



Clockwise from left:
The Wedding Portrait
 (detail), 2003, by Ms &
 Mr; *Shroud/Chrysalis*,
 2000, by Catherine
 Richards; Monika Tichacek
 models for herself -
 production stills from *The
 Shadows*, 2004; *Hayden
 Christensen*, 2002, by Sam
 Taylor-Wood; Tilda Swinton
 sleeps through *The Maybe*,
 1995, by Cornelia Parker.



Subject matter

What is it like to be an artwork? Michelle Bateman speaks to artists who have turned their bodies and their lives into works of art



I am wrapped, mummy-style, in a sheet of metallic gauze and lying on a glass-topped table in the middle of an art gallery. I'm not an artist, but right now I am an artwork.

The artist, Canadian Catherine Richards, calls this work *Shroud/Chrysalis* and fashioned the gauze out of copper to block the electromagnetic waves that surround us everywhere, every day. She tells me that when she wraps herself in the cloth it leaves her skin feeling "clean", a sensation she likens to a humming refrigerator – it's only when the buzz is turned off that you truly notice it. But it's the exhibition's opening night and the steady stream of gallery-goers is proving buzzier than any atmospheric waves.

"You look beautiful," one visitor tells me. "Who's in there?" asks another. "Can I ask some personal questions?" propositions a polite Japanese man with a camcorder. And they don't just talk. One joker takes great delight in tickling my feet, while others poke and prod at me. So much for feeling clean.

The Sydney-based artist Monika Tichacek has had a similar experience. In her performance piece *I Wanna Be Loved By You*, she lay inside a coffin-like box for two hours, with visitors to the gallery looking at her heavily made-up face through a glass peephole. "Some people were very confused as to whether I was actually a real person or not, and they would pinch and squeeze my feet to see if I was of real flesh," Tichacek writes by email from the Amazon, where she's researching a new series of artworks. "I had one man put his face on the glass and do some very obscure kissing simulation – thank God for the glass! He kept repeating, 'Do you wanna kissy-kissy?'"

Most artists project a piece of themselves into their work, but few actually become the art. RoseLee Goldberg, author of *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (Thames & Hudson), says that in every major art movement of the 20th century, performance and the avant-garde have gone hand in hand, but it was only in

the 1960s and 70s that it became "accepted as a medium of artistic expression in its own right". Back in those heady days, performance art was seen as a way of making the political personal – of bringing it right down to the level of a living, breathing human body. Think Yoko Ono at Carnegie Hall in 1965, cutting her dress off for *Cut Piece*.

Today, artists have other aims in mind. While Sam Taylor-Wood filmed David Beckham sleeping and actors including Hayden Christensen crying as a comment on our intimate relationship with celebrity, the actress Tilda Swinton went a step further, dispensing with the cameras to sleep "live" for eight-hour stints in English artist Cornelia Parker's 1995 work *The Maybe* at London's Serpentine Gallery. The work posed questions about mortality; the discreet sign next to Swinton's glass display case read: "Matilda Swinton, (1960-)"

Sydney-based artist Hannah Furnage sees the visceral aspect of performance as a way of connecting more directly with an audience.

In 2004, she spent seven hours submerged in a fish tank surrounded by live eels for *Scoring Dope For Sally*, a work inspired by the tragic murder of Sydney prostitute and heroin addict Sally Anne Huckstep, whose body was found in a pond in Centennial Park.

"I aim to provoke an emotional response," Fumage tells me. "It's not really so much of an intellectual thing and in that way I like to be democratic, so that everyone can access it. The key to the fish tank was that people were actually seeing it and physically putting themselves into that situation. And everyone knows how it feels to be cold, so the reaction was through that."

Not surprisingly, many people feared for Fumage's safety. "We had some guy who came running in off the street and he was like, 'I'm a doctor, get her out of there, this woman's going into hypothermia!'," she recalls. If these reactions sound passionate and extreme, that's possibly because when an artist becomes an artwork, he or she shifts from being an individual to being public property. "It's very interesting, what gets triggered in people [by a work]," writes Tichacek. "I try to put myself into an objective place and just watch what happens. Sometimes it's scary."

At other times the response isn't so intense. Some performances fall into the realm of "endurance art" which, as its name suggests, can stretch over days or weeks. The Yugoslavian artist Marina Abramovic is well known for withstanding extreme pain and fear — she's been slashed with razor blades, had a loaded gun held to her head and walked 2,500 kilometres along the Great Wall of China, all in the name of art — and "enduring" extra-long performances. In 2002, she lived for 12 days straight in full view of the public in a New York gallery, a performance that inspired a scene in the final season of *Sex and the City*. Viewers of the TV show will recall that Carrie Bradshaw met Mikhail Baryshnikov's character, Aleksandr Petrovsky, at a gallery in which a woman was not eating or talking for 16 days. "Frankly, I don't buy the 24-hour not eating thing. I bet that if anyone bothered to come down here at the three in the morning, she wouldn't even be up there, she'd be round the corner having a Big Mac," Carrie quipped. Aleksandr suggested they return at 3am, just to be sure. While the artist had kept to her promised routine, at some point she had run out of audience — she was on display, yet ignored. This is not uncommon, as only the biggest blockbuster exhibitions could boast a packed gallery around the clock for 16 or, as in Abramovic's case, even 12 days.

Like Abramovic, Tichacek has experienced her share of physical discomfort,

having stuck pins in her body, used needles to attach a long wig to her forehead and sewn her legs together. She offers an interesting perspective on those times when audiences would rather queue for another glass of chardonnay or catch up with acquaintances than give her their undivided attention. "I can handle much more pain when I have an audience," she tells me. "The times without an audience are much more difficult to get through. My attention shifts exclusively to my physical condition."

For Fumage, however, it's all part of being on display. Her seven-hour stint in a fish tank pales in comparison to the four weeks she spent sprawled in a chair for *Fear of Joy*, a collaborative work with German artist Via Lewandowsky. "Even the gallery staff started to think I was the artwork and would carry on with business as usual. I was [sitting there], kind of listening to the gossip and people would just go about as if I wasn't a real person," she says. It's like being the guest of honour at a fabulous party, only to have everyone turn their backs on you.

Rather than exhibit their physical bodies, Sydney artists Richard and Stephanie Nova Milne, who work under the moniker Ms & Mr, use their entire relationship as the basis for their art. Recently, they re-edited the video footage shot at their own wedding for a work called, naturally enough, *The Wedding Video*. Having met as teenagers, the pair married when Stephanie was 19 and Richard 21, partly as a way of "playing" or experimenting with the social traditions of marriage.

"It was kind of a funny, crazy thing to do at the time, because you just don't get married at [that] age," Stephanie explains. "The idea of using it as the subject really came from other people's reactions. People always wanted to discuss it, and everyone had such strong opinions about it. It made us think about why we did it, so much, and maybe in a way that most people don't. And therefore it was easier for us to start processing it in some ways." That was in 1999. Seven years later, the video edit was a way for the pair to travel back in time and put a new spin on things. "It was a form of self-defacement in a way, a kind of graffiti, of writing over."

The idea of writing over is an important one. Just as we might reinvent ourselves by experimenting with a shorter hemline or different shade of lipstick, some artists also use make-up and costume in the process of becoming an artwork. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is Orlan, a French artist who completely changed her appearance through plastic surgery. Some of her earlier surgeries were beamed around the world via satellite, while in the 1990s she underwent

various procedures to make her resemble famous artworks, such as the *Mona Lisa*.

Ms & Mr take a more tongue-in-cheic approach, writing on their web site: "The couple had, from time to time, indulged in trying to match haircuts. However, due to differing bone structure and the oversized features of one member, this approach was abandoned in favour of matching T-shirts in inverse colour schemes, which only one member actually wears during daily activities." Stephanie later told me that when making their art: "sometimes what we wear is what we'd wear on a day-to-day basis and sometimes what we put on is kind of exaggerated, but it's never really a costume in the sense that we're trying to step into something else."

It's easy to see why some viewers might be slightly baffled, particularly at exhibition openings. "For some people, there's a confusion between when you're an artwork and when you're not an artwork. When you're a bit too convincing a certain way," says Stephanie. For their own sake, because their lives are so entwined with their art, creating Ms & Mr was "a way to delineate ourselves, so that we're not a constant work of art. We needed that separation for ourselves, because we still need to be Richie and Steph, for our own personal relationship."

That said, the line between art and life is definitely blurred. "We're using every resource we have, which just happens to be our lives," says Richard, adding that there is a certain porousness between the two, an understanding that life and art will necessarily seep into each other.

Indeed, all the artists I spoke with for this story echoed the idea that being an artwork requires a willingness to allow the art to infiltrate each and every aspect of their lives. "My art and life are completely interlinked," says Tichacek. "For me, there is no 'outside' of art." Fumage believes this is a side effect unique to this type of art: "If you're a painter and you've painted a painting, you can look at it, and you can walk away from it."

I can see their point. After only 20 minutes of "being" *Shroud/Chrysalis*, the experience had had a profound effect on me. Typically for a chrysalis, a creature different from the one that entered it emerged; I now know that the same is true of the process of being an artwork. It wasn't the absence of electromagnetic waves or the "clean" feeling that left the deepest impact — it was the "shrouding" process itself. Later that night, I dreamed the walls of my room were closing in on me, that I was being buried alive. I woke with a start, trying to claw my way out. ■