

Faculty of Art

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Review of Live at the End of the Century: Aspects of Performance Art in Vancouver

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Live at the End of the Century

Aspects of Performance Art in Vancouver

edited by Brice Canyon, Visible Arts Society, Vancouver, 2000.

Review by Johanna Householder

"Times'er tough in those days, little Lulu, you kin hardly imagine...."

"Tell me about it, Gram, tell me about the olden days."

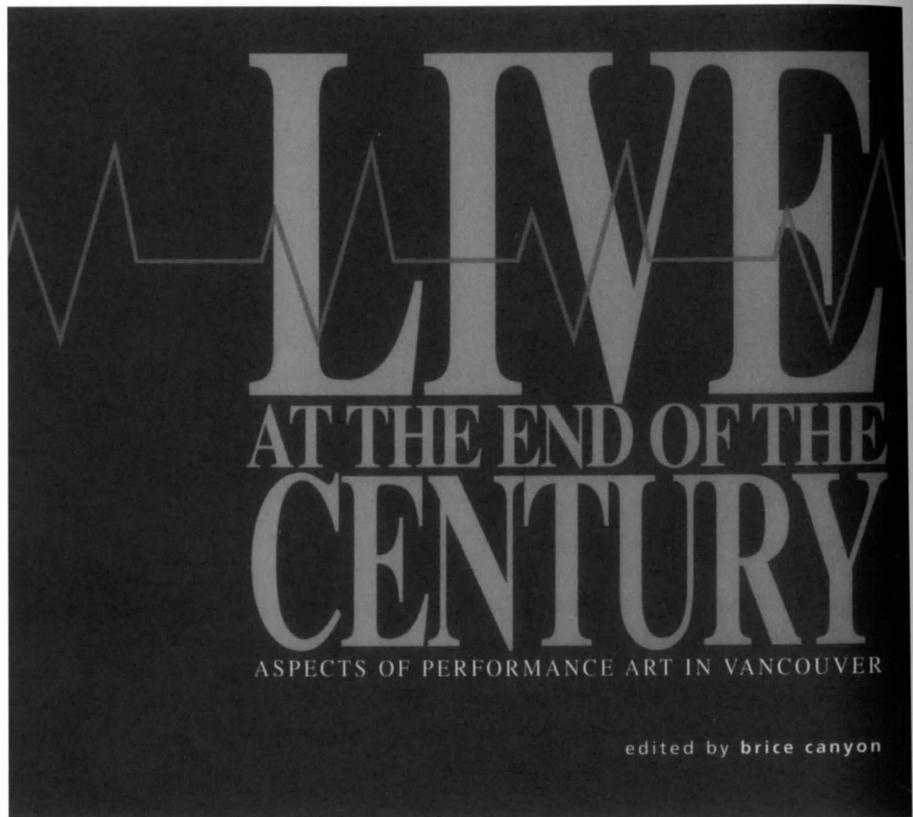
"Wal, when I furs began teachin' performance art there was only one book."

"One book! for all of those artists!"

"That's right missy, and now there's hunnerds. Course mos' of em still don't mention Canadians"

That one book was *Performance by Artists* edited by AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, published in 1979. It was followed shortly after by the proceedings of the Multidisciplinary Aspects of Performance: Postmodernism conference—*Performances Text(e)s & Documents*, published in 1981 and edited by Chantal Pontbriand. Then a long intake of breath, and in 1991 the encyclopedic *Performance avin Canada 1970–1990* edited by Alain Martin-Richard and Clive Robertson. That's three books attempting a comprehensive account of four decades of performance art in Canada.¹ Of course there are countless articles, catalogues, monographs and the like, but so very few collections that this one, *Live at the End of the Century: Aspects of Performance Art in Vancouver*, slakes a big thirst.

In her contribution to *Live at the End of the Century*, Judy Radul cites Marvin Carlson, to wit, "Performance by its nature resists conclusion, just as it resists the sort of definitions, boundaries and limits so useful to



traditional academic writing and academic structures."² Just so. Perhaps that explains the absence of literature. In fact, this statement could well be the jacket blurb of the book in which we find it quoted. So performance has only itself to blame for its absence, and I for one am relieved to have it so. For instead of thick theory, we get the artists' eye view and the very readable handbook of a community.

Unlike another recent compendium, the massive *Out of Actions*,³ *Live at the End* is modest in its aspirations, preferring the

personal over the authoritative account, the local over the global. However, this book transcends itself through a rich array of approaches—thirteen articles, each one offering important insights into a complex field. It turns away from "traditional academic writing" and indulges to the hilt in writing by performance artists, about the art they think about all the time —dare I say it —passionately.

Live at the End is significant not because it is encyclopedic but because it is focused. Certainly the Vancouver scene has many

aspects distinguishing it from other centres —the continuity of the Western Front as a performance presenter, the unflagging involvement of specific artists, and the plethora of persons willing to underscore the performative nature of everyday life by naming themselves as characters in a berserk roman à clef—to name a few. But the specificity of certain trajectories played out in Vancouver ripple outward.

Editor Brice Canyon has gathered topographical and chronological approaches to the subject, "aspects of," as the subtitle says; so we really have two books in this one. The first is an excellent collection of essays, scripts, ruminations, scholarly accounts and personal reflections on performance art. The second is a comprehensive chronology that runs as a sidebar on every page giving an astonishing thirty-five-year record of events interspersed with thumbnail-sized images of performances from 1965 to 1999.

Amongst its treasures are essays on aboriginal performance by Warren Arcan, Aiygyana Maracle, and Archer Pechawis. Soaring descriptions of significant performances accompany deeply-felt analysis.

In a poetic text about the dangers of writing true stories, Ivan Coyote centres the collection, reminding us of the repercussions of telling. Coyote begins in the tactile world of handwriting, "My grandmother's letters look like someone has run an iron over them," and leads us to the writers dilemma—history or fiction, "Something is always changed, or lost altogether, in the translation."

But something is to be found here, too. In this case it is the insistence that performance art is a fabulous hybrid, suffocated by the "Euro-American Neo-Fluxus" (so dubbed by Margaret Dragu) canonical garb. In "Beyond Haute Camp: the interplay of drag and performance in Vancouver," Glenn Alteen makes a vivid chronicle of the hybridization of the art, gay art, gay and performance "communities." In "Performance Art & The Native Artist: an Evolutionary Mix?" Aiygyana Maracle describes in loving detail the pivotal moments of silence broken by aboriginal performers. Karen Henry recalls that golden time when artists were playing in the airwaves with expanded performative investigations into slow scan video, live closed circuit performances, radio and cable TV.

The crux of the matter is the assertion made by Alteen and others throughout the book that performance art has many mothers (some of them men in drag) and that the insistence that it is a child only (or even primarily) of visual art limits our understanding. An attenuated European lineage that includes poetry sonore but excludes tap dancing is not the experience described here. The Vancouver scene was/is remarkable in its cross-dressing, cross-pollinating plethorality.

And Warran Arcan speaks to the hybridity of embodiment, "Given: the impression Duchamp left on me... an impression where he and I ("he and I" being provisional concepts, for the sake of this article) are never the same afterwards: a hybrid, a

singularity encompassing heterogeneity... as I try to account for Marcel's muddy footprint on the floor of my grandmother's house within a cultural silence found only on a certain Indian Reservation — where the silence is a living space, the direct descendent of life before the Reservation."

In between, Judy Radul takes on performance art's arch-nemesis—*theatre*. Stepping off from Fried's 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" (it was after all his invocation of the demon theatricality that cast its pall over literal art damning the fluids and juices of live art with guilt by association) Radul mulls over the ascendancy of theatricality. Meanwhile Paul Wong cuts to the chase with "Various Definitions of Performance Art, Oct. 13, 1999."

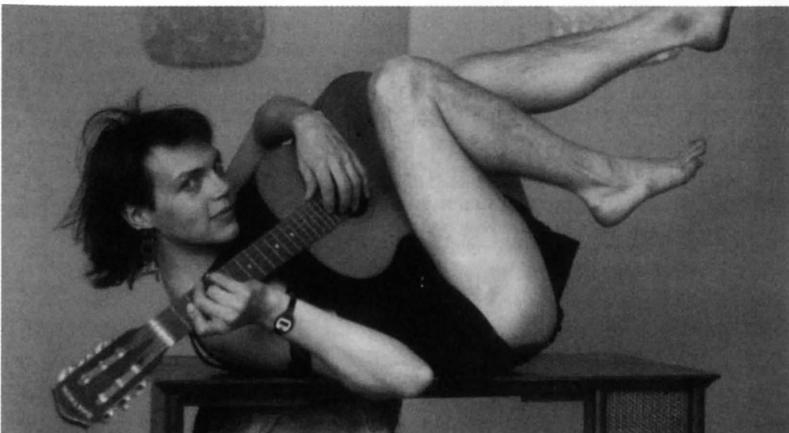
Bracketing these candy box contents are highly performative texts by les emminences grises, Glenn Lewis and Tanya Mars. In "Mondo Artie," Lewis takes off on a mad detective skulk through lived Vancouver art history. This hip shooting script starring Sleuth Lips and a cast of VIPs and VIPlaces works a "You are There" magic on all of us who weren't. Gathie Falk, Mr. Peanut, Lady and Dr. Brute, Marcel Idea, Anna Banana and many more of the late and great make sharply observed Ed Sullivan-esque appearances. Ms Mars closes out the collection with an ironic send-up of her own life's work.

I don't think that stuff of this quality comes easily, and it is some of the best writing about performance art I've read. Let's pray we don't wait another decade for the next installment. And for a trip to Vancouver, it beats the red-eye.

*Johanna Householder is on the steering committee for the 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art held biannually in Toronto.*

Notes

- 1 I am talking about English publications — there are numerous publications coming out of Quebec especially from InterLe Lieu. In his introduction to *Live at the End*, Brice Canyon makes a similar point.
- 2 Carlson, Marvin A., *Performance, a critical introduction*, London: Routledge, 1996.
- 3 Schimmel, Paul, editor, *Out of Actions: between performance and the object, 1949-1979*, New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 1998.



Billy Gene Wallace frolicking in Kempton Dexter's *Digby County Pastures*, June 1986. Billy was a Vancouver drag artist who was a founding member of the grunt gallery. Billy also did drag performance art works, mostly at the Lux at Western Front during the 1986 *Strategies for Survival Conference Cabaret*, and later for the *Broken Moose* exhibition opening at Unit Pitt Gallery. Billy Gene died in 1989, one of the Vancouver art community's first casualties to the AIDS crisis.