

Spotlight: The New Exhibitionists: Performance Art in the 21st Century

by RANDY GLEDHILL

Performance art is reawakening in the 21st century
Don't miss the show

Performance art was born the love child of the art world and the 1960s *Zeitgeist*. When its pioneer anti-high art hipsters challenged convention by manipulating their bodies and smashing themselves against the walls instead of displaying their wares upon them, their physical radicalism challenged the prevailing chic of minimal and conceptual art. It was a *coup d'état* by the scandalous new heir apparent to the hijinks of every historical avant-garde from Dada to Fluxus. Or so the legend goes.

Now, after decades as the art scene's court jester, performance art is reawakening in the 21st century as something new. Physical artistic expression is finding a growing global audience that rejects ideas of commodity and commodification. This resurgence is inclusive of anyone from anywhere, regardless of background, privilege, training or theoretical pretext, and celebrates a new democratization of intellect. Freed from materialist economics, temporal artistic intervention is by nature demonstrative, social and political. A new generation of performance artists is reinventing boundaries through an exploding global network of organizations, venues, symposia and festivals. Like the world-music phenomenon, this transcultural blending of identities, histories and politics is mashing expression into a new and tasty gumbo. Performance-art strategies are also being actively employed by indigenous people, a phenomenon eloquently explained to me in Vancouver's infamous grunt gallery kitchen salon by Aiyiyana Maracle: "...performance art is a natural extension of storytelling, a practice that has spanned generations. It is centred in the body and our genes are the containers of our history. Our body becomes the conduit for what we believe, what we are." This seems an apt definition of the new performance art.

The Canadian performance-art circuit is booming. Artist-run galleries and collectives across the country are presenting their own new festivals and symposia. The most recent editions of two important Canadian biennials—the LIVE Biennial of Performance Art, held in Vancouver, and the 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art, in Toronto—together presented a comprehensive survey of works by nearly 70 artists. Although different in ideology, ambition and structure, the festivals developed analogous programs of local, national and international artists.

Performance art is still largely dismissed as some kind of dysfunctional clown show in conservative, world-class Toronto. Maybe it's the mountains, maybe it's the sea or maybe it's the drugs, but for whatever reason, performance art in Vancouver is accepted and celebrated as a meaningful and historical part of that

city. The LIVE biennial ebbs and flows like the tide over the course of six weeks and features a marathon of performances, symposia and social events curated and programmed under the festival umbrella by a plethora of galleries across the city.

On a mean and stormy November night at Gallery Gachet, Reona Brass, barefoot in a black velvet dress, appears through the window like an apparition. Inside the warm security of the gallery, the audience is unnerved by her confrontational self-deprivation. Pressed against the security bars, she smears her face against the grimy windowpanes to glare at us. Shivering, startled, scared and vulnerable, she repeatedly hops up and down on the wet concrete street, bracing herself against the cold. Finally she takes refuge inside and performs a series of holistic rituals with Wolframio Sinué, an Ecuadorean actor she has invited as a collaborative foil. Still barefoot, she leads the audience out the back door and down a syringe- and condom-strewn alley in Vancouver's notorious skid row to a vacant parking lot that serves as an impromptu marketplace for drug dealers, hookers and the homeless. In the flickering light of a movie projector the partners clash, wrestle, bump, grasp, writhe and finally collapse against a broken wall. Brass speaks through her body to internalize history, injustice, hypocrisy and finally personal empowerment and spiritual enlightenment. She burns her powerful images into our psyche. Tonight her strength, power and anger grow with every raindrop.

The back wall of Western Front is filled with a video projection of machismo in all its brutal glory—rodeo bull-riding. In the process of constructing a makeshift picket fence in the gallery, Jamie McMurry wedges his head between the slats, then breaks out of his self-constructed stocks by violently smashing the pieces apart with a hammer. He tethers himself to a country mailbox by binding a leash of barbed wire around his bare ankles. Hogtied, he crashes out the back door, down the fire escape, across the garden and through the alley, dragging the hapless mailbox clattering behind him. The sharp barbs of the wire that hobbles him cut into his flesh. It looks painful. It is painful. The shocking series of intensely anxious actions is an ambivalent celebration of the artist's personal history as an American farmboy.

Another evening at Gallery Gachet, plastic doll parts and pig fat are rendered on a portable hot plate, then mashed with lipstick into a pigmented creme. Toxic smoke and putrid fumes pollute the air. The rising Vancouver star Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa self-consciously strips naked to strategically smear the red gunk onto the rotund flesh of his inner thighs, armpits and stomach, behind his knees and onto the inside of his elbows. After squeezing himself into a new suit of white long underwear, he proceeds to force the pigment through the material by writhing, rolling, rubbing and dragging himself across the floor. After great physical effort, the pristine white cloth becomes stained bright red in all the right places and the artist transforms himself into a comically frightening grotesque. For a finale, he unbuttons the suit's back flap and inserts a long plastic tube to blow cigar smoke up his ass. While he doesn't succeed in farting smoke rings, he does become quite dizzy in the process and falls down exhausted. Ramirez-Figueroa merges

humiliation and provocation into a stark spectacle that provokes uncomfortable questions of sexuality and identity.

Or has he also wrapped a narrative about Vancouver's infamous serial murders in his bizarre persona? When the artist smears the red paste over his body, is he stigmatizing the victims? Himself? And what about the alleged cover-up of shocking police ineptitude? Is everyone really just blowing smoke up their asses? Bravo to a brash new artist for a brave new work.

Around the corner from Gallery Gachet, the door of The Crying Room, a tiny artist-run gallery in a reclaimed storefront, is open to the street. Inside, picnic tables laden with an array of delicious, nutritious home cookin' overflow with a bounty of fresh soups, salads, breads, pies, cheeses and all the fixings. The artist Mima Preston serves up the chow she has lovingly prepared and keeps spirits high. The event is timed to the dinner hour. People are fed. The simple gesture of giving is proffered with grace and humility.

For his grunt gallery presentation, Finland's Roi Vaara, impeccable in his trademark tuxedo, enlists three volunteers who speak languages other than English to engage in a multilingual conversation free of meaning or understanding. Their animated gestures remain expressive; somehow they understand one another perfectly well on another level. Vaara tapes antique television rabbit ears to his head and, holding a radio tuned between stations, slowly spins in circles. Bits and pieces of random broadcasts interrupt the static. The perch and the round entrance hole of the wooden birdhouse he places over his head mimic the face of a Cyclops. Producing a lighter from his pocket, he suavely ignites the end of the perch, which turns out to be a cigarette. From a hidden speaker the single *coo-coo* of a distant bird is heard. Vaara exists in a parallel universe of existential wit where things no longer make sense as they did before, a pataphysical world of imaginary solutions.

The stage is set for the final LIVE event at grunt gallery: a formal white-china dinner service for 14, heaped with mounds of fresh black earth, is reposed on placemats of faded family snapshots. Between the settings are long grasses crowned with sprays of white flowers. Martini glasses overflow with the corpses of fish. At each end of the long table stands a single straight-backed chair, its seat covered in a pyramid of sand. Sounds of killer whales mix with the Celtic song of women from the islands of northern Scotland. Alastair MacLennan, the celebrated artist and educator from Belfast, begins performing at 4pm. The audience arrives, as scheduled, at 8pm. Attired entirely in black, MacLennan slowly circumnavigates the table, methodically arranging, adjusting and augmenting the display. Oblivious to the public as the room fills with people, he continues, utterly absorbed, weaving his spell, composing the intellectual and sensory bouquet, placing additional grasses, sprinkling blossoms and rice and scattering paper footprints. The footprints eventually blanket everything, collective memory trampling the civility of ceremony. The whale noises end. The artist edges away from the table. The singing stops. Absolute stillness. The end. 11pm. The audience inspects the residue. Subjectivity floats somewhere beyond cognition. Meaning coheres and then dissolves. The artist

oscillates beautifully between shaman, alchemist, oracle, protagonist and charlatan, a conduit without edifice, floating like a dream in the subconscious.

Toronto's 7a*11d, held October 20 to 31, 2004, was a concise, critically cohesive survey. The current "renewable collective" of steering-committee members curated the series from submissions received in response to a widely promoted international call for proposals. Performances were site-specific or presented at the temporary hosting venue, Xpace in Toronto's Kensington Market.

Cheryl L'Hirondelle climbs *Iron Mountains*—buildings—man-made artifices imposed upon the landscape. Today's mountain is a downtown multi-level commercial parking garage. With each journey up its industrial staircase, she carries another piece of low-watt radio equipment. After many trips, a transmitter and antenna are finally assembled. The pirate broadcast interrupts the signal of a local station: "Hello...this is Radio Free Kensington." She inscribes a chalk tag on the rooftop in Cree syllabics: "This still is the domain of the birds." The air above the land is symbolically reclaimed. A security guard appears during the intervention. The assembled battery-powered radio station renders him furious. This is obviously subversive activity—could be terrorism. He is determined to evict the assembled subversives from the private property he guards. His contempt changes to concern when confronted with the logic, passion and charm of the artist. "Do you know how dangerous this community is? There are bad people here," he pleads.

Cookie monster eat it all up...stick it in your jaw...eat a cookie.... In the group performance presented by the emerging artist Maria Legault at Xpace, four nubile young beauties clad in skimpy white underwear cavort in a sea of bread crumbs to an industrial techno-trance dance beat. They repeatedly hunt for crumbs and pretend to stuff crumbs into their mouths, fight over crumbs and burrow into the drifting mass. I am entertained and titillated, but my voyeuristic amusement with their driven efforts to manifest a politic is challenged by their simple yet profound comment on the gluttony of consumerism.

Dressed in a tight black dress and red high heels, the Indonesian artist Melati Suryodarmo stands on a block of butter in the centre of Xpace. She begins a slow, sensual dance. Her gestures are skewed as her feet work the greasy butter into a slippery threat. Accidents happen. Her sexual grind fragments as her balance is interrupted by gravity. She repeatedly falls, and then recomposes herself, trying but failing to retain her former control. She lands hard. The shock and pain are telegraphed to the audience. Her seductiveness has become vulnerability.

A few days before the U.S. presidential election, Mideo M. Cruz travels to Niagara Falls to videotape an intervention he calls *New World Disorder*. Cruz has come from the Philippines to pose on the platform of a public viewing binocular at the edge of the gorge. He wears a flak jacket bearing an American flag, a black ski mask and a dog muzzle and carries a large tote bag emblazoned with the image of Mickey Mouse. Behind him are the American Falls and the American empire. Tourists strolling along the promenade stop and

stare or obliviously continue on their way. The following day, in downtown Toronto, the recorded footage is projected onto a billowing white sheet that spans the open garage door of Xspace before an audience assembled on the street. The artist, wearing his anti-globalization agitprop costume, tears open the screen. He produces from his Mickey Mouse bag a two-litre Coca-Cola and secures a condom over the mouth of the bottle, then rips off his costume in a fit of passion. Naked, as if masturbating, he vigorously shakes the phallic corporate symbol of First World global dominance. The carbonated liquid expands rapidly. The condom inflates to enormous proportions and explodes, spraying a fountain of Coke. The artist pours the remaining soft drink over his head in an ecstatic frenzy. Spent and sticky, he picks up his bag and quickly exits.

Performance Art: Theory and Practice. The acclaimed Spanish avant-garde performance pioneer Esther Ferrer speaks clearly into the microphone: *performance*. The manifesto that she then enacts contains few audible words. ...*at performance...about performance...of performance...toward performance...* Vigorous hand gestures describe the many salient silent points. ...*against performance...mini performance...* She falls back, eyes closed, then abruptly continues. ...*instant performance...mono performance...auto performance...* Removing her sweater, she places across her chest the letters P.E.R.F.O.R.M.A.N.C.E., then sets forth more silent revelations. ...*dirty performance...* She gluttonously devours food. ...*destruction performance...* With maniacal glee she smashes a clay flowerpot and violently throws a chair against the wall. ...*techno performance...audio performance...* She honks a rubber bicycle horn, then begins pronouncing aloud a rhyming stream of nonsensical phonetics. Then in rapid succession: ...*neuro performance, schizo performance, masochistic performance, sado performance... cryptic performance*. The artist vanishes under a table. The sound of a music box fills the room. Ferrer reappears and clears her throat. The wacky mixture of heady theoretical subtext, Lucille Ball comedic timing and Marx Brothers irreverence is breathtaking. Through theatrical, elegant, entertaining and physically dynamic gestures, Ferrer defines art-making as a wide-eyed celebration of anarchy and intellectual freedom. Her art is a living proclamation of indefatigable spirit.

At both festivals, I became a bit delirious from the stimulatory overload of so much variety. The incredible range of activities eclipsed anything I had anticipated. Despite the fact that most artists still chose a formal gallery venue to perform their dog-and-pony shows, I came to expect the unexpected, and was amazed and surprised by the extremes to which artists will go. Although recurring themes seemed to emerge, interpretive labels may or may not be valid in this brave new world; much of the activity could be read several ways. The essential commonalities are the personification of physical intent and the artists' unbridled desire for public exhibitionism. *Vive le spectacle humain*.

Most artists work intuitively to integrate their performance location into their actions. The experience will only happen then and there; part of the audience appeal is the conspiratorial inclusion in the

proceedings. You will unfortunately have to wait until the fall of 2006 to again check out 7a*11d in Toronto. Meanwhile, the Toronto group Fado presents performance art throughout the year, including an upcoming performance by Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa. For updates about this and more, bookmark www.performanceart.ca. LIVE 2005 is scheduled for October 15 to November 26, 2005, in locations throughout Vancouver. The theme of this year's festival, "Altered States," is fitting, as the biennial will be celebrating the genius of the 81-year-old living Lotus Land legend Al Neil. Project descriptions, schedules and locations will be posted at www.livevancouver.bc.ca. Catch it while you can.

This series of essays on emerging Canadian artists is sponsored by The Fraser Elliott Foundation in memory of Betty Ann Elliott.

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