

Documenting Fluid Memes: Slippery Translucence and Visceral Reflection in Performance Art

perhaps one of art's powers or strengths -- in other words, one of the things that makes it valuable to consider something as "art" -- is exactly this ability that art has (I might also say here "this right that art asserts for itself and is valued for") : to look askance, to offer a sideways view that changes our entire understanding of a given frame's potential parameters.¹

The responses that best profile Fado's 'After the Facts' online discussion on performance art came at the end of the dialogue. Paul Couillard asked whether performance art should be taught. He noted that "As soon as you start teaching a subject, it is in a sense archived, and there's a tendency to create a canon... how does performance art retain its shape-shifting abilities?" Kirsten Forkert responded by describing how she as a teacher tried "to question the notion of a canon, the notion of who writes history, teaching in a way that's about encouraging people to develop their own ideas and definitions. ... We should resist the temptation to propose an alternative canon." Louise Bak summed it up with a call for "expanding spaces, expanding discussion and critical questions around performance issues."

The perspectives on performance art and the criticism of it that emerged from 'After the Facts' had within them the same self-aware questioning that is at the heart of the performance art practice. They were 'after' in the sense of quoting, or being inspired by the work of other artists – and the difficult and dangerous but essential act of critical analysis. They also addressed 'facts' in the sense of performance art's alternative proposals to an institutionalized, mediated and dehumanizing version of reality and history imposed by ubiquitous corporate and institutional psychopathology. Louise Bak noted that "...performance actions are taking place within a world where the means of transmitting ideas are deteriorating and becoming very unifocused -- in fact privileging certain visions and shoving margins aside unless they can be assimilated with ease."² This is further elaborated by Jessica Bradley in her article about the work of Rebecca Belmore. She warns of how the "ideology of the visible" has the "ability to maintain the invisibility of other voices and representations." She presents an alternative in that "performance can excavate and bring to life those issues and images that do not fit within, or are systematically marginalized by, the dominant culture."

One of the essential challenges faced by the participants in 'After the Facts' revolved around the contested nature of definition in performance art critical analysis. Rachel Echenberg proposed a notion of why performance art is a site of resistance in contemporary art. "Art is entrenched in a system of naming that, by its nature, sets up boundaries; simultaneously including and excluding possible modes of working. Naming stops us, probably because it is the name that leads us to think that we know something. And thinking that we know something can stop us from looking, asking, experimenting, and sharing."³ Claude Schryer's Inter-Arts report provides a useful summary of how performance art resists naming. "The nature and thrust of performance art and interdisciplinary practices are to seek the blurring of boundaries and thus stubbornly resist definition of themselves, or of traditional definitions of

¹ Paul Couillard, After the Facts online discussion. 2005. <http://performanceart.ca/after/q4.html>

² Louise Bak, After the Facts online discussion closing roundtable teleconference. 2005. <http://www.performanceart.ca/after/teleconf.html>

³ Rachel Echenberg, After the Facts online discussion. 2005. <http://performanceart.ca/after/q4.html>

art."⁴ Louise Bak relates some of the methodologies of this resistance. "The existent strength in 'performance art' arises from its versatility to ensure experimentations of authorship, unpredicted associations and environmental circuits -- for new articulations of relationship, an aesthetics capable of evading the automatism of perception and existence."⁵ While also recognizing the difficulties of definition, Johanna Householder in her introduction to *Caught in the Act* draws out a keen and audacious perception of the role of performance art within the broader milieu of contemporary art.

*Performance art seeks to investigate existing conditions, includes human presence, and questions the purposes, processes, apprehension, and experience of art; while making it. So though it is a vanguard practice, in the sense of exploring the necessary conditions of its own existence, it is simultaneously fundamental in its devotion to process. ... It is my argument that performance art is not only an essential practice but that it is the essential practice of late 20th/early 21st century art; an art form from which, today, all other arts subtend. ... As Dot Tuer observed in 1987, performance 'renders visible the politics of representation as a struggle over the control of real bodies in time and space.'*⁶

While the focus on the body is a widely-held and influential critical position in performance art analysis, 'After the Facts' revealed a strong interest in how notions of the relational are being played out in performance art practice and critical discourse. Rachel Echenberg describes the basis of this process. "Each participant in the production of an artwork (within an active aesthetic) brings, adds and takes away with them their own meaning and understanding, fragmenting the whole artwork into a complex living web. If we look at it in this way, the aesthetic object/activity is never tangible or complete, and art can become deeply connected to life."⁷ (My eyes see 'exploding' into a complex living web.)

Notions of the relational can also deeply influence how we construct reality. Warren Arcand in his article in the anthology *Live at the End of the Century* describes an important and long-lived cultural alternative to the tyranny of western European concepts of a noun-based objectification and alienation.

*"One day, I asked my mother how to say "I love you" in Cree... she told me... Then I asked which is the "I", the "love", and the "you." She thought a moment, made a face and said it doesn't work that way, it doesn't break up like that, you can't separate those words... And there I glimpsed a Cree worldview where spiritual ideas like love are inexpressible and incomprehensible without a relationship, as the word doesn't break down like that. Things in relation compose reality as we understand it. To speak with broken relations is to be unintelligible."*⁸

⁴ Claude Schryer, Review of the Interdisciplinary Work and Performance Art Program - Final Report (1999), Canada Council, Conclusions section. <http://canadacouncil.ca/interarts/>

⁵ Louise Bak, After the Facts online discussion. 2005. <http://performanceart.ca/after/q4.html>

⁶ Johanna Householder, ap·o·lo·gi·a in *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian Women*, YYZ Books, Toronto. 2004. p13 Quoted: Dot Tuer, *Gestures in the Looking Glass*, C Magazine. 1986.

⁷ Rachel Echenberg, After the Facts online discussion. 2005. <http://performanceart.ca/after/q4.html>

⁸ Warren Arcan, Working Title, in *Live at the End of the Century: Aspects of Performance Art in Vancouver*, ed. Brice Canyon, Visible Arts Society, grunt gallery, Vancouver. 2000. p150

Another aspect of the 'After the Facts' discussion revolved around questions of documentation and product-based versus process-based art practices. Ironically much of what is known about performance art arises from experiences and analysis of documentation - there are a very few who have experienced a great deal of performance art but the majority of the arts community has seen much less and is comfortable in a knowledge of the practice gained more through books, articles, video and stories told by friends and colleagues. Even to the point where artists who perform privately and only present to the public the documentation of their actions are scribed into the performance art practice.⁹ In her article for *Live at the End of the Century* Judy Radul describes how "Having internalized the camera's sense of duration and repeatability our performative gesture/enunciation/reception can not be separated from its potential for, and traces of, reproduction." She provides an important note of caution about the dangers of establishing firm performance art canons in this regard. "A definition of performance which opposes reproduction also makes it difficult to situate the work of younger generation artists who are less concerned with this ontological irreproducibility of performance and tend to freely combine the live and prerecorded, risking/reconciling participation in an economy of disappearance (through real time) and an economy of reproduction."¹⁰

This becomes especially critical when addressing the work of artists whose work incorporates performance, media, object production and installation - blurring and renegotiating the boundaries between these creative expressions. Lori Blondeau's performance work in CyberPowWow curated by Skawennati Tricia Fragnito and Archer Pechawis, and her performance-photography works are good examples.¹¹ Another significant example of flexible, complex and essential breadth of expression is Rebecca Belmore's work - integrating media, photography, performance, installation and object-based process and production.¹²

Even the practice of performance art itself with all its resistance to definition and its strategies for empowering diversities of perception, revelation and methodology can also be seen as restrictive.

...there are many visual artists who are doing what I would call performance-based work, but they would refuse to call themselves performance artists because there are implications that they don't want to be associated with. What I may call "performance art", another artist may call "contextual practice", "manœuvre", "intervention", etc.¹³

⁹ Paul Couillard, After the Facts closing teleconference: "I was part of an OCAD panel that Jessica Wyman organized not that long ago, looking at how performance art is documented. Diane Borsato was on the panel. She often gets categorized as a performance artist, but she almost never does a public action. She does private gestures that she records, and what gets shown is the photo documentation or writing about the piece. It's not about the public being there watching her when she's boiling down boots to get the essence of sentimentality. There's a gesture that's involved, but not one that's put live before the public. One could say she was a photographer, because she shows the photographs, or a writer because she presents the writing about it." <http://www.performanceart.ca/after/teleconf.html>

¹⁰ Judy Radul, Stage Fright: The Theatricality of Performance, in *Live at the End of the Century: Aspects of Performance Art in Vancouver*, ed. Brice Canyon, Visible Arts Society, grunt gallery, Vancouver. 2000. p40-41

¹¹ <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/gallery.html> and http://arts.usask.ca/art/faculty/pages/l_blondeau.html

¹² <http://www.performanceart.ca/time3x/belmore/interview.html> , <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/news/imagegallery/wa127326430051406250.htm> , and <http://www.belkin-gallery.ubc.ca/belmore/>

¹³ Rachel Echenberg, After the Facts online discussion closing roundtable teleconference. 2005. <http://www.performanceart.ca/after/teleconf.html>

The variety and ongoing evolution of these critical perspectives indicate that continual analytic and documentary discourse on performance art practice must be sustained. We must support the marking of the sites and paths of an evolving and dynamic practice - one that very incisively portrays significant moments, relations and deeply rooted transformational experiences in our careening, conflicted and hysterical cultural rush. As an illustration, Archer Pechawis provides a unique and evocative perspective of a particular aspect of the practice that is a performance in and of itself.

Aboriginal performance art is the high-heeled, steel-toed moccasin of the telegraph; a series of mountain passes known for extreme weather and dangerous curves. Here, First Nations artists hybridize the telegraph, distilling the information into communal hyper-parable, the issues couched in metaphor or served raw. The work offers a promise of the unexpected, of danger, but here the confrontational edge much performance art relies on is re-purposed. Vancouver actor Sam Bob once likened the life of a First Nations theatre artist to membership in a secret society, with its own terrible rites of initiation. Aboriginal performance art seizes these rites and drags them into the open, where it revels in airing dirty laundry. Attendees are challenged to help scour it on the rocks.¹⁴

Sidebar: The Value of "Off the Radar: Initiatives in Critical Thinking"

The Fado online discussion 'After the Facts' is supported by a Canada Council Inter-Arts initiative 'Off the Radar: Initiatives in Critical Thinking'. It is an important alternative and supplement to other Canada Council programs of support for critical analysis. This program arose from the sustained commitment of the Inter-Arts advisory committees to supporting critical analysis and telling the stories of our diverse practices for the benefit of the Canadian arts community and arts audiences. The concerns the committee had about the lack of a Canadian performance art critical history are echoed by Tagny Duff in the anthology *Caught in the Act*. "As a practicing artist beginning a career of teaching at the university level, I am concerned by the noticeable absence of historical material on performance art made in Canada, and in particular by women. This is currently reflected in many Canadian academic institutional curriculae using the larger circulation of American and European art historical anthologies and texts on performance artists."¹⁵ In the same anthology Tanya Mars gives a sense of the urgency toward redressing this lack. "...the history of the medium lives predominantly as memory. Because of its ephemeral nature and the fragility of its documentation, not to mention the fragility of memory and the tendency to revise history, we felt it was imperative that the history be recorded before it is lost."¹⁶ A shared understanding of this historic critical ecology led a pivotal Inter-Arts advisory committee to make the following recommendation:

¹⁴ Archer Pechawis, *New Traditions: Post-Oka Aboriginal Performance Art in Vancouver in Live at the End of the Century: Aspects of Performance Art in Vancouver*, ed. Brice Canyon, Visible Arts Society, grunt gallery, Vancouver. 2000. p137

¹⁵ Tagny Duff, *FFWD, RWD, and PLAY: Performance Art, Video, and Reflections on Second-wave Feminism in Vancouver 1973-1983 in Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian Women*, YYZ Books, Toronto. 2004. p42

¹⁶ Tanya Mars, *Preface: From the Exquisite to the Extreme in Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian Women*, YYZ Books, Toronto. 2004. p11

That the Inter-Arts Office encourage research and critical discourse in performance art, interdisciplinary work and new artistic practices.¹⁷

'Off the Radar' gives a voice to communities of arts practices that have a complex diversity and creative vitality. They are leaders in new creative perception and in developing alternative production methods and presentation strategies. They interrogate, revision and refresh many of the basic conventions of contemporary art. The 'Off the Radar' program is a resonant initiative that contributes innovative new voices to Canadian art criticism across a wide range of creative practices.

¹⁷ Claude Schryer, Review of the Interdisciplinary Work and Performance Art Program - Final Report (1999), Priorities section, Canada Council for the Arts, 1999. <http://canadacouncil.ca/interarts>