

PERFORMANCE SPACE PRESENTS:

JOHN A. DOUGLAS

Body Fluid II
(redux)

23 MAY – 16 JUNE 2013

Body Fluid II (redux)

Body Fluid II (redux) JOHN A. DOUGLAS

SWITCHED ON

23 May - 16 June 2013

Body Fluid II (redux) - John A.
Douglas

Deviator - PVI Collective

Breathing Monster - Myriam
Gourfink and Kasper Toeplitz
(France)

Forever Now - Brian Ritchie, Jeff
Khan, Thea Baumann, Willoh S
Weiland



The artist would like to acknowledge
and pay respect to the following
Aboriginal nations, Latje Latje,
Kurientje, Gadubanud, Ngarigo, Eora,
and Wiljali, on whose land the works
were recorded and performed.

PROJECT CREDITS

BODY FLUID II (redux), 2013

This 10-hour performance is comprised of seven 85-minute cycles. Each cycle is set by the dialysis cyclor machine.

1. Awakening: 10:00
2. Orbit: 11:25
3. Herculeum 12:50
4. Waltz : 14:15
5. Burden: 15:40
6. Exhaustion: 17:05
7. Rejuvenate: 18:30

Cameras: John A Douglas, Kristian Haggblom, Lena Obergfell, Alejandro Rolandi, Melanie Ryan.

Sound Recordist: John A Douglas, Matt Cuneo

Soundscapes and sound design: John A Douglas, Naomi Oliver.

Samples from: Thomas Koner, Toru Takemitsu, Gyorgy Sviridov, Soviet space radio broadcasts, Stephan Mathieu, Debra Petrovich.

Movement Coach and movement score development: Sue Healey.

Riggers: Alejandro Rolandi, Mark Mitchell.

Special thanks to Su Goldfish, School of Arts and Media, UNSW.

THE VISCERAL GARDEN, 2013

Collaborative performance "Blood of Arachne": Naomi Oliver

Cameras: John A Douglas, Heath Franco, Kristian Haggblom.
Macro Photography & Videography: John A Douglas

Original Soundscapes: Naomi Oliver, Heath Franco

Field Sound Recordist: John A Douglas

Sound Design and Arrangements: Heath franco & John A Douglas.

Chroma key studio consultant: Heath Franco

Editing, digital compositing and animation: John A Douglas

Special Thanks to Derek Williamson, Museum of Human Disease, UNSW, Faculty of Medicine.

Lighting equipment and chroma key studio courtesy UNSWTV

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INTRODUCTION

BODY FLUID II (redux) - front gallery

HD 1080p three-channel video with sound, polystyrene, timber, gold leaf, tatami, peritoneal dialysis machine, stainless steel.

This ten hour durational performance seeks to transform the artist's daily dialysis treatment into an act of self transformation. The work is divided into seven cycles comprising the duration of one treatment that the artist undergoes each day.

The movements and instructions that are performed and evolve slowly over time are an expression of the artist's own experience as a life support patient; social isolation, fatigue, entrapment, the tension between illness and recovery, the fragility life and death and the interconnectedness between all living things. The audience is invited to spend as little or as much time as they wish and may contemplate any illness or death in their own life. Tatami mats are provided for the audience to do this.

THE VISCERAL GARDEN - back gallery

HD 1080p four-channel video with sound, duration - 16 minutes.

The Visceral Garden takes us into a narrative journey divided into four sequences. The journey begins with an alchemical transformation from gold to copper and emerging in a dark forest as a red figure. The protagonist becomes encased in a red membraneous fabric and is trapped into the web of Arachne (Naomi Oliver). Passing through a portal the red figure enters the underworld into the forest of death made of bones and falls into a river of blood. Plunging deep into the underworld the figure free-falls through various organs each of which are afflicted with the same conditions as the artist. He finally is devoured by the diseased organs. While *Body Fluid II (redux)* is based on treatment, this work is the disease itself made manifest.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

JOHN A DOUGLAS b.1960

*Lives and works in Sydney
Represented by Chalk Horse, Surry
Hills, NSW.*

John A. Douglas is an intermedia artist working in photomedia, video, live performance and installation. He has exhibited in both group and solo shows consistently since 2005. He first became known in the late 1970s and 1980s as a drummer for various underground post punk bands releasing a recording in 1980 under the Msquared label and re released on the Laughing Outlaw label in 2005. In the mid 1990's he turned to the visual arts and studied undergraduate and postgraduate studies at COFA UNSW and was awarded a university scholarship completing an MFA in 2008.

John's work has investigated a range of diverse topics including, gender and cultural identity, history and myth making, landscape and trauma. He has been the recipient of Australia Council grants most recently an Interarts AIR grant in 2012. His work has been discussed and reproduced in

various art publications as well as radio interviews and podcasts. His work was the subject of a documentary broadcast on the ABC *Artscape* program in 2009. Photographic and video works are held in the Artbank collection and private collections.

He is currently the inaugural artist in residence at the Museum of Human Disease, UNSW and continues to develop multi stream live art and exhibition projects. He was the founding curator of the live arts initiative *Free Fall* at the Oxford Art Factory and is now entering its third year as a venue for both emerging and mid career artists.

He is a lecturer in video and sound composition at the Faculty of Creative Arts, Wollongong University and works as a freelance artsworker.

www.chalkhorse.com.au

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FLUID THREATS: NOTES ON THE WORK OF JOHN A. DOUGLAS

Different cultures create their own hierarchy of importance for the internal organs of the body. The brain and heart hold privileged positions in Western culture whilst in Chinese medicine the kidneys have special significance as the source of *jing*, which plays a foundational role in longevity and the provision of life essence. John A. Douglas is an artist for whom the failure of his kidneys is the primary subject and interest of his practice. Douglas is known for his endurance dialysis performances and his latest work *Body Fluid II (redux)* is a continuation of this trajectory, in which Douglas performs peritoneal dialysis whilst undertaking a closely scripted movement score, accompanied by sound score and 3-channel video projection.

Douglas is not the first artist to have made his illness-experiencing body the subject of his art - Hannah Wilke, Jo Spence, Bob Flanagan and Melinda Rackham are

others who come to mind. There is a powerful politics behind such a gesture but Douglas is unique in the manner in which pathos, prosthetics, transformation and genuine philosophical and existential questioning fuse. Douglas has constructed a unique visual and conceptual language forged from an unlikely marriage of influences - Japanese B-grade sci fi film, an interest sparked by a visit to Japan undertaken shortly before Douglas commenced dialysis and perhaps intensified by the knowledge of the impending impossibility of overseas travel; elements of Russian mysticism in the films of Andrej Tarkovsky; Nicolas Roeg's 1970s sci-fi classic *The Man Who Fell To Earth*; and the spiritual potency of the Australian landscape, a force deeply formative in Douglas' childhood and adolescence.

Out of this alliance *Body Fluid II (redux)* presents us with a faceless man clad in gold Lycra bodysuit whose attire, and levitational feats in previous iterations of the work, might suggest the super hero. However this impression does not persist for even a microsecond as we quickly register the contradictory and absurdist nature of the spectacle. This body does not perform feats in the conventional sense but rather is deeply anti-

Performance Space

heroic, dragging catheter bag behind him across the performance floor, locked in thwarted endgame dual with his dialysis machine, or slithering in agonized slow motion down the face of an iron-red sand dune in an unnamed Australian desert. The manifest struggle to exist, the faux glamour, and the vista of the artist's distended belly resulting from the dialysis-induced build-up of fluid, and accentuated by the highly reflective Lycra stretched across it, provoke contradictory responses that vie for dominance – humour, registration of the artist's honesty and courage, and something achingly painful which is immediately undercut by the complete absence of sentimentality in Douglas' work. In an architecture reminiscent of the twisted convolutions of intestinal trails themselves, Douglas' work ceaselessly repeats back upon itself, destabilising its own assumptions and refusing any comfortable settling point viewers could take with the work.

Renewal is an equally important part of the artist's language. Like the tides suggested in some of the landscape footage, the dialysis machine drains the entire fluid-filled cavity of Douglas' abdomen during each performance and replaces it with fresh water, salts, glucose, albumin and other

substances that enable Douglas' organs to continue to function for another day. We sit with Douglas while he performs this ritual of self-transformation embodying by turns wakefulness, frustration, renewal and exhaustion, and contemplate the nature of our own aliveness and mortality, perhaps even enter into visceral sympathy with Douglas as we are made more aware of the fluid filled cavities that inhabit our own bodies.

Symbiosis is a defining feature of Douglas' oeuvre. His ambivalent relationship with the medical equipment he depends upon is one enactment of this, played out in explicit form throughout the movement score of *Body Fluid II (redux)*. Whilst Douglas enters a form of planetary confinement each night, orbiting around a sun he depends upon, along an axis determined precisely by the length of his patient line, he also admits to missing his machine on occasions when the dialysis process is skipped. This is more than simply missing the physiological rewards the dialysis process delivers – there is affection and a kind of tenderness for this prosthetic device that is not just an outshoot of his own body, but which enters into his body and in that sense is animated in return by the forces that animate Douglas'

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very being. The machine offers Douglas life at the same moment that Douglas reciprocates the gesture. The relationship between human and medical prosthesis presents an intimacy that we have not yet fully considered. It is more than time and fluids which are shared. Profound medical interventions such as the one Douglas experiences on a nightly basis have spiritual and ontological significance beyond the mechanistic language of spare parts that pervades the medical world and Douglas intuitively recognizes this.

Douglas' recently completed 4-channel video work *The Visceral Garden* takes a darker turn. A work prompted by the progression of Douglas' physical symptoms it is an expression of the artist's grappling with death. Populated by characters inspired by the underworlds of Greco-Roman mythology, its narrative structure is linear rather than circular - in the final scenes Douglas floats or descends through a universe of oversize necrotic organs that threaten, and eventually do, devour him. To create this work Douglas used macro photography of tissue specimens that mirror his own medical history during a residency at the Museum of Human Disease, University of New South Wales - lungs constricted by

asthma, nephritic kidneys with blood vessels knitted together, compromised parathyroid, bone and immune system, the list continues as the collaborative nature of the body is unveiled. Douglas collaborates extensively with other artists in the realisation of his works - choreographers, sculptors, video and sound artists. In this way his practice enacts the kinds of collaborations that sustain life, those from organ to organ and cell to cell, in which decisions are made during molecular conversations in the rapidly unfolding conditions of the now. The body constantly emerges based on these decisions and, like a work of art, their cumulative effect determines the shape of our selfhood.

However like life, death also emerges. Death is not a moment but an extended durational process. Life and death are folds that perpetually fall into and through each other. The shuffle between life and death takes place inside all of us in ways we are rarely aware of. For Douglas this shuffle is explicit and deconstructed - it is enacted each night according to a carefully prescribed timetable of sequential, 85-minute timeslots. Douglas has seized the insights his condition of being have offered up and, faced with the daily struggle to reconcile

the irreconcilable – illness and recovery, wellness and unwellness, rejuvenation and decline – he performs the alchemical transformation of despair into gold, or at least works of art that arrest with the force of the questions they prompt and go to the heart of what the creative act is capable of, its political agency and its ontological significance.

- Helen Pynor, May 2013

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Helen Pynor has been exploring the intersections of art and the life sciences for more than a decade. Pynor holds a Bachelor of Science (1st Class Hons, Macquarie University), a Bachelor of Visual Arts (Sydney College of the Arts), and a practice-based PhD from Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney. Pynor's practice spans installation, media art, bioart, video, photography, sculpture, and performance. Pynor has exhibited widely in Australia and Europe, most recently in solo exhibitions at Galerija Kapelica (Slovenia, with Peta Clancy), The Australian Centre for Photography (Sydney), GV Art (London), Dominik Mersch Gallery (Sydney), Performance Space (Sydney, with Peta Clancy), and Leonardo Electronic Almanac (online, with Peta Clancy). Recent group exhibitions include Science Gallery (Dublin), The OK Center for Contemporary Art (Linz, Austria), The Wellcome Collection (London), GV Art (London), Bargehouse (London) and The Powerhouse Museum (Sydney). In 2012 Pynor was awarded an Honorary Mention in the Hybrid Arts Category of Prix Ars Electronica for her collaborative work with Peta Clancy *The Body is*

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a *Big Place* and she has received national awards in Australia including the RBS Emerging Artist Award (2009) and The Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award (jointly, 2008). Recent residencies include The Heart and Lung Transplant Unit, St Vincent's Hospital (Sydney), SymbioticA (Perth), Performance Space (Sydney), A.R.T. (Tokyo), The Australia Council Studio (London) and Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts (Paris).

PERFORMANCE SPACE

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