I stand in front of the table, the proxy body enters the space and walks towards me, the audience watch from the back or sides of the room, I unfold the white wrap and hold it up as they lie down, I place it over their body, I position a small white cloth over the genitals, I wash their feet with warm scented water from a red bucket, I oil the face and neck, I remove the white cloth, fold and place it under the table, I oil the body, arms and hands moving up over around underneath and finally cradling the neck, I unfold a shroud and place it over the body, I press the shroud onto the oiled body moving from feet to head, I take a red marker and write a few words on the bottom right-hand corner, I remove the shroud and walk to one of the hanging lines securing it with pegs, I return to the table and unfold the white wrap, I stand in front of the table and hold it out, the proxy body rises and I cover it once more, the proxy body leaves the space the way it came, I pick up a wash cloth from a separate red bucket of hot soapy water, I wash the table, I dry the table, I sip some water, I splash salt water over my shoulder, I stand in front of the table, the proxy body enters the space and walks toward me ...

*I Stand In (2011–14, figs 4.81–4.83)* is a performance ritual that is timeless and relentless. It exists in the moment and its traces remain as an expanding archive. In this work, volunteer participants stand in for a faceless individual. A stylised corpse-washing ritual is enacted and the physical remains of the activity, oil imprinted shrouds, accumulate in the space as ghostly testaments. As proxies, each participant puts a face to a number, a human presence to a concept, and collectively, they transform the cold hard statistics of death tolls to the flesh and blood of individuals and what it means to be mortal. The audience, as witness, forms a haptic connection with my touch on each individual body; this in turn anticipates and eventually enacts a transcendence from a ritual for the dead into a ritual for living.
In this testimonial I wish to talk to the work, how it was conceived, the processes involved, and what I have witnessed inside it over its four iterations from 2011 to 2014. This work grew out of many concerns. While the main action of a corpse washing—the oiling of a naked body—initially sat inside another body of work with a similar enquiry, this action took on a life of its own, fuelled by the desire to offer an audience permission to witness this rare and intimate transaction. We rarely, if ever, see a naked body cared for, and touched, in a way that is non-sexual. For me, the body—essential, visceral and emotional—is central here. The body that breathes, digests, pumps blood, gurgles, inflames, excretes, feels pain and pleasure. It is the one thing we can all relate to, regardless of age, gender, race or religion. It is the one thing we share. It is with/through the body that meaning can transfer.

*I Stand In* proposes that through simple repetitive actions played out again and again—over hours and days—we can start to see our own reflection and our own mortality. From this position of familiarising the unfamiliar there is a way to move forwards and attempt to address the more complex issue of personally understanding and processing global human tragedy outside of our own immediate community: recognising not only ourselves but also our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, friends and associates within the larger context of humanity.

Pervasive media connectivity means we can no longer claim ignorance of world events, but the awareness that it affords often leaves us feeling ineffective and powerless. We empathise but I think we are actually intellectualising and consequently feel impotent in the process. In presenting this durational work, I attempt to focus on how to affect a more authentic response anchored in the here and now. This is not necessarily an answer to the bigger questions but it is an attempt to process the immediate tumult.

Tragic events and death tolls have long been something I struggle with in the following terms:

a. my emotional response and what to do with it;
b. a perceived acceptance and normalisation within our society;
c. losing perspective of real life to the detached counterpart of numbers;
d. privilege and cultural distancing.

In 2010, during the Haiti earthquake that initially killed at least 210,000 people, the whole performance crystallised for me, aesthetically as well as formally. I understood the work had to be durational, repetitive and sustained, yet tempered, respectful and almost hermetically contained. I envisaged a parallel world where the work never stops, a relentless roll call where everyone is and will be accounted for as the archive grows. On a practical level, how long does it take to attend to 230,000 bodies? If you translate that number inside the meter of *I Stand In* (approximately one body every seventeen minutes), it would take nearly twenty years, working nine hours a day, seven days a week. Comparisons like this help us to understand abstracts in real terms. For me this allows a relationship to the material at hand. The repetition is critical. To repeat something a few times, we learn and we understand the action. To keep repeating we see a rhythm, to keep on repeating with a different body each time, the reality of it starts to slap you in the face.

The physical repetition I work with is subsequently echoed in the
presence of the shrouds. They are a pivotal and important part of the work. Initially they translate the business of the mundane activity into a tangible trace. However, by the end they transcend this, to become a unique testament and record. After each stand-in body, the shroud is hung in the room and attached to the lines with pegs, again referencing ‘work’ or ‘labour’ (figs 4.84–4.85). As the hours pass, the once empty room transforms into a library of sorts. Later, when the work is done, this library becomes a space for reflection. The audience can weave their way through the passageways, bearing witness anew to these ghostly remnants. During the first iteration of I Stand In the shrouds contained the imprint of the oil from each body. On subsequent iterations I started to introduce text. After pressing the shroud onto the body, I write a few words in red ink. These words are not scripted; instead I challenge them to arrive at the time. They represent last thoughts, last words, last whisperings, last things seen, last things heard, last things smelt, last actions. They are my own fictional and poetic interpretation and start to read like a merciless litany of last things, swinging from the wretched to the tragically beautiful: ‘only you will have to live with this’, ‘it’s orange and sparkling’, ‘everything is suddenly silent’, ‘rubble & dust’, ‘What the Fuck?’, ‘shit that’s my blood’, ‘you dare?’, ‘A green blade of grass, an ant, my mother’s hand’, ‘violet flares’. However, I always leave at least one shroud blank, a nod to the original presentation and to the unknown. During the six-day iteration at the 2nd Venice International Performance Art Week 2014, I wrote the same script for one full day. Months before I had read an interview and the words ‘No, it’s ok’ had jumped out at me. The words had been in response to an employee questioning actions that could jeopardise the lives of many civilians. To me this was yet another confirmation of the continued disregard for human life when it is tied up within the processes of waging power and control. The identity is irrelevant; it is the same world over. Then and there, I decided that I would write only these words on each shroud for a day—my own silent protest held within their ambiguity.

In I Stand In, I consciously choose to remove myself as the ‘performing’ body. Instead, I am the body that performs routine actions. There is a performativity in the formal way the space is set, where the materials are placed, the fact there is an underlying ambient soundtrack that holds the space, just as the smell of rosemary from the oil burner fills the room. However, in the context of a mundane activity, I perform a series of predetermined actions and enact a premeditated ritual. Beyond this I feel there is no sense of me performing. It is rather a doing of something immediate and in need of my full attention. The participant body is the only thing that changes, along with the hanging shrouds. It is this body that becomes the focus. It interests me how this might shift the relationship of the viewer’s investment when they begin to understand that the perceived performing or participant body is also an audience body just like them. In effect, the audience body has merged its position from outside witness to inside proxy, thus exchanging the passive watching of an audience in relation to a performer or ‘other’ for the more active watching of an audience in solidarity with its audience representative. This micro transaction can then project the work back into the larger macro scene within the context I Stand In is trying to address. I see the audience and the participants as the integral parts of the work: they are the work and I am the glue. It is a coexistence that creates a different sense of viewing and ownership. The form offers multiple entrance points and I share the space with many voices. I become the conduit and the audience can choose to recognise themselves or others in these voices. It becomes less ‘other’ and more ‘us’.

A significant part of I Stand In is the fact that it is at once a one-to-one experience and an audience experience. One sits inside the other and both are equally important. From the moment each proxy body walks into the room we are locked together in an exchange that is only between the two of us—a private moment in a public space. I must be alert, read the signs of the body and adjust or manipulate things in order to make the participant feel at ease. Securely held, they embark on their own personal journey to consider their offer as a ‘stand in’. Participants have informed me time and again that they are so surprised how completely safe and private they feel—as if it is just the two of us—within such a communal space. This is contrary to the external objective view, where they are observed exposed under bright lights in a public room, naked on a table while I attend to them in a faux last rite. However, the external subjective view recognises this private space and this is where the shared connection often occurs between the body on the table and the audience body. The participants in this work are courageous, placing themselves in a very intimate and vulnerable situation. Having confidence is implicit, and as I demand their trust, I place my trust in them. I, for one, am so moved by

Testimonials

Julie Vulcan

I Stand In

Fig. 4.84–4.85Julie Vulcan, I stand in, 2014. Durational performance/installation, Performatorium, Fifth Parallel Gallery, University of Regina, Canada, 17 April 2014. Photograph and © Jason Cawood.
the grace with which each participant enters into the work, and how they respectfully embrace their part in it. It makes my heart jump each time a new person comes into the room. The consideration and regard I have observed in the participants, are also generally mirrored in the audience. Without words or instruction, they inhabit the space in a way that is reverent. I have heard stories of how protective people become of the space, which I believe is due to my earlier proposition: by recognising their interconnection with the body on the table they feel a closer rapport with the occasion. The audience supports and/or participates in the fluid cycle of viewer, participant, and return to viewer. The gradual change in the relationship to the work is inevitable.

Being inside the work is an incredibly humbling experience. In 2011 after I finished the first nine-hour presentation I was speechless, tired, energised, and later, emotional. In each subsequent iteration I have found new nuances and subtle shifts in details in response to each new site—gallery, studio, performance space—and within the time frame presented, whether that is a single nine-hour day or six consecutive four-hour afternoons. Within the work my attention is layered. I hold awareness of the space, the audience, the ‘stand in’ body and my body. I am constantly reading and calibrating the energy and subtle shifts within all these elements. I must be vigilant and find the place that enables me to keep going hour after hour and to stay attentive for each new body that arrives on the table. Sometimes time is a marker that allows me to keep going; at other times I slip into a liminal space outside of time. It is always different and every day has a different energy or flavour. The work demands me to be as close to 100 per cent present as possible, and this is what I try to maintain. When I am present, time, exhaustion, emotion just flow, they come and go.

In a world of constant power struggles—not only human but also natural—civilian fall-out is inevitable. I Stand In attempts to find a place where we can set aside judgement and prejudice, and recognise ourselves within these cycles. Rewind to 2011 again: During the nine hours I was engaged in the work, unknown to me, on the other side of the world a 9.0 magnitude earthquake on the ocean floor set into motion a tsunami that caused widespread devastation to a section of the east coast of Japan. Coincidence yes, but the weight of it is not lost. This work is timeless in its relationship to its subject and it continues to have ongoing resonances and ripples as new global events unfold. Subsequently it affirms my belief in the relevance of performance art to frame, translate and articulate our complex relationship with our world, and how we might process our position within it.