

## **Kate Craig: Living in Character I By Karen Henry.**

*Caught in the Act, An Anthology of Women in Performance*, Tanya Mars & Joanna Householder, editors, YYZ Books, 2003/2004. With thanks to Hank Bull.

Kate Craig is well known for her videotapes and for fostering the video production program at the Western Front starting in 1976, but her participation in the flurry of performance activities on the West Coast in the 1970s provided the foundation and opportunity for her work in video. When the first video camera was introduced to the Western Front in 1974 there was already an active performance scene which critiqued Hollywood and mass media and their roles in creating a decadent star system of money and power. Video provided an appropriate frame through which the performances could be seen, by other artists and potentially by broader audiences. The artists created a parallel system of promotion, public events, colourful personae, awards and pageants, parodying and subverting both the commercial art world and mainstream culture. The image, literal or implied, and its relation to television and other popular media was the foundation of this performance work. Kate, whose meticulous framing is recognizable in her camera work, approached performance with the same intense concentration on the image. Her life and work was in relation to a theatre of images as a framing device through which the artist communicates.

### **THE ART OF THE POSE**

Before identity politics, there was the pose: before subjectivity, objectivity and just plain activity. In the heady 1970s, identities were fluid, playful, communal and sexually experimental. Performance was a way of intervening in and parodying what was considered “the establishment” in North American culture.

In 1970 Kate Craig was newly married to Eric Metcalfe and the two moved to Vancouver from Victoria, BC. On the way, they travelled in Europe and stopped in Toronto for the Miss General Idea Pageant. In Vancouver they hooked up with their friend from Victoria, Michael Morris, and his friends including Vincent Trasov and Glenn Lewis. In 1973, eight of the group bought the Western Front as a space to live and work. Kate was the only woman in this predominantly gay scene with a strong camp sensibility which encouraged the acting out of media icons. Everyone had at least one persona that was played out in live performances, mail art activities and everyday life. Metcalfe’s character Dr. Brute, which surfaced in his work in 1969, was a personification of heterosexual lust and hedonism. His mascot was the leopard. Kate became Lady Brute, a foil for the Doctor’s obsessions, acting out the stereotypical trope of the seductress with the leopard skin accoutrements of wild sexuality that the image implied. She was at home in this theatrical atmosphere. Her background was in costume design, first at the Neptune Theatre in Halifax and then at Le Theatre du Nouveau Monde, and costume was at the heart of the performance activities at the Western Front. Kate was the costumier, collecting artifacts and designing and making clothes for Dr and Lady Brute, Art Rat, the New York Corres Sponge Dance Swimmers (rubber shark-fin bathing caps co-conceived with Gary Lee-Nova), the Great Homunculus, and others. [\[1\]](#)

While Lady Brute was a character she married into, Kate took it on as a collaboration

through her love of costume. Eric performed the lascivious Doctor or the cool jazz musician with his kazoo saxophone and Kate perfected the pose – the character was, after all, about image and style. Lady Brute donned leopard skin coats, pants, hats, heels, glasses, scarves, and appeared in performances and parades modeling her collection, always ready for a photo shoot. Lady Brute appeared a number of times, with and without the Doctor, but the iconic image is the photo by Rodney Werden that appeared on the cover of *File* magazine in 1973. In the image Kate sits seductively on the edge of a display surrounded by her leopardskin wardrobe. One net-stockinged leg is raised to reveal a black garter beneath the leopardskin cuffed jacket. Kate understood the arch sensibility of the character and made her audiences appreciate the full impact of the particular “image-bondage” that Lady Brute represented.

Typical of the active multiple associations of the time, Lady Brute/Kate Craig became one of the Ettes, a girl group that first appeared as backup for Mr. Peanut in his mayoralty campaign in 1974. The group included Kate Craig (who was the shortest), Mary Beth Knechtel, Babs Shapiro, Judith Schwartz, and Suzanne Ksinan, among others, varying with each occasion. The Peanettes, dressed in black jackets, shorts, and top hats, did a strutting two-step in line behind Mr. Peanut, accompanied by Dr. Brute and the Brute Saxes. During campaign meetings they would sing *Peanuts from Heaven* and hold up the letters spelling out PEANUT and shout: P is for performance, E is for elegance, A is for art, N is for nonsense, and so on. Mr. Peanut and the Peanettes stole the show when the newly elected mayor (Art Phillips) was making his acceptance speech in the ballroom at the Bayshore Inn. The television cameras swung away to catch the act and Phillips accommodated the antics. The Ettes were modeled as a generic backup group, emphasizing the supportive role usually played by women. They described themselves as post-feminist, feeling free of, but not burdened by, heterosexual politics and encouraging a more playful pan-sexual environment. They could conveniently attach themselves to whatever occasion arose. Besides the Peanettes they performed as the Coconettes (with Dana Atchley) and the Infinettes at A Space in Toronto (written and directed by Mary Beth Knechtel and choreographed by Margaret Dragu). Though the antics were mostly silly, the Ettes could be entertaining in their critique. As AA Bronson was heard to remark after the A Space show, “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be.” The Ettes finally “came out” as the Vignettes (individually mannered and *finished*, so to speak) at the Amy Vanderbilt Valentine Debutant Ball (conceived and directed by Lin Bennet) at the Western Front in 1975. This was a “comedy of manners” in which the “girls” walked with books on their heads and practiced doing and redoing a table place setting until they could do it blindfolded. Lady Brute had a few minor lines and everyone dressed in prom-night finery and danced and sang to *Once in Love with Amy* and other show tunes.

By 1974, changes in Kate’s personal relationships coincided with a change in attitude towards the performance parodies that had inspired the early 1970s. The artists’ felt it was time to move on before they were completely bound to their personae. Kate’s relationship with Eric was coming to an end, and typical of the weaving of art into life that characterized the time, she discarded the leopard skin mantle through two performances, one that merged the leopard with her own sensual freedom and one that ritually separated her from that particular image. In the summer of 1974 she designed and made, with the help of Patrick Ready, a harness that could be hitched to a cable so that she could fly. The cable was rigged from the hull of a beached freighter to a tree on

the shore over the beach in Dollarton, outside Vancouver. The *Flying Leopard* was Kate's first entirely personal project. Using the *Hands of the Spirit* (artifacts that had become a symbol of the creative spirit of performance, used by both Western Front and General Idea) as wings, she cast off from the upper deck of the boat and slid along the cable which dropped perilously close to the stones below. With great aplomb she tried the stunt again, reaching her tongue towards the shallow water below her. The audience for this performance was a few intimate friends, but it was filmed by Byron Black for his program *Images for Infinity* on cable television. The postcard of the winged leopard on all fours in the tall grass shows the female leopard returning to a natural wild state. Kate subsequently divested herself of her leopard skin wardrobe in a performance for video entitled *Skins* (1975 w/Hank Bull). Standing naked in front of the camera, she dons each piece of leopardskin clothing one by one and then puts it into a trunk. The sound track of Kate and others watching the tape contributes to the separation of herself from the image of Lady Brute.

## **PINK POEM**

These performances took place during the height of the sexual revolution: for the first time, the pill provided women the opportunity to enjoy sex without the natural consequences of pregnancy. Along with the empowerment of sexual freedom came the renewed politics of feminism. The ethos of the time encouraged participatory action and women were working together to organize political and social activities. This new stridency was often "anti-feminine" in an effort to distance women from the overly acculturated terms: pink for girls, blue for boys, dolls for girls, guns for boys. Kate, wryly contrary and ever the individual, turned her collecting interests to an exploration of the colour pink. She collected pink household and fashion items and made her own pink clothes. At one point she had her hair cut in a spiral around her head. Though this was not a performance character, it was a sustained activity in line with the simple Zen performances of the Fluxus movement and French artist Robert Filliou who spent time at the Western Front during this period. Kate was not a performer who loved the stage. Kate was more comfortable integrating performance into her everyday life. It was the context in which she lived, and performance represented a deliberate lifestyle choice. The "pink poem" culminated in 1980 in the videotape *Straight Jacket*. In the tape, Kate models an intricately tailored straight jacket that she made of pink satin. The soundtrack, a sing-song performed by Mary Ready (written by Kate with music by Hank Bull) revolves around the theme of "inside-out." Given the constriction of the garment and its sensual surface, it's hard not to see this reflection on the significance of pink in a feminist context, though the tape and the ongoing work ultimately associates the colour with a female sensuality that is bound by social constraints not limited to heterosexual politics. For one thing, Kate had spent the last ten years surrounded by a creative cadre of gay men that practiced its own forms of misogyny

## **COLLABORATIONS IN ART AND LIFE**

For the youthful artists at the Western Front in the 1970s art was generated through the vitality of community and collaboration. The lifestyle became a philosophy and an ethic of production affecting a larger circle of associates who participated in the creative life of the place. Kate was one of the most firmly grounded participants in this philosophy and

practice.

The Lux Radio Players was a vehicle for writing and performing together and for playing with sound and illusion. The performances were recorded live and only later edited by Hank Bull and Patrick Ready for co-op radio, CFRO-FM. The scripts were written around the characters and loosely constructed by one or the other of the players, usually Hank and Patrick or Glenn Lewis (for his Mondo Arte series). They were added to and elaborated by the players in the process of planning and performing. Kate played a number of roles, as did everyone, and one of her specialties was acoustic sound effects. Her one consistent character was The Soni Twin with Glenn Lewis. The Soni Twin was a Siamese private eye based on the idea that “two heads are better than one.” The matched pair would speak their lines in rhyming couplets and in tandem. The Soni Twin first appeared in *The Barge to Banality*. The title was disparagingly bestowed by Michael Morris when he first heard the script. They also appeared in *A Clear Cut Case*, the first recorded performance of the Players in December of 1974, and later performed in *A Bite Tonight*, *Habitart: or How to live with our Just Deserts* at Habitat in 1976, and *The Thief of Gladbag* on the Judy Lamarsh show for CBC.

In 1977 Kate was involved with several activities including a short-lived punk band called *The Young Adults* in which she played the drums. The band, including Terry Ewasiuk, Dave Larsen, Elizabeth Van der Zaag, Kate Craig, Monica Holden-Lawrence, Michael Wonderful and Hank Bull, never performed publicly but, consistent with the emerging role of the video image in the music industry, they did make a videotape. The group was too volatile to stay together very long. Their relationships were characterized by an incident in which singer Terry Ewasiuk asked Kate if she could please keep the beat. Kate responded, “Keep your own fucking beat.”

The radio plays had not provided many opportunities for Kate’s interest in costume design during this period, but the Western Front residency program brought artists from all over the world into her circle, inspiring her to create World Wide Costume, a wardrobe designed specifically for photo-shoots in response to fashion magazines. In general, The UN Habitat Conference in Vancouver [2] had brought the creative dialogue of internationalism into focus and the Western Front was well situated to capitalize on this opportunity. The Canada Shadows, a blend of early European performance and special effects, Indonesian puppet theatre and gamelan, and electronic music, premiered in March on the occasion of the fourth anniversary of the Western Front. The group included Kate, Patrick Ready, Hank Bull, Glenn Lewis and composer/performer Martin Bartlet (one of the founders of the Western Front). The first Canada Shadows production, *The Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll*, was based on a novel by Alfred Jarry. Kate and the rest of the group designed and cut out meticulously detailed shadow puppets based partly on past performance characters such as the *Flying Leopard*. The Shadows toured to San Francisco and performed *Vis à Vis* in 1978 in several venues in Ontario and Quebec, including a performance festival organized by Chantal Pontbriand at the Musée des Beaux Art. In 1980 Kate and Hank Bull embarked on an extensive world tour looking for shadow plays in Indonesia and India and playing with musicians in Africa. They carried a portable shadow theatre and made puppets and performed along the way. The Canada Shadows performed again in Europe in the 1980s as World Shadows in a play entitled *La Chaise des Mémés*. Later works included *Aka Nada* and *Corpus Colossus*. Both the Lux Radio Players and the Canada Shadows continued

sporadically through the 1980s.

Performance was a radical activity in the 1970s, undefined as a genre. Kate's idea of performance was informed by community and based in thinking of life as an art project, living thoughtfully and creatively. Her commitment to this is stunningly exemplified by her final performance as she was dying of cancer in the summer of 2002, holding court in Storm Bay, BC, surrounded by her friends and posing sitting on the coffin that she had ordered made from the local wood. With formidable inner strength and the involvement of a close community, she maintained the balance of life and art until the end.

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## NOTES

1. Gary Lee Nova called himself Art Rat. Kate made a papier mache rat head that was worn in performances by various people including Kate in its first incarnation for a photo shoot in London. The New York Corres Sponge Dance School was Glenn Lewis's vehicle for mail art and performance activities such as a synchronized swimming group that wore rubber shark fin bathing caps (made by Kate). The name was a reference to Ray Johnson's New York Correspondence School, another mail art creation. The Great Homunculus was a character developed by Hank Bull originally as a mystic on the HP Radio Show on Co-op Radio. Kate made the robes for Hank when he adapted the character for live performance. These were only a few of the many personas in play at the time.
2. The UN Habitat Conference in Vancouver in 1976 was the first meeting of international NGOs around the idea of human settlements and sustainability, an energetic and inspired moment in terms of shared dreams and shared culture. It was a grand event involving the entire creative community either directly or indirectly and many dedicated volunteers.