

CYNTHIA SCHWERTSIK

Cynthia Schwertsik's art practice was seeded at a revolutionary time in the arts, when progressive cross-disciplinary and socially-engaged practices emerged, shifting the focus of art away from the 'object' and toward the 'action'. Informed by her background in dance, Schwertsik's visual art practice is largely performative and site-specific. It spans painting, drawing, installation, photography and moving image; as well as public art and interventions, residencies and collaborative projects. Originating from Austria, she currently lives in the Adelaide Hills, developing and presenting projects in Sydney, Broken Hill, Adelaide and throughout regional South Australia. Since the early 1990s, her work has also been commissioned in Europe, South Africa and the USA.

I first met Schwertsik's in 2015, at Australian Experimental Art Foundation. I was Program Manager, and she was one of a cohort of art student volunteers for *Performance Presence / Video Time (PP/VT)*, a major survey project curated by Professor Anne Marsh. Schwertsik assisted Jill Orr, a doyen of Australian performative environmental art, in preparing her live work.

It was in the following year that I was struck with a sense of Schwertsik's modus operandi and the ideologies of her own practice. She was in the audience for a performance by Dadang Christanto, at the opening of his AEA exhibition 1965. The project referenced the 1965-66 mass killings in Indonesia when the artist's father had 'disappeared', most likely abducted. Standing in front of a wall emblazoned with '1965' in dripping, blood-red paint, Dadang invited the audience to participate by throwing small flour-filled pouches at him. He sat down cross-legged against the wall and closed his eyes. The atmosphere grew palpable. Overcoming their initial reluctance, onlookers began a surge of throwing the pouches. Although most were visibly uncomfortable with their actions, two cackling men fired forceful fistfuls of missiles at the artist; it was utterly disturbing. In the meantime, Schwertsik lay herself on the floor, face-down toward Dadang as he sat motionless being pelted with flour bombs. She had instinctively understood his work. Now in retrospect, she remarks: "I was overwhelmed by the alarming need to take sides in what was a demonstration of how fast a situation can turn into a warzone; there was something demonstrative of a normalising mass-behaviour happening." Her response was one of compassionate activism, an offering of care in a context that spoke of carelessness.

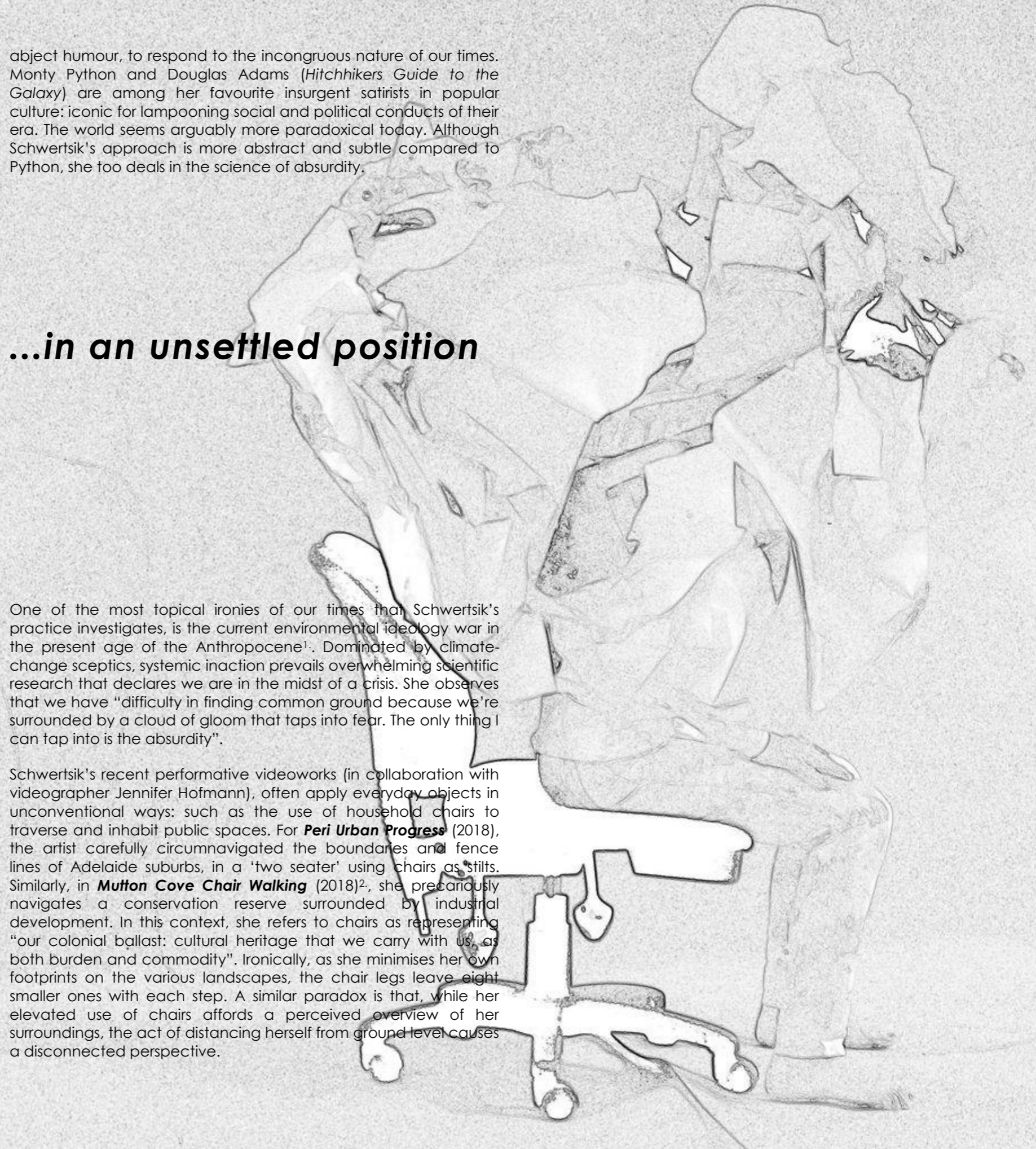
Schwertsik's art practice is underpinned by the significance of care and intuitive action. However, unlike Dadang or Orr, she uses

object humour, to respond to the incongruous nature of our times. Monty Python and Douglas Adams (*Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*) are among her favourite insurgent satirists in popular culture: iconic for lampooning social and political conducts of their era. The world seems arguably more paradoxical today. Although Schwertsik's approach is more abstract and subtle compared to Python, she too deals in the science of absurdity.

...in an unsettled position

One of the most topical ironies of our times that Schwertsik's practice investigates, is the current environmental ideology war in the present age of the Anthropocene¹. Dominated by climate-change sceptics, systemic inaction prevails overwhelming scientific research that declares we are in the midst of a crisis. She observes that we have "difficulty in finding common ground because we're surrounded by a cloud of gloom that taps into fear. The only thing I can tap into is the absurdity".

Schwertsik's recent performative videoworks (in collaboration with videographer Jennifer Hofmann), often apply everyday objects in unconventional ways: such as the use of household chairs to traverse and inhabit public spaces. For *Peri Urban Progress* (2018), the artist carefully circumnavigated the boundaries and fence lines of Adelaide suburbs, in a 'two seater' using chairs as stilts. Similarly, in *Mutton Cove Chair Walking* (2018)², she precariously navigates a conservation reserve surrounded by industrial development. In this context, she refers to chairs as representing "our colonial ballast: cultural heritage that we carry with us, as both burden and commodity". Ironically, as she minimises her own footprints on the various landscapes, the chair legs leave eight smaller ones with each step. A similar paradox is that, while her elevated use of chairs affords a perceived overview of her surroundings, the act of distancing herself from ground level causes a disconnected perspective.



As well as deploying ordinary found objects, Schwertsik's work features routine moments and scenes, to highlight the habitual nature of our existence. **Double Check** (2017–), is an ongoing videowork series of self-portraits that she adds to annually. In a world where our physical presence is increasingly defined through digital platforms, these works question contemporary social rubrics. She writes "I increasingly feel the need to double-check my presence through touch, to bridge the gap between visual appearance and the kinetic experience of being alive". The series shows the artist interrupting daily mundane chores to periodically drop everything, press a sheet of paper into her face and fervently rub charcoal over its contours, then seamlessly resume the task at hand. Commenting on the challenge of simultaneously maintaining her art practice while keeping up with daily domestic demands, she questions the sustainability of the ludicrous pace and expectations of modern living

During Schwertsik's 2019 Kangaroo Island residency (SA), *Double Check*'s underpinning concept of self-care shifted toward the politics of caring about the environment. While debate persists about whether climate change is man-made or indeed real, the world tussles between enjoying untenable modern conveniences, versus the urgency to minimise our carbon footprint. In the meantime, mountains of scientific research accumulates on unthinkable reams of paper destined to disappear into storage and gather dust, outdated and irrelevant.

Commenting on our tendency to overthink to the point of inertia, Schwertsik's videowork **HeadSpace** (2019) explores the body as a vessel for absorbing and processing knowledge. Here we see the artist carefully pivot on an office chair in her studio. Her head is engulfed by a giant billowing mass of crumpled documents – an assemblage of earlier drawings, maps, memos, news articles, which have accumulated around her and which she regularly sifts through. She describes this studio fuel load as being a "collection of all that knowledge... if it's not put to use, I'll suffocate under it". As she slowly turns, she occasionally pauses as if searching for direction or meaning through the layers of information that fills her headspace. Schwertsik's recycling of salvaged 'single-use' documents, highlights the irrational politics and ethics of endless deliberating about environmental sustainability.

Experimentation from her time on Kangaroo Island continued to unfold during her 2020 Sauerbier House residency in Port Noarlunga

SA. Here, her primary source of material was piles of 1990s South Australian weather maps, which had been accrued by a meteorologist relative and laid dormant in her home for years. Initially, Schwertsik made *Double Check*-style self-portraits on the backs of the maps as an alternative way of 'locating' herself. Discarding the use of charcoal and reaching beyond the surface of her face, her subsequent videowork **HeadSpace II** (2020) extended the notion of the body as an agent of consciousness and activation. We see her systematically wrap and crease the maps around each of her body parts, as if physically absorbing their information. Carefully, each mould is exfoliated and placed on the studio floor in a loose construction of shells that represent the remnants of all that thinking. There's a pause, then she flattens out each sheet in a gesture, as she says, of "fixing, restoring, ironing out, neatening – *doing* instead of submitting to the weight of it". Split into three screens looping simultaneously, *HeadSpace II* highlights that "going in circles is very human"; much like the way **Double Check** draws a parallel between artists' administrative obligations and domestic duties.

Drawing inspiration from Ben Okri's book *The Freedom Artist* – described by the publishers as an "examination of how freedom is threatened in a post-truth society"³. – Schwertsik's Sauerbier House residency explored "how care can be a practice of political consequence". Her resultant exhibition, *...in an unsettled position*, refers to the self-imposed, perpetual disruption of her own status within the places she occupies. It can be seen as an act of resistance against taking unfair advantage of our privilege as the dominant species, at the expense of the natural environment.

Recognising that native animals and plants are instinctive carers, Schwertsik says: "there's very little space between intuiting and acting". She laments that escalating capitalism has caused us to lose our intuition in knowing how best to preserve and sustain our natural resources; in favour of exploitation in the quest for profit, as seen in the proliferation of mining and monocultures. Schwertsik offers an antidote: "We need to step back, be quiet and listen. But how do you listen to trees or animals, or even create the space to?"

Among the deep tragedy of human lives lost in recent nationwide fires and floods, the endemic decimation of wildlife has threatened some species with extinction. Schwertsik perceives that "as a consequence of diminishing diversity, our imagination is depleted". She visualises an irrational future where humans must mimic the vanished flora and fauna to fill the void left in our ecosystem. In her videowork **Double Footed Salt Lake Elk of the Southern Hemisphere** the artist performs the role of an imaginary extinct species, stealthily moving through a paperbark forest that is dying from over-salination due to excessive land clearing. Camouflaged in white, with makeshift antlers using the legs of an upturned plastic garden chair over her head, her figure is barely distinguishable as it gently animates the ghost-like woodland. Positioning herself as the landscape, she asks: "when will it be too

late to walk a mile in its shoes" and better understand the natural world's vulnerabilities?

Artist residencies are hotbeds for propagating concepts and seeding new ones. Schwertsik often concludes hers with bodies of work that, instead of 'complete', act as punctuations that herald the next phase of research. Her Sauerbier House residency continued her homage to the remnants of wildlife within and on the fringes of our urban spaces. **Anthropocentric Speculations (1-3)** is a series of three videoworks about the interconnectedness of all living things, and explores further the absurd postulation that we could replace extinct species by impersonating them. One was filmed on the bank of Ngangkiparri (Kurna Women's River or Onkaparinga River), which flows adjacent to the colonial Sauerbier House villa. The other two are set in the dunes of the nearby St Vincent Gulf shore. In all of them we see only the artist's upside-down legs, clad in various trousers and boots. Bending and twisting out from amongst clumps of bushes, they oscillate between seeming obviously human, and possibly flora or fauna.



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In the two works set in the dunes amongst thick scrub, her sprawling limbs could be read as avian predators, a prehistoric coastal plant, or even a trifid. The version on the bank is set against the backdrop of the river's glassy surface that inversely reflects the sky and overhead bridge, suggesting an underwater scene. Here, her legs sway like reeds, or a pair of searching ibises: the artist was later told of the now rare Glossy Ibis that once populated this region. In all three works, the figure's head is again hidden. Schwertsik implies that "with no head there is no logic, only absurdity". As well as the old adage of 'burying one's head in the sand', she recalls childhood memories of her sister sitting at the dinner table with her head under a blanket, believing she was invisible.

On the other hand, planting her head in nature is a witty proposal for how to act on the urgency to *listen* to the land that we inhabit.

Anthropocentric Speculations revisits a public intervention work, **Conceptual Balance** (2018), in collaboration with Renate Nisi and Zoe Freney. In central Adelaide, during the business district's lunch breaks, the artists performed headstands amongst pockets of greenery, as Schwertsik writes, to "become part of the surrounding rhythm of plants". It was their way of urging us to "take our heads out of the flat world of 'brainy' screens, made only of pixels", and connect with the natural biosphere that more importantly defines what and where we are.

Schwertsik's process-driven practice is underpinned by a philosophy of art as action. She says: "I don't think through thinking; I think through doing". She perceives that passivity leaves us vulnerable to manipulation, and dependent on assumptions about the places we occupy. Instead, she celebrates that "there's something precious about the physicality of engaging with the world and activating your space".

Schwertsik likens artists to scientists, in that they are always questioning. Amid perpetual hermetic discourse about what it means to 'be human', her practice delivers a series of evolving provocations that underscore the absurd theatre of human behaviour; in particular the kind that disconnects us from corporeal experiences. She remarks: "We're weird. We sit on chairs, run around in shoes, lock ourselves in houses and the internet... we entertain ourselves out of the world".

Schwertsik's practice playfully pinpoints and gives form to absurd aspects of our lives. She creates space for us to acknowledge our complicity in the ridiculousness that stifles progressive culture. Coaxed with humour, we're encouraged to consider our potential as agents of change through care and activation, and to rethink our own settled positions.

Fulvia Mantelli 2020

1. The Anthropocene is a relatively new term, primarily used by science-based cultural theory and more recently by artists. It defines an ecological epoch determined by human impact on the earth's geology and ecosystems, and widely recognised as a key driver of climate change.
2. *Mutton Cove Chair Walking* was part of *Landscape Stories – Mutton Cove*, a project by Open Space Contemporary Arts in collaboration with City of Port Adelaide-Enfield. It was presented together with a soundscape of stories from local community members, collected by Janine Peacock, which unfolded the history of area.
3. <https://www.harpercollins.com.au/9781788549608/the-freedom-artist/>

All other quotes are sourced from conversations between the author and the artist in the past year, the artist's website and her texts and promotional collateral relating to various projects.

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