

## Exhibitions and Performance | Michael Turner

It has been thirteen years since the publication of Whispered Art History: Twenty Years At The Western Front (1993), a collection of essays, images, and event chronology “celebrat[ing]” what the book’s editor, Keith Wallace, calls a “pioneer in the development of artist-run centres in Canada.” I remember flipping through my copy at the launch, impressed with the range and volume of activity, though curious why no one wrote on the gallery. Music, Performance, Video and Writing were given discrete treatment, yet where one might expect an essay on Exhibitions, instead we got William Wood’s intellectual audit of the office files. Although insightful, and occasionally funny, *This Is Free Money?* stuck out.

Now, after rereading the book, I am beginning to wonder if it might be the other way around: that in resisting an essay on Exhibitions, Wood was (inadvertently or otherwise) drawing attention to the formalization of the Western Front, its subdivision into curatorial units—a formalization determined in part by public funding agencies, but also upheld by the owner-founders, not to mention reinforced by the book’s authors, who, with the exception of Wallace, organized their essays by curatorial program, as opposed to exploring the more generalized, non-traditional notions of art making (art-as-life, the Eternal Network, mail-art correspondence), the stuff the Western Front was made of when it was founded, in 1973.

In fairness, Wallace covers administrative and programming regimes in his Introduction, allowing curatorial programs a logical choice for essay topics. Logical but convenient too—especially when they detract from an assessment of the Front itself as a medium, this great honkin’ instrument where ideas, actions, and objects converge, achieve overtone. This was the case in 1973, but is it the case today? Indeed, I do not know the last time the Front’s resident dance company, EDAM, collaborated with the centre’s other programs—and EDAM occupy almost a third of the building. Nor do I see those attending musical performances at gallery openings (the gallery’s budget accounts for a third of the Front’s funding—which is not to imply musical audiences should feel beholden). As for Media, its ongoing emphasis on sound (and its relaxation of the Video Residency Program) has me wondering what capital M Media means these days—and like the magazine, there exists a perception that it is the same five people working the same material over and over again.

I have been asked to write an essay on the Western Front’s Exhibitions and Performance programs, part of a follow-up to *Whispered Art History*. However, because *Whispered Art History* did not carry an essay dedicated to Exhibitions, I feel compelled to mention, in some form, the gallery’s early days. Also, because I have been asked to write on Performance—and because Performance was addressed in *Whispered Art History*—I worry I might be writing two essays. Rather than do that, I will attempt instead a retelling of Exhibitions and Performance together, with an eye towards their (re)convergence.

According to the chronology, the Western Front's first exhibition—stoneware and woven objects by Robert's Creek artists—took place in December, 1973. Everything in the show was for sale. The significance of the exhibition was not so much the work but where it was coming from. Robert's Creek ("Babyland") was a pastoral node in the Eternal Network, a summer retreat for three of the Front's co-founders—Glenn Lewis (aka Flakey Rosehip), Michael Morris (aka Marcel Idea) and Vincent Trasov (aka Mr. Peanut). Although the mails were the means by which the Network communicated, it was sometimes necessary to invite artists into the building—if not to make work, then at least to show it. The roots of this exhibition can be seen today, in the annual craft sale.

The following year, General Idea provided an illustrated report on the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavillion; Robert Cumming converted what is now the Front Gallery into the Lure of the Sea Bar; Mariko Kiyooka and Julia Tribe exhibited costumes; and Anne Focke displayed a collection of Space Needle souvenirs. None of these exhibitions concerned themselves with traditional object-making, and the Front seemed fine with that. (Indeed, as with the absence of *Whispered Art History's* Exhibitions essay, it was what was not happening at the Front that spoke to where the owners were headed.)

Although *Whispered Art History* lists three exhibitions in 1975, there were in fact only two (Carole Itter's *Tribute to Chickens* was a performance). Which leaves Gerry Gilbert's manuscripts and Eric Metcalfe and Kate Craig's *Spots Before Your Eyes*, a collection of objects and gestures the artists began compiling after their marriage, in 1969.

*Spots Before Your Eyes* was a total environment, one that involved correspondence, fashion, installation, music, performance, personae, properties, sex, and, of course, the leopard spot motif. The show was significant in a number of ways. First, as a work of art, it marked a high point in Front interdisciplinarity, a resonant appendage to the *Art and Correspondence* from the Western Front show that toured the country four years later. Second, despite its burlesque (of fame, status, wealth and power), *Spots* could just as easily be construed as a celebration of that which it purportedly mocked, particularly the heterosexual union of Metcalfe and Craig (Dr. and Lady Brute), a conjugation that chaffed at the homotopic aspirations of certain members of the Front cast, most of whom were gay men. Third, *Spots* signaled the end of the 'free play' era at the Western Front, for in 1976 Morris became curator of Exhibitions, a move which further subdivided the Front into curatorial units (Dance and Music being first), thus setting the stage for what was (and what was not) going to be happening in the gallery from then on.

In January 1976 came one of the Front's first formal exhibitions, a blockbuster show of holography called *Fringe Research*. Holography was a relatively new area of artistic inquiry (Hornby Island artist Jerry Pethick had been among the first local artists to explore it). However, like 'virtual reality' in the 1980s, holography never took off, a failure that could be seen as a metaphor for the Western Front

itself, whose mysterious and prismatic beginnings were, by the late-Seventies, becoming occluded, predictable, exclusive.

By the time *Art and Correspondence* from the Western Front toured, in 1979, there existed a tension amongst the Front's owners. Morris and Trasov (now co-curators of Exhibitions) argued that the Front should be placing greater emphasis on the gallery program, going so far as to suggest annexing the Dance studio. This was not a popular proposal. Martin Bartlett (Music), Craig (Video and Residency Program), Glenn Lewis (Performance, as well as Managing Director), and Metcalfe (Music) felt the Front should remain open to all programming possibilities, including those that have yet to invent themselves. The position of Morris and Trasov (who, by then, had shed their nicknames) reflected a trend in the visual arts: the return to object-oriented production and the gallery as arbiter. In this respect, they were echoing what Vancouver Art Gallery director Luke Rombout announced in 1974, when he cancelled the performance-based Special Events Program in order to "bring the gallery back to being involved in the visual arts." Of course the trend towards object-making was already apparent at the commercial galleries, where, after years of 'difficult' to manage conceptual projects, gallerists were once again showing painting, sculpture, and, to a lesser extent, photography. As for the aforementioned tension, it was never resolved. A short time later, Morris and Trasov left for Berlin (though they remained co-owners, until 1999).

In her *Whispered Art History* essay on the Performance program, Judy Radul intercuts Eric Metcalfe's years as performer and Performance curator with a series of instructive orienting statements as to what performance art might be. Indeed, it is remarkable that, as late as 1993, the history of an institution's Performance program required a commentary as to what constituted its practice. I say this not as a criticism, but in recognition of a discipline that was, at the time, relatively new, under-theorized, and without borders. This last point—the borderless nature of performance art—is important, given the earlier split between owners (Are we an institution, or a medium?)—but also, with respect to the Video Residency Program, how the opening of borders allowed visiting artists to work outside their metiers, such as a Mona Hatoum, who, while visiting the Front for a performance at *Wiencover IV*, produced her first video, the appropriately titled *So Much I Want to Say* (1983).

Near the beginning of her essay Radul notes that the Performance program, prior to 1980, "had been unfunded and loosely organized." She also mentions Metcalfe taking up the position of Performance curator at the suggestion of Glenn Lewis, who had become the Front's Managing Director (where, presumably, he secured Metcalfe's salary and budget). Much of Metcalfe's curation is covered in *Whispered Art History*, a program which included performances by international better-knowns Laurie Anderson (1981), Adrian Piper (1981), and Eric Bogosian (1982); locals Margaret Dragu, Judy Radul, and the Neo-Nativists (Warren Arcan, Leonard Fisher and Russell Wallace); and Canadians Tanya Mars, Andrew J. Patterson, and Clive Robertson. Suffice it to say, Metcalfe's curation was notable insofar as it furthered the development of performance art as a discipline, as well

as the Front's relationship with local institutions such as the University of British Columbia's Fine Arts Department and the Emily Carr College of Art and Design, both of whom regularly sought out the Front as a potential co-producer.

Metcalfé's run was the longest of any Western Front curator—over twenty years. (While Performance has had four staff curators in its thirty-three year history, Exhibitions has had twice that many.) After the departure of Morris and Trasov, Lewis became Co-ordinator of Exhibitions, offering the gallery to guest curators like Theodore Wan and David McWilliam. Hank Bull, who arrived at the Front six months after it opened, was curator in 1982—and then Bull and Daina Augaitis from 1983-1984, before Augaitis took on the job herself, in 1985. The Bull-Augaitis years reflect a growing reinterest in the plastic arts, especially work by Canadian artists. Whether this was work Morris and Trasov would have chosen is debatable. If Spots before Your Eyes marked a high point for the Western Front, as medium, the 1986 Luminous Sites exhibition was a reprise: a collaboration not only between Exhibitions and Performance, but also the Front and various local institutions—from commercial galleries to artist-run centres, from shopping malls to the Vancouver Art Gallery. Curated by recent Emily Carr College of Art and Design graduate Daina Augaitis, and Karen Henry, of Video In, Luminous Sites took as its thematic "social forms of representation," with a focus on photography, film, and what was then still referred to as video art. The show featured Canadian artists Tomiyo Sasaki, Barbara Steinman, Paul Wong, Kate Craig, Stan Douglas, and Roy Arden (and guest curators like artist Ken Lum). Although the performance series was smaller in scale, the participation of both programs recalled an earlier Front, and no doubt brought with it speculation as to where the Front was going.

The Luminous shows marked the end of Augaitis's term at the Western Front (she left shortly after, for the Banff Centre, before leaving there for the VAG, in 1995, where she is now Senior Curator). It is worth noting here that Augaitis was the first non-owner and non-practising artist to be employed as a staff curator, and her successor, Annette Hurtig, then a relatively inexperienced rural curator with a Masters Degree in English, was coming from a similar position. Indeed, if Augaitis put Front Gallery on the map, Hurtig maintained its presence, collaborating with Music and Performance to produce shows by Al Neil, Pointed Sticks guitarist Bill Napier-Hemy, in addition to exhibitions by the Association for Non-Commercial Culture and Alan Sekula.

But if the gallery was achieving recognition as a site for contemporary art, it was not being reflected in the Exhibitions budget. This of course had less to do with funding agencies than decisions made by the owners on how Canada Council discretionary monies (as allocated to artist-run centres) would be distributed to the centre's various programs. Hurtig's salary, for example, was \$600 a month, which is fine if you are living in the building, as Metcalfe was, but hardly a sustainable wage for a single parent mother. Yet when Hurtig asked why she was being paid so little, she was told the curator of Exhibitions was considered a training position, and that if she could not survive on her wages, she should rethink her involvement.

I bring this up not to embarrass the Front, but to show how the gallery program has been treated over the years—first as a threat to the interdisciplinarity the centre was founded on; later, as a necessary evil, a *raison d'être* for the Canada Council's discretionary monies. That Hurtig was told her salary was based on a training wage further disparages the Exhibitions program, which, to my mind, has always been a site of interdisciplinary activity, carried on by those who were as new to the interdisciplinarian experiment as Augaitis and Hurtig were to curating. But let's not dwell on that.

When *Whispered Art History* went to press, Brice Canyon was curator of Exhibitions. Canyon, who is infamous for declaring that he would not show "straight white males," came to the Front as the boyfriend of Glenn Lewis. Like Bull (who was Lewis's boyfriend before his marriage to Kate Craig), Canyon had little formal art training, and in many ways both he and Bull were products of the Front—trained, as it were, by the institution itself. This emphasis on training is consistent with what Hurtig (now a successful independent curator) was told regarding her salary, as well as the owners' eagerness to identify both her and Augaitis as Front discoveries, people who 'got her start' at Front Gallery. (This people-not-products mentality is reminiscent of IBM's reinvention of itself in the wake of Apple's domination of the home computer market, which was going on at approximately the same time.)

During Canyon's four years as curator, he remained true to his declaration, taking on issue-oriented projects like *Looking At The Revolution* (1990), a multi-media exhibition on AIDS activism; a gender-inquisitive photomontage show by Kelly Wood; Anne Ramsden's examination of Nietzsche's texts on women; and, in November 1994, his last show at Front Gallery, an installation by Cornelia Wyngaarden, called *The Fragility of Origins*. Although Canyon's program was open to work in all media (except painting), identity was usually at the core. This was not uncommon to Vancouver. However, by the early-1990s, certain identity-based works were having problems keeping pace with their critique. Observers from all political persuasions were quick to impose terms like determinist, reductivist, relativist and simplistic on works that overlooked propositional integrity in their celebration of difference. In retrospect, Canyon's declaration was, at times, more petulant than critical.

In 1994, Canyon's successor, Judy Radul, and Eric Metcalfe (*Performance*), began teaching at Emily Carr College of Art and Design's Intermedia Department. Both had in common a group of students whose interests included installation and performance, inspired in part by artists like Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy, who were popular at the time. Teaching was not new to Front curators (Martin Bartlett taught at SFU; Glenn Lewis was a sessional at UBC in the 1970s), but to have two artist-curators conversant in installation and performance at the art school was a boon to a centre that had, over the years, developed a reputation for being elitist and inaccessible. Identity-based work remained a staple of both programs, with exhibitions by Jayce Salloum (his 'representations of Beirut' archive) and Jin-Me Yoon (in her video debut), and performances by Guillermo Gomez-Pena, Roberto

Sifuentes, and James Luna. Where Exhibitions and Performance had not spoken much since the Luminous series, suddenly they had lots in common.

Two notable examples of artists who had both exhibited and performed at the Western Front were the UK's Haley Neuman (in a show curated by Antonia Hirsch) and Canadian Shauna Beharry. Neuman, known for her spectacular high-technical forays (a skirt made of live microphones), performed on a city bus, with the video document later installed in the gallery. Shauna Beharry, on the other hand, eschewed the gallery and the Lux for the Front's garden and kitchen. It was in the kitchen where Beharry invited viewers to sit in front of the building's antique stove, which, despite Metcalfe's protestations, she cranked to six hundred-and-sixty-six degrees. What is best remembered about Beharry's appearance was her resistance to the traditional exhibition and performance spaces and her use of lower technological forms, such as gardening and cooking—an evocation of the Front's earlier hand-made era. Although her exhibition/performance was not entirely successful, it is memorable insofar as it stands in contrast to a gallery program that was becoming increasingly concerned with electronic media installation. Of course the same could be said of the Performance program: although Metcalfe continued to host iconic performance artists like Carolee Schneemann and Paul McCarthy, 1995 saw a burgeoning interest in performance and new technologies, as manifest in the interactive digital environments of Grant Gregson, Paul Lang, and John Webber, in April, and, a month later, Kathy Kennedy's musical intervention at the Vancouver Public Library, a project that involved 100 singers singing to tracks delivered to them, via narrow-cast, on transistor radios.

The remainder of the 1990s saw the Exhibitions program under co-curation. Radul, whose highlights included The Library Show (moving the Front archive into the gallery proper, where BOO Magazine was launched), and the first collaboration between Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller (The Dark Pool), had for some months been in correspondence with Antonia Hirsch, a German-born artist living in England. Hirsch had heard about the Front while studying at St. Martin's, and asked if it were possible to volunteer there, in exchange for accommodation. Volunteering at the Front, as Augaitis, Hurtig, Canyon, and Radul once had, was a common route to employment, and Hirsch became co-curator of Exhibitions in 1996. Once ensconced, she was instrumental in bringing in artists like Andreas Hintermaier, Neuman, Olaf Nicolai, and Pippiloti Rist. Radul and Hirsch would continue to work together on shows by performance-oriented artists such as Cathy Sisler (curated by Nicole Gingras) and Jan Peacock, until 1998, when Radul left the gallery, and Fiona Bowie took her place.

The Bowie-Hirsch era was marked by an accelerated interest in video installation, most notably their scope project, a year-long series of activities that focused on "experimental film, including video that references film/cinematic practice and hybrid works." Like the Electronic Arts Festival, which Exhibitions had participated in the year before, 'scope's range extended beyond the gallery space. Weekend film jams took place in the Lux; there was an on-going series of panel talks, not to mention exhibitions by artists such as Jonathan Middleton and Derek Barnett.

With all this activity, spread throughout the building, one was again reminded of an earlier Front—as Dana Atchley had been, when, in May 1998, he returned to the Front to give his last performance, entitled “Next Exit”. Atchley, who had been ill for some time, sat beside a “digital fireplace” and told stories. Eighteen months later he would succumb to cancer.

This might be a good time to return to the Performance program. Earlier I mentioned Radul and Metcalfe’s sessional positions at Emily Carr. Although Radul was eventually hired at SFU’s School for Contemporary Arts, Metcalfe continued at the art school, where he encouraged students to explore performance. No doubt many of these younger artists were influenced by the performative aspects of installation artists such as Sisler and Peacock, and it was not long before Metcalfe began inviting them to do performances of their own. Interspersed between performances by Phil McCrum (“The French Revolution”), Coco Fusco, Lori Blondeau, and “irritainers” Gordon Monahan and Laura Kikauka were evenings that featured students John Boehme, Rob Dayton, Tagny Duff, Marlene Plimley, J. MacLaughlin and Jonathan Welles. Although most of these artists have made performance central to their practices, others, such as Dayton and Wells, have explored notions of performance in music and textiles, respectively. Indeed, it is this burgeoning area of ‘performativity’ that began to reveal weaknesses in Metcalfe’s conception of performance art. I am referring here to his long-standing definition of performance art as “not theatre.” This weakness became most apparent with the emergence of international artists like Catherine Sullivan and Carey Young, not to mention locals Geoffrey Farmer, Myfanwy MacLeod, and Radul, all of whom draw on theatre and theatrical tropes in the construction of their performance-based installation works.

But Metcalfe faced a greater challenge, one that threatened the existence of his program altogether.

In 1999, after a review of their Interdisciplinary Work and Performance Art Program, the Canada Council created Inter-Arts—a leaner, more pragmatic version of its predecessor. Metcalfe, who had received funding from the outgoing program, was told by incoming Inter-Arts officer Claude Shryer, a musician, that his program was not “inclusive” enough, that he needed to involve other communities. When asked what this meant, Metcalfe was told that “inclusion” did not so much refer to gender or ethnicity but to ‘spoken word’ and theatre. Metcalfe argued that performance art is part of a highly-evolved art historical discourse, with its own vocabularies—vocabularies that belong to the visual arts, not literature. Which is true. But with “Performance Art” now erased from the banner, Metcalfe’s program was forced to define itself as more than “not theatre”.

What is ironic, here, is that Metcalfe’s position was similar to that of Morris and Trasov, who, twenty years earlier, proposed expanding the gallery into the dance space. Implicit within this expansion was increasing the gallery’s role in determining the centre’s direction, perhaps going so far as to direct Front affairs through the gallery program. Oddly enough, by making a case for Performance

belonging to the visual arts, Metcalfe was inadvertently making a case for returning performance art to the place where the visual arts lived—Exhibitions—thus making a distinct Performance program appear redundant.

By the time Metcalfe retired, in August 2001, performance was no longer the exclusive domain of the Western Front (Glenn Alteen and Brice Canyon of grunt gallery had taken on the monumental task of mounting the LIVE Biennial, which began in 1999 and continues to this day). Nor was performance, as argued by the authors of the Canada Council's Interdisciplinary Work and Performance Art Program review, an area of singular artistic pursuit, given that many younger artists were exploring performance within larger art-making practices (something Metcalfe had helped foster at the art school). Indeed, in a recent essay, entitled *At What Distance... (Between Pictures and Performance)*, published in *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists (2005)*, Monika Szewczyk brought to light what many Vancouvers had known all along: that there existed a parallel performance history in Vancouver art, one that began with Ian Wallace's *At Work* and 'ended' with the work of Tim Lee. With Metcalfe's retirement, many were curious where the Performance program might be headed.

In the fall of 2001, Bowie took a full-time position at the art college, leaving Jonathan Middleton, an Emily Carr grad who had succeeded Hirsch as co-curator in the fall of 1999, the lone curator of Exhibitions (Hirsch had been working as a sessional at the art college, in addition to making and showing work). Earlier that year, Exhibitions had embarked on another thematic series, *Popular Format*, which featured work by artists using popular culture as a referent. Although more broadly defined than Exhibition's 1999 *Sound Separations* show ("artists who create sound in the context of film"), and the inter-departmental *Festival of Sound Art* the following year (jointly presented by Exhibitions, Music, Media, and Performance), *Popular Format* focused specifically on song and film's impact on contemporary culture. Mark Curry unpacked film noir; Tim Lee, Scott Livingstone, Shannon Oksanen, Holly Ward and Ki Wight inhabited pop songs; Laurale Woodcock, the operetta. All the work in this series took the form of video installation.

The fall of 2001 also saw the arrival of the new curator of Performance, artist Victoria Singh. Originally from New Zealand, Singh, who has a penchant for spectacle, had been active in taking performance art to clubs and private venues around town. Among her first Front shows were appearances by techno-interactive artists Stelarc and Perry Hoberman, an ambitious co-production that involved the Pacific Art and Technology Association, the University of Victoria, the Victoria Independent Film Society and the art school. Singh followed that up with her *Contemporary Ritual* series, featuring Sharon Alward, Alan Reade, and Reona Brass, and, in January 2003, a group show that included local artists from various artistic communities performing in tents, where viewers could observe their actions through slits, much like they would a peep show. Singh's shows were well-attended, and after the first eighteen months, her programming—which involved new technologies, the body, ritual, spectatorship, a mix of local, national and international artists, in addition to co-producing institutions— suggested not so

much where performance was headed, but what it had become. Indeed, as a viewer of these events, especially at a time when performance and 'performativity' were finding their way into photography and video, I could not help but wonder how the Performance program might address its discipline 'playing' itself out in the gallery—that is, if notions of performance were being found in Exhibitions, how might those notions, as actions, be addressed in the Performance program?

A recent example of a performance work occupying the gallery would be Tim Lee's 2003 guest curation of a show based on a 1983 project by Ian Wallace. In *At Work*, Wallace repurposed the gallery into a studio, in order to show himself at work—reading, writing, and thinking—the things artists do in their studios. Lee's update was not so much a translation but an adaptation, with the artist Wallace replaced by the writer and critic Clint Burnham. The success of Lee's adaptation lies not in his translation of a work from twenty years earlier, but in addressing the close relationship between academic, critical and aesthetic pursuits that have come to characterize the practices of many Vancouver artists today. Conversely, a 2004 series of tributes to iconic performance artists, curated by Singh, and featuring re-enactments of performances by Chris Burden and Marina Abramovic, was just that—a tribute. Although the project was entertaining, it seemed to signal a stasis in a discipline that, if not spectacular, was at least capable of producing something unexpected.

Earlier this year, Middleton and Singh left their positions (Middleton is now teaching at the art school, while Singh has joined the board of LIVE—both continue to make work.) Replacing Middleton is Candice Hopkins, a recent graduate of Bard College's Curatorial Program, while Performance is under the interim curation of interdisciplinary artist Joanne Bristol. Although we have yet to see anything of Bristol's program (Hopkins has done shows by artists Allison Hrabluik and Jimmy Durham), a notice has gone out soliciting curatorial proposals for the following year, to be administered by Exhibitions. That the Performance program appears to have been subsumed within Exhibitions seems appropriate, given what Morris and Trasov, and more recently Metcalfe, had argued. I would also add that performance, whether as a 'live' action or a set of assumptions and gestures explored through painting, sculpture, photography or video, is a decreasingly singular pursuit but (once again) part of a larger interdisciplinarian practice, the kind the Western Front once encouraged, and, of course, still will.

Michael Turner July, 2006