilisation of the source code material is transformative, revealing deeply disquieting views of the state of the planet and the politics of power. His work reflects on the performance of surveillance, like a mirror maze, endlessly repeating the original image in a tunnel through time.

Henner is a master of the art of utilising the massive surveillance archive to penetrate secret places, slipping off the mask and showing it like it is. In his use of surveillance technology Henner personalises the source code and brings our attention not just to the images but to the matrix which has created them. His large-scale aerial landscapes (Feedlots and Dutch Landscapes) reveal situations that the world is not permitted to see. The penalties for displaying photographs of these censored landscapes can be severe. The joke is that the censors are not yet able to read their own archive. Henner describes this irony of state control as a brief historical moment when the technology has outpaced us. Satellite photography is relatively recent and we have not yet learned to read it.

“I think it (satellite imagery) just starts to seep into everyday life and we adopt it uncritically. But every now and again something punctures through the banality to remind us of what’s going on.”

A poignant example of this puncturing is his photographic series No Man’s Land. Henner uses Google Street View images to look closely at a situation the world usually averts its eyes from. In this case women, clearly refugees, who are working as prostitutes on the lonely outskirts of Italian and Spanish towns. The images are confronting and deeply moving and raise a multitude of aesthetic and ethical questions. They might have been captured by a gutter crawling client (or perhaps a photographer intent on stalking his prize). Instead they were captured by the all-seeing eye of Google Street View, the Big Brother surveillance machine that ironically distributes the images freely to all.

Henner has faced some harsh criticism for No Man’s Land particularly for its perceived voyeurism. He says, “It felt like
discovering something vital and urgent. My partner Liz (also a photographer) worked with sex workers in Manchester for a while and got to know a number of them very well. But the problem of how to represent them was a real issue and an almost insurmountable one. When I came across these women on Street View, I felt like it offered a solution ... The technology in some way obscures a singular focus on them and actually blurs them. It allows us to see something but then hides it at the same time.”

Each of Henner’s photographic series represents something of compelling concern to him. They are an extension of his worldview and he readily concedes that the technology he uses is anything but neutral: “The systems and ideas that develop the software and hardware come from us. The culture of their makers is in the machines’ DNA. These optical technologies trigger a range of impulses that run deep in us. The impulse to survey, to suspect, to control (for example). But, also, the impulse to reveal, to critique and to stare. The selfie is interesting to me. It’s the operator turning the camera back onto themselves, as though the external territory has been so fully mapped and catalogued that the only remaining space to explore is one’s self. And we know how unfathomable a space that is. So I wonder if the selfie is really just laying the groundwork for what I mentioned before, the trading of each other’s selves and identities.”

Writer Daniel Rourke has compared Henner’s worldview to that of Troilus – the ancient Greek philosopher – who believed that the whole world could be envisioned in its entirety. We have the technology now to imagine that this might be possible, but as Rourke points out: “The World picture remains incomplete just as long as one’s perspective is itself not included in the frame.”

The camera always remains outside the picture frame. The perennial problem remains that any attempt – whether philosophical, technological or artistic – to envisage the world leaves the object of the enquiry outside the frame. The visceral presence of the artist within the work is what makes performance art so compelling.

If an “eye in the sky” was watching over Jill Orr’s early performance work in Mildura (Response, 1978) it would perhaps have been imagined as a form of the cosmic spirituality that suffused the 1970s, particularly in Australia. Orr was part of the vanguard of performance art in Australia which was motivated by a desire for direct communication
with the audience, elevating art from a product created for an elite market to a philosophical enquiry into the nature of being. It was an idealistic art form that existed in the moment. Indeed there were barely any records made of some of Orr’s earliest performance works.

Far more questions than answers are posed by the act of creating performance art in the moment, for human eyes only. Early performance art lives on in the imagination and is therefore extremely adaptive. Memory is not fixed like a photograph, but remains alive to the nuance of individual experience. The carefully manufactured image had not yet taken hold in the early 1970s. But when it did Orr mastered it to perfection. Her large format photographs and videos from the last decade in particular are powerful extensions to her performance and are often utilised within the set.

Iconic images perform a strong narrative in all of Orr’s work. From the very beginning, from Pain Melts (1979) and Bleeding Trees (1979), where the only technology is the artist’s body in the environment, Orr created compelling images within her performances, like freeze frames within the continuum. What has changed, apart from the quality and the stage management of image production, is that they have been isolated from the moment of performance and become timeless. Orr still frequently performs live in front of audiences but the images and video that are exhibited as an extension to her performances are mainly created in a closed ‘live to camera’ production.

Performing to camera is a very different process. It is still Orr’s body and her intuitive spatial awareness, within her imaginatively costumed, stage like, often outdoor, settings. The vagaries of performance remain intrinsic to the work as she performs to camera. Added to that is the collaborative dynamic of the creative team, photographer, videographer and of course the weather. But the resulting exhibition (as opposed to Orr’s live performance) is meticulously choreographed by the artist, a pure distillation of the work, more like a cinematic experience than a live performance. All the smells have gone.

Accompanying Orr on her first Mildura shoot for her new work Ingredients For A Precarious Meal was a rare privilege. For me, the sounds and smells of that early dawn in a Mallee wheat field will always accompany the images the artist has created for this ambitious work. Ingredients For a Precarious Meal imagines future industrial scale food production across three continents – wheat in Australia, rice in Asia and potatoes in Europe.

Whilst Orr seems almost quintessentially Australian, her narratives are universal. She has been engaged with the international arts arena from very early in her career, with exhibitions in Holland, Belgium, London and Paris in the early 1980s. Orr was the only Australian selected for the inaugural Venice International Performance Art Week, 2012, and in the past three years she has exhibited in Berlin, Poland, Brazil, Malaysia and Australia.
The vision in *Ingredients For a Precarious Meal* is global science fiction. The scale of future agriculture and the enormity of its impact are portrayed through three inventive hybrid characters (all enacted by Orr) in a vast surreal landscape. The preliminary images are powerful and Orr’s planned performance of the work, in Mildura’s abandoned railway yards during the Mildura Palimpsest Biennale, promises to be one of her seminal live performances.

The age of surveillance, social media and reality TV is transforming how we think about performance – the world stage and all its actors are now recorded and disseminated free of charge. Performance art, the most ephemeral and poetic of art forms, has moved into new dimensions. Jill Orr’s prolific career, spanning five decades, tracks those changes closely. Where it was once “post-object” it is now collectable. But the changes run far wider and deeper than our human eyes are yet able to perceive.

In her futuristic imagining Orr creates entirely ambiguous images that provoke a visceral rather than intellectual response. It is a strange irony that for all of its futuristic technology, Henner’s work always images the past, albeit with a mindfulness of our precarious future here on earth. There is no contest between fact and fiction, reality or virtual reality, live performance or performance to camera, all of it is art and it reveals (and also conceals) matters of great importance to us.

1 All quotes from Mishka Henner in this article are based on an email interview with the author conducted in March 2015.  

Helen Vivian has curated the last three Mildura Palimpsest Biennales.
Jonathan Kimberley is curator of Mildura Palimpsest Biennale #10, 2015.

Mildura Palimpsest Biennale #10 2015 features more than 70 Australian and international artists working across a range of major durational programs. Jill Orr is part of the Inland Residency Program and Mishka Henner is part of the Unmapping the End of the World project. All projects are presented as part of the Mildura Palimpsest Biennale #10 Opening Long Weekend Experience, 2–5 October 2015 | www.mildurabiennale.com