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Review of The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art

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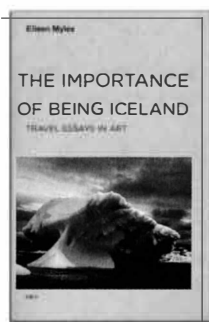
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The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art
Eileen Myles
Semiotext(e), 2009

Eileen Myles begins *The Importance of Being Iceland* with an account of being invited by curator Hans Ulrich Obrist to participate in the exhibition *Do it*, held in Reykjavik in 1996. As she explains, she came to know Obrist through a mutual interest in the 19th-century Swiss writer Robert Walser, whose writing often described what he saw while on long walks. Walser, who sometimes undertook these excursions at night, wrote in microscopic script, and in his written descriptions abandoned himself to his surroundings in a way that gave equal attention to the most spectacular and the most ordinary of details. This practice, a form of literary modernism that combined elements of popular fiction, literature, and personal reflection, sets the

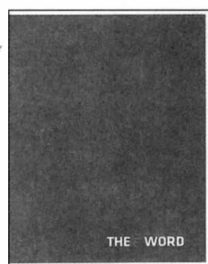
stage for *The Importance of Being Iceland*. Through her own peripatetic method, Myles brings together ideas and experiences from vastly disparate realms, describing them in ways that shifts the reader's sense of their scale and significance.

It is in this way that the subtitle to the book—*Travel Essays in Art*—is especially apt. Myles has compiled her writings on art alongside talks, blog posts, reflections on various people, discussions of well-established and marginal practices (including Icelandic epic poetry singing, quilting, modern art, cross-stitch and video art), drifting between describing exhibitions, artists and events. She discusses artists like Robert Smithson, Roni Horn, Sadie Benning and Paul Lee, and the films of Robert Frank, and describes the spaces that lie in between her encounters with their work: namely, her commute between Los Angeles and San Diego, the back of the Sister Spit tour van and the women's wash-room in the Philadelphia airport, where the glow of planes taxiing into the terminal can be seen through a frosted window. It is in such spaces that many of her richest observations occur, and they are presented here with incredible lucidity and candour. Written as autobiographical art criticism, these insights

are in part what make this book so extraordinarily interesting.

Myles' writing is sharp and captivating. This can be attributed in part to the perspective that she has as a lesbian who grew up working class, and as poet who writes about art. As she describes it, she is "working class though kind of middle (class)... a poet and a novelist, one time college professor, among other things. Generally as many things as possible." While writing is clearly her expertise, at age 60—with a lifetime of the accumulated knowledge that comes from being a professional observer—she's also an authority on the topics that interest her. This enables her to write in a way that is critical and erudite. But she is a poet, not an art specialist, so she writes with the curiosity of the outsider. She's also intensely aware of the vast social inequalities that fracture American society, and describes her subjects with the directness and urgency that these conditions demand. This makes for writing that lends a unique sense of importance to the experiences and artworks that she describes, and provides deeply engaging explanations of why they matter. ▶

—Amish Morrell



THE F WORD
Essays by Alissa Firth-England and Candice Hopkins, Karen Henry, and an interview with Lisa Steele
by Firth-England
Artists' works by Lisa Robertson and Kristina Lee Podesva
We fern Front
Vancouver, 2009

Feminism is often considered as having a definitive chronological and ideological timeline, structured in waves that have since broken and been reabsorbed. Appropriately, *The F Word* catalogue uses this model as its premise for an investigation of contemporary feminist art practices. The exhibition's title alludes cleverly to the current condition of feminism as an unspoken or "taboo" subject with which some women artists no longer want to be associated. As Karen Henry argues in her catalogue essay "The Trap of Feminism," following the second wave (which was criticized for its essentialist ideals) and the third wave (its highly academic and sex-/gender-inclusive successor), women artists can no longer agree about what it means to be labelled as a feminist. The catalogue also includes essays by Lisa Steele, Alissa Firth-England and Can-

dice Hopkins that address how contemporary feminism incorporates elements of both first-wave and second-wave feminism while also diverging from them. The essayists note a shift in focus from gender-specific issues to a wider range of social issues that reflect the growing diversity of North American publics.

Another recent significant contribution to feminist art discourse was the touring survey exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, comprised of artworks produced during the second wave, from 1965 to 1980. Although *WACK!* reinforces a shift towards finitude or canonization, it also calls attention to a growing interest in a renewed discussion of the validity and relevance of feminist discourse. *The F Word* exhibition at Western Front coincided with the Canadian exhibition of *WACK!* at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and was produced as a local response to the concentration of American artists in the larger survey. Other Vancouver galleries, including Artspeak and the Contemporary Art Gallery, also presented exhibitions intended to engage and provoke responses to the history of the feminist art movement from the perspective of the third wave.

The curators of *The F Word*, Firth-England and Hopkins, chose to focus on the correlation between the emergence of second-wave feminism and the use of video among women artists. Many of the works in the exhibition,

reproduced as linear image sequences in the catalogue, are from the 60s and 70s, when women's video collectives like Amelia Productions, Women in Focus, Isis and Reel-feelings flourished in Vancouver. For women artists at this time, video was an ideal medium: it was affordable, accessible and not yet widely used within the larger contemporary art world.

In her interview with Firth-England, video artist Lisa Steele argues that women have continued to use video because of its direct association with the body and performativity, and considers it as one of the most "potent and reflexive [media] for women artists." Expanding on the current state of feminism, Steele suggests that third-wave feminism is a movement inspired by the lost relevance of its second wave. While the frameworks of the previous movements remain, contemporary women artists no longer use the same vocabulary or approaches, choosing instead to vilify outdated terms in order to create a new ground for discussion. Steele notes academic tendencies within current feminist practice and laments the decline of activism, hoping it will be revitalized. Just as the feminist movement became party to the civil rights movement, so has the third wave joined forces with LGBT communities, suggesting that it, too, will continue to evolve. ♦

—Ginger Scott