Mike Parr is one of Australia’s pre-eminent artists with a practice spanning performance, film, painting, sculpture and printmaking. Emerging from a background of conceptual art in the early 1970s, his interrogatory poems and word works escalated into the provocative performance art for which he is now recognised internationally.

Accumulating under the banner of the *Self Portrait Project*, Parr’s vast body of work uses art and language to crack surfaces and explode character. Delving into memory and the unconscious, his art plays out in a richly associative field in which material gestures are psychologically charged. Resisting a conventional chronology, *Foreign Looking* reveals the dense and delicate connections evident in Parr’s continually experimental practice.
'My archive includes all kinds of documents: detailed specifications for projects, written accounts of my international travel, texts for language pieces, critical articles and, in due course, obsessively detailed diaries that span the whole of my career. All this material constitutes the routine daily accumulations of my work and can be thought of as a portrait of the Australian art world. It’s a very telling portrait, too, because our interaction very often records the difficulties of carrying on a critical practice in a culture that tends to resist innovation in the arts. At this level, my diaries expose me as much as they expose my correspondents and interlocutors, although perhaps me much more, and to my disadvantage, because my frustrations are often close to the surface.'

A prolific diarist, Parr subjects his artistic practice to relentless analysis. Black ink records initial thoughts, while red responds in an effusive and often belligerent back-and-forth, forming an intricate lineage of the artist’s interior dialogue through time.
The montage in space and time

‘My performance work is a form of extreme realism and each document is intended to confront the viewer in a completely unrelieved and uncompromising way … The performance work is meant to be aversive … a limit state in every sense of the meaning of “limit state”.’

The montage in space and time is a new installation comprising performance films made between 1972 and 2016. Flicking back and forth over time and projection channels, the three-hour sequence brings Parr’s most self-aggressive and disarmingly beautiful performance films into concert. Asking no less of his audience than of himself, the divide between artist and audience dissolves.

We Are All Monochromes Now 2003 stands as silent witness to the film cycle. Left-hand coat sleeves are tucked into corresponding pockets, an allusion to the artist’s missing arm. After the excesses of the film, the restraint of the photographs, in which the portrait is reduced to a sequence of coats or shells, underlines the extremes or ‘limit states’ that Parr seeks out within his work.
‘I’ve always assumed that the boards weren’t “art” because art doesn’t come into their production. But their mess, their confusion enables me to think about the structure of disorder. When I saw these boards in combination I realised that they were significant … primeval and fundamental.’

‘You could say that the drawing boards are my attempt to free the self portrait from self-portraiture. I am constantly thinking about the nature of the marks that constitute and deconstruct the self portrait and this throws up the problem of the background. It is the background in particular – notes in relation to the crude drawings and painting – that best complete the boards.’

Frequently made while talking on the telephone or walking around the studio, the drawing boards evidence a piecemeal mode of production. It is often within this format that performances are conceived and reconceived, betraying a fragmentation of thinking that is only resolved by the performance act itself.
TALKS

Artist talk: Absence of totality
Saturday 13 August | 2.00 pm
James O Fairfax Theatre
Incorporating elements of film and performance, Mike Parr discusses his artistic practice since 1970.

Art for lunch
Thursday 18 August | 12.45 pm
Information centre
Roger Butler, Senior Curator, Australian Prints and Drawings, discusses his experience of working with Mike Parr over the course of 30 years.

The minotaur and the mirror: presence, performance and representation in the work of Mike Parr
Saturday 17 September | 2.00 pm
James O Fairfax Theatre
Professor Edward Scheer, Director of Research, School of the Arts and Media at the University of NSW, discusses Mike Parr’s practice in terms of the simultaneous presencing and displacement of the artist. Particular focus will be given to Parr’s recent ‘retrospective’ works such as Asylum: Entry by Mirror Only at Dark Mofo in June 2016.

Art for lunch
Thursday 22 September | 12.45 pm
Information centre
Peta Jane Blessing, NGA Research Library Archivist, discusses Mike Parr’s extensive archive, which was acquired by the National Gallery of Australia in 2012.

Ritual and extreme actions: performance art and its contexts
Saturday 24 September | 2.00 pm
James O Fairfax Theatre
Professor Anne Marsh, Professorial Research Fellow at the Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, discusses performance art in Australia and internationally with a focus on ritual practice and extreme body actions.

TALKS

Art for lunch
Thursday 20 October | 12.45 pm
Information centre
Sue Cramer, Curator, Heide Museum of Modern Art, discusses the concept of Inhibodress and the important role it played in Mike Parr’s early practice.

Reproduction zero
Saturday 22 October | 2.00 pm
Information centre
Sarina Noordhuis-Fairfax, Curator, Australian Prints and Drawings, discusses the role of drawing within Parr’s practice.

TOURS

Curator's tour
Saturday 20 August | 2.00 pm
Temporary Exhibition Gallery
Elspeth Pitt, Assistant Curator, Australian Prints and Drawings and curator of Mike Parr: Foreign Looking, gives a tour of the exhibition.

ASI: Art Scene Investigation OUT THERE ART (ages 7–12)
Tuesday 4 October | 10.30 am – 12 noon
Throughout the Gallery | $12, $10 child members (includes morning tea)
Does art push your buttons? Does it scare or excite you, make you think about stuff in unexpected ways? The Art Scene Investigation Squad will help you get to the bottom of it all.
WORKSHOPS

Create space: Quick zines
10.00 am – 4.00 pm
Information centre
Saturday 20 & Sunday 21 August
Saturday 27 & Sunday 28 August
Saturday 3 & Sunday 4 September
Saturday 10 & Sunday 11 September
Be inspired by the works on paper in Mike Parr: Foreign Looking and create your very own zine. Zines are an easy DIY publishing system to share your stories, ideas and thoughts. Drop-in any time, no booking required.

Art explorer: Zine time
(ages 8–12)
Thursday 6 October | 10.30 am – 4.00 pm
Information centre | $60, $55 child members
(all materials and tools supplied)
Zines are a fun and easy DIY publishing system and an international underground movement. Be inspired by works of art created by Mike Parr as we take you through the what and how of zine creation. This full day workshop includes experimentation with typewriters, dymo labels and other quirky materials. Bring your own morning tea and lunch.

Palimpsest: Layers of meaning drawing workshop with Penny Low
Saturday 15 October | 10.00 am– 12.30 pm
Information centre | $45, $40 members (includes all materials and life model)
Join Educator Penny Low for a workshop exploring Mike Parr’s drawing practice using a live model. Participants will create layers of drawings on transparent paper to form a composite image of the human face. A range of materials including cartridge and tracing paper, graphite and pastels will be used. Maximum 15 participants.

PERFORMANCES

Alphabet/Haemorrhage Libretto
Saturday 15 October | 2.00 pm
Information centre
A new arrangement of the Alphabet/Haemorrhage Libretto by Dr Alexander Hunter, lecturer at the ANU School of Music. First written by Mike Parr in 1992 the libretto must be rearranged each time it is performed. Program supported by the ANU School of Music.

Telling Time
Saturday 29 October | 2.00 pm
Information centre
Telling Time is a live performance by artists Amala Groom and Frances Barrett, evolving from Mike Parr’s interest in language and poetry. Amala will teach Frances phrases relating to time and temporality in Wiradjuri, the language of central NSW. Through the remembering, echoing and patterning of language, they speak of place and identity, perform a gesture of healing, and give voice to the miwi (spirit): the essential thread between us.

Reading for the end of time
Saturday 5 November from 10.30 am
venue TBC
Mike Parr undertakes a durational performance based on Roland Barthes’ Camera Lucida.

ONGOING

Information Centre
Peta Jane Blessing, NGA Research Library Archivist, will work in the Information centre every Friday between 11.00 am and 12.00 noon.

Theatrette
A curated selection of the artist’s performance films (1971–2016) screens in the theatrette daily between 10.30 am and 4.30 pm.
'The Bride is a constructed image, a kind of screen or cosmetic overlay. The repetitive duration of the Bride performances wears the image down. I am interested in disrupting the symbolic order. The breaking of the image remains very important to me.'

Parr’s alter-ego, the Bride, entered his work in the early 1990s. Many ideas feed into her. But often she implies the threshold state that a person enters into during a ritual or custom; a fragile point at which a person no longer possesses their pre-ritual status but is yet to acquire the new one they will hold once the ritual is complete.

In *The End of Nature* 1998 the Bride walks on the frozen Baltic Sea until collapsing from cold. An almost indiscernible figure within the white, icy atmosphere, she exists in a delicate space between gender, language, life and death.
‘26 Untitled Self Portraits 1981–96 is a very important series. My first attempts at drawing filled me with despair … but I began to think about these drawings “psychoanalytically”. They seem particularly potent if only because of a kind of struggle that is represented in their range.’

Largely untrained as an artist, Parr began drawing in the 1980s as an extension of his performance practice. *26 Untitled Self Portraits* includes his earliest efforts. Reflecting his intense engagement with psychoanalytic theory, the shifting collection of likenesses reveals the self as impermanent and unstable. Emerging from above and beneath the paper, the drawings are like unconscious identities floating up towards the surface of skin.

The relationship between medium and concept is extended in *Bronze liars* 1996. Modelling the sculpture partially blind, Parr simultaneously groped out and deformed the features of 16 portrait busts. Cast in cool bronze and yellow wax, the contrasting materials suggest conscious and unconscious minds, cold reason and bodily warmth.
Water from the Mouth

‘Water from the Mouth 2001 was performed continuously for 10 days. I remained in solitary confinement in a 12-foot-square room, which had been purpose built as a freestanding cube. The title, Water from the Mouth, had come to me because I had imagined that my extreme isolation might induce a spillage of interior monologue, and in anticipation I had the room carefully miked, so that my mutterings could be relayed into the gallery … [But] language seemed to leave my mind as isolation and starvation took hold. For a great deal of the time, I seemed to be floating in an image world of memory.’

Describing the piece as his most concerted effort to embody ‘pointlessness’, Parr lacked a horizon from which to build perspective; lost words with which to form linear strands of thought; and his body, broadcast onto the internet, was infinitely displaced onto screens throughout the world.
‘Poetry seemed like self indulgence … 
In a way, for me, poetry was a provisional way of organising visual perceptions. It was also a conventional romantic identification that I was waiting to violate.’

‘A very cool, austere room …
presenting a mental, linguistic knot.’


Parr observed in the early 1990s that the portraits he made obsessively during the previous decade formed an expanding alphabet, a ‘dream-like text’. By comparison, the clinical ticking over of words and numbers in *Blind Obedience/Silent Majority* 1998–2005 denies the poetic possibility of language: an oblique reference to the German philosopher Theodor Adorno’s claim that it is barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz.
'I am not destroying these works but completing them and I’m completing them by including the video documentation of their painting out in the final presentation of form. I imagine filming all of the complexity of their surface, as the imagery is disappearing, and I imagine the time of this process of their disappearance played out on a screen beside them.’

‘I have a funny relationship to time …
I operate in a kind of spiral.’

On 29 August 2015 Parr covered six immense prints with red paint. The performance was physically demanding, an act of self-aggression, a decisive end imparted on a body of work. Yet it also revealed the conceptual arc extending throughout Parr’s practice – accumulating tension and forceful release.

Parr linked the work to another: Social Gestus No. 5 (the “Armchop”) 1977 in which he re-enacted the trauma of losing his arm by slashing a prosthetic limb from his body. The act of cutting away and cutting into, of accrual and cancelling out, has shaped a circular body of work that continually reflects and enriches itself.
‘Rules and Displacement Activities has emerged as a self portrait in the context of a group portrait. I am trying … to describe myself from a kind of social base.’

The theatrette focuses on Parr’s work as a filmmaker. Its centrepiece is the epic cycle *Rules and Displacement Activities* 1973–83. Among the most ambitious experimental films ever made in Australia, its decade-long production involved a fluctuating band of collaborators.

Divided into three parts, *Rules and Displacement Activities* explores the innate drives compelling human behaviour and relations. The first part documents Parr’s relationship with his audience; the second endeavours to remedy alienation with sensuality; and the dramatic conclusion probes the role of family in individual identity. In the vivid action *Family under Water* 1977–81 Parr’s father, mother, wife and daughter appear beneath a rock pool that monstrously distorts their features.
‘[The Archive] is really an accidental configuration. It’s the outcome of the most humdrum, “automatic” aspect of my activity as an artist … some of my father’s siblings and his father died from tuberculosis at home before the First World War. The disease scourged the family, and his mother seemingly filled the absence implied by their empty rooms with her vast compulsive collections.

‘Similarly, my activity as an archivist is obsessive accumulation without much pre-thought. But, having said that … my works can’t really be separated out from the background that produced them, and the archive has come to preserve that background in a particularly complex way.’

In 1974 Parr installed Information Centres No. 1 & 2 at Central Street Gallery, Sydney and the Contemporary Art Society, Adelaide. These installations were the first displays of Parr’s archive of Fluxus and conceptual artworks, books, magazines, LPs and posters, collected at Inhibodress, the artist co-operative he co-established in 1970, and later while travelling in Europe.

Established in the same spirit as Parr’s early installations the Information Centre holds a selection of the artist’s sprawling archive. Throughout the exhibition this interactive space is also a site for talks, workshops, lectures and new performance pieces. Once a week, the NGA’s archivist works within the space, filing and preserving Parr’s voluminous correspondence and personal effects.
Facts about the Room

‘Facts about the Room [1970] is the earliest extant work and my first attempt at moving beyond poetry in the direction of conceptual art. It is pure and remote … apprehension running through a text that hints at deeper disturbances.’

Parr observed that, ‘To begin talking about a fact … is to lose it’. While the first statement of the installation is assured (the windows in the room are made of glass), successive ‘facts’ are inflected with metaphor (the glass is a picture), anxiety (the glass is paradoxical) and as night falls, menace (the room in a sense is now finished). Revealing language as unstable, not authoritative, the work paves the way for Parr’s practice, which relentlessly probes linguistic, political and behavioural systems.
BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1945 Mike Parr grew up in rural Queensland before moving to Sydney with his partner Felizitas in the late 1960s. Co-establishing Australia’s first artist collective, Inhibodress, in 1970 he was a formative stimulus in the development of conceptual art and performance art in this country. A fierce critic of the Australian art world and a vital link to its international counterpart, Parr has been a divisive and highly influential figure for almost fifty years.

Parr has exhibited extensively both in Australia and internationally, including at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris and Museum of Modern Art, New York. His performance practice was the focus of the retrospective Edelweiss at Kunsthalle Vienna in 2012, and will be included in the forthcoming Kochi-Muziris Biennale, India in 2016. Parr represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1980 and presented the major installation The Ghost who Talks at the Palazzo Mora in 2015.

Note: Artist texts are edited extracts drawn from email exchanges with the exhibition curators, in addition to published works including Breaking through language: Mike Parr interviewed by Edward Scheer and Nick Tsoutsas, 1997; Uncorrupted joy: edited excerpts from emails to Kristine Stiles, 23 July – 26 November 2001; Identities: a critical study of the work of Mike Parr 1970 – 1990 by David Bromfield, 1991; Performing genealogies: contemporary Australian performance art after Mike Parr by Helen Hughes, 2016; and In conversation: Mike Parr interviewed by Elspeth Pitt, 2016.

Mike Parr The Sickness Unto Death (detail) Sydney, 2010–15, colour photograph