

*What is Performance Art? Writings on Australian Performance Art*

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*Dr Nobody*

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After devoting most of my artistic output to a single idea driven by a single performance persona, the development of *Dr Nobody* in early 2013 was as welcome as it was exciting. Until that point much of my work centred on a nameless figure in a business suit and tie. The actions that I would perform in this guise were strictly tasks of patent futility, such as warding off rain with an umbrella while waist deep in water, or sweeping up a vacant demolished lot with a dustpan and brush. My initial impulse with this kind of work was social comment. I aimed to replicate the political idiocy and social stalemate that I saw around me with allegorical action. Due to the utter meaninglessness of these tasks, devoid of narrative or utilitarian frame, as well as my choice of costume that lent the tasks an air of slapstick folly, my early efforts often attracted commentary about the absurd of Camus, and the lot of Beckett's hopeless protagonists. In the subsequent years, with further reading, I learned that my initial, rather ostentatious impulse toward impasse as political and social commentary found its echo in these more existential musings. My youthful insights then melded with their philosophical counterparts, becoming my default worldview and conceptual *modus operandi*. But after several years pursuing this singular line of enquiry these critical impulses seemed to have mellowed in favour of a more generalised view of human absurdity. However with this new body of work my original compulsions seem to resurface. Here *Dr Nobody* appears as the product of equal parts social critique, political correctness, and philosophical resignation, exhibiting all the confusion and anxiety one might expect from this blend.

Much of *Dr Nobody*'s conceptual and aesthetic punch is provided by costume and context. To protect his identity he wears a Guy Fawkes mask and applies vocal pitch alteration to such an excessive degree that subtitles are required. This Guy Fawkes mask was popularised by the recent Hollywood film *V for Vendetta* and has since become

ubiquitous as the disguise of choice for political and social activists and ‘hacktivists’ in public appearances, rallies, and online video messages. Principal among these is the hacker group Anonymous, whose appropriation of the mask has become a brand of sorts, such that the mask itself is inseparable from their public image and is often used emblematically in viral images, posters, and fan art. This group also uses voice alteration in their regular video messages, although their masked presenters often mime along to a script being read by text-to-speech software rather than doctor their voice directly. As distinct from the accusations of political belligerence and calls for solidarity in the face of bureaucratic negligence typical of videos of this type, *Dr Nobody*’s messages are essentially directionless rants. The clash of expectations generated by the videos supposedly urgent form, the pathetic droll of their monologues and their reification as subtitle text afford the videos an uncanny humour as the viewer realises that the message they are being delivered is far from arresting. However this surprise and humour soon gives way upon the realisation that the speaker is deadly serious, intriguing the viewer to maintain their attention.

Once uploaded to YouTube, these single channel videos become quickly lost in the saturation of opinion, titillation, horror, and peculiar humour of online video. For the viewer it is as if *Dr Nobody* is at once aware of his insignificance, yet paranoid of his words being misconstrued. He frequently finds it necessary to reiterate his points and explain himself until, flummoxed and nervous, he concludes with a clumsy thought or gives up entirely. Each video has a relatively clear topic, either an issue that annoys him or a point of curiosity that he wishes to explore with his non-existent audience. These range from theories of the efficacy of ethanol-blended petrol to the problematics of timing masturbation within a long-term sexual relationship. An early video divulges his irritation at his neighbours’ lack of diligence in sorting their recycling. *Dr Nobody* opens the video in typical stammering form, eventually outlining the rules of domestic recycling and how different materials need to be placed into particular bins. He then expresses his annoyance at the discovery of inappropriate recyclables in certain bins, and his feelings of obligation to remove these items and replace them in their correct receptacle, and the considerable disgust that this task invokes. As an afterthought, he elaborates that in order to communicate his offense to his immediate neighbours he renamed his Wi-Fi network

‘You Suck at Recycling’ but then confesses his embarrassment at the name and its divulgence of the pathetic triviality of his preoccupations. Finally, at a loss of how to continue, he summarises his accusations, resolves to change his network name, and imparts a final decree that if one is to bother recycling at all then they might as well do it correctly.

The individual performances involve fairly little structure and forethought. I begin with a topic, be it a thought or question, put on a red T-shirt and the mask, sit down in front of my computer and record the subsequent issue using QuickTime and a webcam. There is no script, rather the content of the monologues take form as an ad-lib diatribe that could almost be considered a stream of consciousness, although far more self-conscious. The embarrassment, trepidation, inarticulateness, and confusion are all mine, and are exacerbated by the presence of the webcam and the gradually proceeding time code of the recording. I often have to force myself to hurry through the rest of my spiel because the recording is approaching the ten-minute mark, a length naturally settled upon for its relative ease of editing, uploading, and suitability for maintaining audience attention. In performance my natural self-consciousness comes to the fore and is amplified by the video feedback showing myself in the ridiculous mask uttering rambling petty complaints, as well as the knowledge that every word is to be cemented in subtitles. True to my nature, I nervously continue my inane babble until I talk myself into a logical or moral corner.

My indecision is caused by the presence of undisclosed rules that govern what can and cannot be mentioned. For instance I must always avoid the names of brands, places and people, particularly relatives, although I do permit myself to talk about my mum. These are censored as an attempt to maintain anonymity and to promote universality. Offensive language is permitted, and often occurs naturally and almost serves as punctuation, as is common in casual Australian vernacular. And I often find myself at a loss and resorting to ‘um’s, ‘ah’s, and the occasional ‘know what I mean?’ in order to avoid dead air. Other rules dictate that I cannot lie; I must not deliberately make humorous remarks unless they arise naturally; irony and sarcasm are to be avoided in favour of direct communication, and not to discuss topics of social importance. Adhering to these guidelines ensures that the works avoid seeming overly scripted while still

maintaining topical and formal continuity. They also hint at their own presence, allowing the viewer to sense that there is an underlying structure to these picayune diatribes. More importantly, they force a relative honesty in my choice of topic and words, hinting at an underlying subjectivity hiding behind the mask's leering eyebrows and mischievous grin, creating a humorous play between artifice and authenticity.

One of the primary factors that ensure my commitment to this series is its honesty. While my utterances are self-censored they are nonetheless truthful. After years of hiding behind a curtain of metaphor and philosophical allusion so thick to be reductive *ad absurdum*, here I found that I could speak my mind, albeit in the safe confines of a restrictive ironic container. Masks conceal so that we may safely reveal more of our inner selves, and these videos provide me with this security threefold. This comes first in the symbolic artifice of the work of art, second in the pretence of the mask, and third in the secure constraint of the rules. But these restrictions do little to limit the works' broader allusion to the mess of conflicted and convoluted desires and actions that shape our history and condition. This is perhaps because they mirror the circumstances of our society and its development, and the way that we must curtail our direct impulses in order to survive in a community. Yet for me their best function is their simple testament to the banality of the everyday, to the mere fact that most of the time this is all we seem to be concerned with. This is what matters to many, this is what happens to most, this is what we think and do and talk about, at least by all appearances. This trivia is what largely fills my days, whether I like it or not.