

Three Readings: Camera, Tape and Sound (Kathy Acker, Steve McCaffery/bpNichol, and Kevin Davies, as introduced by George Bowering)

by Michael Turner

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The literary reading is a relatively recent phenomenon. Implying a written text, it is closer to Gutenberg than the pre-contact conveyance of Salish myths and legends or the Homeric tradition of poetic oration. Words spoken from a page, as opposed to those that come remembered.

As a reader and a writer I have participated in hundreds of literary readings. Sometimes I look forward to them; other times they fill me with dread. In preparing my visit to the Western Front Media archive, I chose to focus on the collection's literary program¹, curious to see if the documentation of readings at a centre known for interdisciplinarity differs from those at a literary festival or a writers' club.

What follows are three instances where a reading and its documentation combine to form a third event. The first focuses on the camera; the second on the videotape; the third on the relationship between what is seen and what is heard.

CAMERA

Kathy Acker read at the Western Front's Luxe on February 2, 1977, the first in Vincent Trasov's "American Writers Series". The document begins with the camera zooming out from the author as if caught on

stage during the raising of the curtain. But there is no curtain, just as there is no stage. The Luxe is a "performance space," not a theatre.

Acker is seated on a pillow, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt. She is small, made even smaller by the single spotlight and the camera's (high) angle. Her voice is small too, and she is aware of this — how in compacting herself, winding herself tight, she hints at what is to come. She introduces herself as a "prose writer, on the whole, even though I come out of the poetry circle back in New York City."

As Acker reads, the camera reads Acker, zooming in slowly, locking on the upper half of her body, giving the impression that she is standing, not seated. As carefully as the camera zooms in, it zooms out again, returning to the audience and what the audience sees, as only it can see it.

Acker's text is the second "fairy tale" from *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* (1978), a meta-fiction that has Acker as "Lautrec". Those familiar with the text will know that the second fairy tale is Lautrec's story of Claire. What begins as the cliched tale of a conflicted teenage girl rebuffing her boyfriend takes a shocking turn when Claire is sexually assaulted by her brother, a Vietnam War veteran. Equally shocking is the camerawork: as Claire's brother forces himself inside her, as if on cue ("...finally he bore into me so hard some part of me, burning, gave way. I felt no relief. He rolled off of me. Suddenly he began to see me. A look of horror replaced the day's grin on his face. Oh my god, he gasped, what have I done?"), the camera bores into Acker.

Was it a cue? Did the camera operator have prior knowledge of Acker's text, a text that would not be published until the following year? With the camera remaining close, the story returns to its Lichtenstein-friendly content, ending two minutes later when Acker instigates a break.

TAPE

Nine months later, on November 21, Western Front hosted an event featuring Ontario-based poet bpNichol and the sound poetry group The Four Horsemen, of which Nichol was a member (the group had just performed at a sound poetry festival in San Francisco). The evening begins with Nichol reading from Books 3 and 4 of his epic poem *The Martyrology*, before summoning, one at a time, the Horsemen.

First up is Steve McCaffery. Like Nichol, McCaffery was among a handful of Canadian poets working to expand poetry's written and spoken parameters to include an opaque, or concretist, form of written composition and an oral style reliant more on extended vocal techniques than the breath line word-servings of Charles Olson. The piece they performed, called "Aupe Relationship", was introduced by Nichol, but with little explanation (other than to say that "Aupe" should not be confused with "OPP, or Ontario Provincial Police").

Poised to begin, the tape suddenly buckles and, for a brief second, the performers are lost in its fold. Upon return, they dig in, passing back and forth the words "you" and "me", stretching them into multi-tonal figures—when the tape buckles again, and again, until eventually new glitch forms appear (shivering, stuttering and freezing), not so much entering the mix but helping to define its palette.

The relationship between McCaffery and Nichol's performance and the deficiencies of the tape is uncanny, with the initial buckle acting as both muse and omen, or a transformational device that sets the stage for what is to come. Prefacing their performance is a story Nichol told at the conclusion of his *Martyrology* reading. When asked why his poem contained so many references to God, Nichol replied: "I decided a long time ago that anything that came into the poem I would leave in the poem. So I suppose that's in the way of explanation, not an apology." What came into the documentation of McCaffery and Nichol's poem was just that.

SOUND

On October 22, 1983 the Western Front hosted a benefit reading for MacLeod's Books, after an arsonist had damaged its property. On the bill was a young poet named Kevin Davies, a former "child preacher" who was later associated with the Kootenay School of Writing, whose founders were survivors of their own ideological firebombing when the Social Credit provincial government closed down the David Thompson University Centre in the mid-1980s.

Of all the readings in the archive, this was the one I was most looking forward to, mainly because of Peter Culley's 1993 essay "Because I Am Always Talking: Reading Vancouver Into the Western Front"², opening as it does with an account of Davies's performance. Given the precision of Culley's text, I was curious about the discrepancies between what Culley remembered and what could be seen and heard on tape, a curiosity that, although yielding results (Davies "falters" about six minutes later than Culley remembers), allowed for a more relevant discovery.

The Davies segment begins (and ends) with emcee George Bowering informing us of the vibrant writing scenes in "Nelson, Prince George, places where working people live," and that one of the "biggest, newest scenes is in Nanaimo" (where both Culley and Davies were living). From there Davies takes the stage³. With all the self-importance a twenty-three-year-old man can muster, Davies says "I haven't written a poem in a while," but that he will read instead from "a trashy assemblage of notes... hastily and inaccurately transposed," what he calls "Exhibit A". We are also told that he will be reading these notes as fast as he can ("for some reason") and that they are "to be accompanied by heckling."

And that is what happens—only I am not sure I would have known this had I not read Culley's essay. As Davies rips through his text (what Culley describes as "more or less discrete statements"), the audience comes alive, emitting gales of laughter. Sometimes their laughter is

in response to Davies text, other times in response to the hecklers, giving the impression that the poet and the audience were on separate audio tracks. A weird feeling. Culley describes “the air filling with jeers, laughter and sounds of encouragement,” but it is only the “laughter and the sounds of encouragement” that can be deciphered—the “jeers” occurring off-mike.

As Culley points out, Davies eventually “falters” and the audience attempts to clap him off the stage. But he resists. Suddenly Bowering appears and grabs Davies’s notes, throwing them to the ground. Davies flees. Someone shouts for an encore, and Bowering, in the spirit of play, gives this some thought. He steps off stage, to retrieve Davies, only to return empty-handed, denouncing Davies text? performance? as “a lot of dumb shit.”

What might have been “a lot dumb shit” in the moment makes for a compelling document today. Like the tape deficiencies that animated McCaffery and Nichol’s performance, the Davies reading is haunted by ghosts of its own—in this case, the hecklers who, though unseen and unheard, turn the audience from passive listeners into a chorus of active laughers. Although large in their consequences, the hecklers, on their own, are too small to penetrate the circuitry of the unidirectional microphone and the camera to which it is attached. Of course penetration was not a problem during the Acker reading, the one instance of the three that was not the result of technical difficulty.

While a literature exists on the documentation of performance art (the performance document as object and the anxieties that result), I have found nothing on literary readings and their relationship to the (video) camera. One explanation could be the predictability of the format: the author, attached to a podium, reading from a text as if it were a script, one the audience might well be familiar with. A format such as this has little need of a camera operator; one merely presses “record”.

In viewing the Acker tape it occurred to me that the most appropriate form of documentation, the one most consistent with the architecture of her text (like the sonic figure McCaffery and Nichol produced), would have been a camera in the fixed position, without scopophilic zooms or pans. What Acker gave us that night was, in her words, a “fairly tale,” a form flattened from years of retelling and maintained by a moral frame designed to keep its narrative in place.

This is the surface Acker constructed in order to test its formal limits. That the camera zoomed in so aggressively not only skewered the effect, it showed a misunderstanding of Acker’s art: and that of course is literature. Having turned the reading into television, the spell was broken. From then on my research focused less on the camera in favour of that which could not be controlled, either through the preservation of tape or the privileging of sound.

Footnotes:

1. According to *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years At the Western Front*, Keith Wallace, ed. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993), the Western Front Literary Program formally began in 1974 under Gerry Gilbert and over the years included curators Mary Beth Knechtel, Henry Greenhow, Vincent Trasov, Warren Tallman, Charles Watts, Billy Little, Judy Radul and Hank Bull.
2. *Whispered Art History: Twenty Years At the Western Front*, Keith Wallace, ed. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1993), pp. 189-197
3. While the Acker, bpNichol and the Four Horsemen events did not have an elevated stage, the MacLeod’s Bookstore benefit did.

Michael Turner is an award-winning writer of fiction, criticism and song. His books include *Hard Core Logo* (Arsenal Pulp, Vancouver, 1993), *The Pornographer's Poem* (Doubleday, Toronto, 1999) and *8x10* (Doubleday, Toronto, 2009), and his criticism has appeared in the magazines *Art Papers*, *Art On Paper*, and *Modern Painters*. He has written catalogue essays on Julia Feyrer (Artspeak Gallery, 2010), Tim Lee (Presentation House Gallery, Vancouver, 2007) and Ken Lum (Contemporary Art Gallery, 2001) and has contributed to the anthologies *Intertidal: Vancouver Art & Artists* (Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver and MuHKA, Antwerp, 2005), *Vancouver Art & Economies* (Artspeak, Vancouver, 2007) and *Ruins In Process: Vancouver Art in the Sixties* (Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, 2008). A frequent collaborator, Turner has written scripts with Stan Douglas, poems with Geoffrey Farmer, and a libretto with Andrea Young. As the Ellen and Warren Tallman S.F.U. Writer-in-Residence (2009-2010), he curated *to show, to give, to make it be there: Expanded Literary Practices in Vancouver, 1954-1969* (2010), Simon Fraser University Gallery, Burnaby, British Columbia.

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January 12, 2011 6PM in the Western Front Grande Luxe Hall
A screening and talk presented by Michael Turner, as part of *Past is Prologue*—an ongoing research project considering the Western Front Media Archive

List of Tapes

Kathy Acker reading from "The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec" (1978), February 2, 1977

Steve McCaffery and **bpNichol** performing "Aupe Relationships" November 21, 1977

Kevin Davies reading from "Exhibit A" October 22, 1983

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