

THERAPY SESSION

TIMOTHY MORRELL TAKES A CATHARTIC TOUR THROUGH *LET THE HEALING BEGIN*, AN EXHIBITION THAT ASKS WHETHER ART HEALS OR HURTS.



There is a popular belief among the general public that all artists are a little mad. Among artists there is sometimes a nagging suspicion that despite being perfectly sane, they run the risk of being driven crazy by their work. On the face of it, art would therefore not appear to promote mental health. Even if the demands of sustaining an art practice can stretch an artist's ability to remain balanced, the work they produce may have a consoling, calming and indeed therapeutic effect on viewers. Or so many viewers like to believe.

The 1977 video of **Mike Parr** apparently chopping off his arm is not, however, that kind of therapeutic art. It's one of the works in the exhibition *Let the Healing Begin* at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane which presents confronting, often cathartic images and examines their salutary effects. Curator of the exhibition, IMA director **Robert Leonard**, considers contemporary art to be "riddled with therapeutic subtexts and strategies," and has assembled a group of works by Australian and international artists which "address therapy". The exhibition explores this theme from various angles while maintaining a neutral position. "Some of the works endorse therapeutic imperatives," Leonard says, "some satirise them, others are undecided."

The exhibition also includes videos in which **Marina Abramovic** and Ulay (**Frank Uwe Laysiepen**) scream and slap each other, and **Polly Borland's** photographs of people in masks and bodysuits that transform them into monstrous humanoids. Video and photography are the dominant media here, recording actions that allow an individual's familiar and acceptable persona to break down, releasing primal versions of themselves that are not socially conditioned. "Therapy," according to Leonard, "is all about making and unmaking – restoring and repairing – one's self."

Most of the works in the show are startling to a lesser or greater degree, locating art in the outer reaches of bizarre behaviour. A curator seeking to engage the public's desire for sensation rather than the viewers' intellectual curiosity could easily have subtitled this exhibition "art and madness" rather than "art and therapy".

Art therapy is generally dismissed by the professional art world, where the work of so-called outsider artists – eccentric amateurs – attracts serious attention, but only on the grounds that the maker is somewhat deranged or deluded and therefore interesting. The idea that making art can make the artist better has more currency in the



medical profession than it does in the art world. Leonard is "interested in the disavowal of the idea" by the majority of professional artists, when a minority regard it as essential to the meaning of their work. He emphasises that there are no outsider artists in this exhibition. Everyone in the show has a substantial and, in many cases, major international reputation.

The starting point for the exhibition is the Viennese actionist group, comprised of various artists working in the 1960s and 1970s in the home city of **Sigmund Freud**. They regarded art as a laboratory for social experiment and organised events and happenings designed to free participants from the psychological straightjacket of conventional behaviour. The earliest work in the exhibition is *Kardinal*, a 1967 film by **Otto Muehl**, who subsequently set up a free love commune.

Melbourne artist **Stuart Ringholt**, author of the autobiographical *Hashish Psychosis: What It's Like to Be Mentally Ill and Recover*, provided Leonard with the motivation for this project. Ringholt cites his art practice as a key element of his recovery, although his family initially opposed his ambition to be an artist, believing art to be the source of his problems. This situation opens up a debate and

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From far left:

Mike Parr, *Cathartic Action: Social Gestus No. 5 [Armchop]*, 1977. Photograph. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, SYDNEY/MELBOURNE

Mike Parr, *Portrait of M and F*, 1996. Photograph. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND ANNA SCHWARTZ GALLERY, SYDNEY/MELBOURNE

Tony Oursler, *Blue*, 2004. Fiber glass form with video and sound. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND JENSEN GALLERY, AUCKLAND/SYDNEY



Leonard's exhibition provides a forum for it. There is a program of accompanying events with films and a panel discussion, *Talking Cure*, with participants including Mike Parr and **Scott Stephens**, the ABC's online editor of religion and ethics.

Ringholt's practice includes conducting public workshops designed to rid participants of their inhibitions. (Before the opening of *Let the Healing Begin* he conducted a tour of the show, during which he and all participants were naked.) He has said that art "is what brought sanity to my life" and offers the same opportunity to others.

Some of the work in the exhibition is inescapably funny. **Mike Kelley** exhibits a political poster with the message that America's primary health issue is the low self-esteem induced by celebrity culture, which could be rectified if celebrities were forced to work with members of the public in sex clinics. There is a tiny sculpture by **Ronnie van Hout** of a man dressed as a banana holding a placard bearing the words "HELP ME". His self-portrait sculpture as twins, *Doom and Gloom*, is intended to represent both sides of his personality.

Overall, however, the artists are equivocally earnest. The work of

Mike Parr, also part of an ongoing self-portrait project, exemplifies what Leonard describes as the "hurting and healing" process. After the bloody and traumatic amputation of the artificial limb in Parr's *Cathartic Action* video, it is replaced by an arm knitted for him by his sister. Like the possibility of art rectifying the ills of the world in general, the idea that it can help with our personal problems will always be contentious, but will always have an optimistic following.

Let the Healing Begin at the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane continues until 30 April 2011.

From left:

Robin Hungerford, *Like a hole in the head*, 2010, detail, video with sound. COURTESY: THE ARTIST

Ronnie van Hout, *Bananaman*, 2005. COURTESY: THE ARTIST, UPLANDS GALLERY, MELBOURNE, IVAN ANTHONY, AUCKLAND, AND HAMISH McKAY GALLERY, WELLINGTON

Polly Borland, *Untitled XVII [Smudge]*, 2010, detail. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND MURRAY WHITE ART ROOM, MELBOURNE

