



Quebec's Diane Landry (left) will spin shoes on record players and Mexico's Lorena Wolffer subverts the catwalk at the upcoming performance-art biennial.



EXPOSING THE UNDERGROUND

PERFORMANCE ARTISTS FROM VANCOUVER AND BEYOND GO INTO OVERDRIVE FOR LIVE

BY JANET SMITH

About the only thing you can predict about the month-and-a-half-long LIVE biennial of performance art is that it will be unpredictable. Descriptions of the amorphous art form are always hindered by the fact that the audience (and in some cases the surroundings) always changes the end result.

For proof, look no further than local artist Irene Loughlin, who, as one of many projects she's taking part in for the festival, is planning a site-specific performance on a Downtown Eastside fire escape on October 27. For her work, *Vertigo*, she will attempt to climb the structure, release birds from a cage there, and then hang from the fire escape, in a memorial to people who have died in the alley below and an act of hope for those who have survived. Here are the known quantities: she is going to wear a dress made out of salmon bones (in part to symbolize the Native history of the site) and she'll videotape the piece and screen it live on a monitor at street level. But there are also a lot of unknowns. For starters, audience members won't know the exact location of *Vertigo* until they show up at Gallery Gachet at 4 p.m. to be led to the site. Says Loughlin: "Who knows? Maybe I'll be stopped before I can do it. I may grasp and hang; I've been rock-climbing and practising, but I'm not very good at it. I have an idea, but because there's so many variables and politics and logistics, you don't know what the outcome will be. That's the exciting thing about performance art." Adding to the uncertainty is that the title of *Vertigo* was not chosen out of thin air: Loughlin is afraid of heights.

Like Loughlin, Glenn Alteen, curator at the grunt gallery and organizer of LIVE, has learned to embrace the variables of performance art—and to deal with the fact that he can't be quite sure what the pieces presented at galleries around town between Saturday (October 13) and November 30 will look like. "With performance art, it's not like producing theatre or visual-art shows because you really don't know what you're going to get," he says. "It's one thing to read a description of it, but when you actually see it, it can be about a whole range of other things."

Part of the reason performance art is so hard to talk about specifically is that it takes such wildly diverse forms. The festival's 30 performances will encompass everything from high-tech multime-

dia pieces to low-tech and cabaret-style happenings. *Objects for the Emancipated Consumer* (October 25 to 27 at the Dynamo gallery) is a multimedia spy drama that invites audience members to activate sound and video by scanning bar-coded objects; pregnant Toronto artist Lisa Deanne Smith will walk amid audience members and invite them to pick the blooms off her custom-made costume in *Flower Girl* (October 19 at Gallery Gachet); and Quebec City's Diane Landry will spin objects like kitchen implements and shoes on two record players, turning the everyday into abstract art, in *La Morue (Cod)* (at the grunt November 11). Galleries around town were left free to curate their own performance works for LIVE. Each puts its own twist on the art form: Artspeak, a gallery interested in the interaction of text and visual art, will host Syntax Errors, a series of "performed lectures", at SFU Harbour Centre, while the Video In is organizing a two-part video screening and lecture called *re:live* that explores the relationship between video and performance art.

LIVE grew out of Live at the End of the Century, a citywide event organized two years ago to mark the history of performance art in Vancouver. Two events at this year's biennial pay tribute to that heritage, too. Radix Theatre marks one of the scene's most infamous episodes—a controversy in which a local performance artist publicized, but never pulled off, the public execution of a rat on the VAG steps—with the Sniffy the Rat 10th Anniversary Bus Tour on October 21 (with pick-up at the Arts Club Theatre). On opening night (October 13), Glenn Lewis rounds up a cast of old and new performance artists to play out a retrospective of this city's contributions to the form. Says Alteen: "It takes place in the VAG rotunda, and it's nice to be bringing performance art back to the VAG. They've been gung ho on this." But as much as it tips the hat to the local past, this year's event is bringing in much new work from out of town and out of the country.

Toronto's Rebecca Belmore, for example, will use recycled jars to collect water and stockpile it all day long on October 20 at the grunt gallery, where it will stand as an installation through the next week. "That's more in the style of work that gets done in Toronto and back east," says Alteen. "You don't see the durational work as much here."

Among the most ambitious visiting projects is Mexican performance artist Lorena Wolffer's *Catwalk Envy: A Subverted Runway Show*, at the Western Front. For two weeks leading up to the performance on November 9 and 10, Wolffer will work with several local artists to create "fashion model" characters that address social and political concerns. On the

WHAT
LIVE biennial of performance art

WHERE
Various venues

WHEN Saturday (October 13) to November 30

INFO 604-875-9516 or www.livevancouver.bc.ca/, with schedules at participating galleries

night of the show, they'll use the runway as their stage. Western Front artist Lori Weidenhammer invited Wolffer here after taking part in a similar subverted catwalk show in Regina last year: "I was pregnant at the time, so I did a pregnant Playboy bunny-type waitress and tried to imagine if one of those waitresses got pregnant," she says. "The idea is to use the catwalk as a performance-art venue."

Wolffer's concept grew out of her own *If She Is Mexico, Who Beat Her Up?*, in which she tackles the effects of the North American Free Trade Agreement on Mexico and its women. (It's also to be performed as part of *Catwalk Envy*.) "The main focus of my performances has been to transform the female body into a site in which social and political concerns can be addressed, into a metaphorical blueprint for the social body of Mexico," says Wolffer from Mexico City, where I've reached her by e-mail. "The performance of *If She Is Mexico, Who Beat Her Up?* features me as a 'battered high-fashion model'; a battered nation that insists on presenting itself not only as salubrious but also as 'fashionable' and 'attractive'."

Mexico City's performance-art scene may be more politically charged than Vancouver's. Says Wolffer: "I think that, because performance art works with/around the body, it can be more 'openly' political than other art forms. Culture is inscribed in the body." And although Wolffer admits that Mexicans still perceive performance art as a marginal form (as many do here in Canada), she used to help run a festival there that drew 400 people a night. The practice seems to be attracting growing attention worldwide, she says, but then she qualifies that with a challenge: "I think now is a turning point for performance, when we need to redefine it, question the new directions it can take and find new venues for it."

If that's true, LIVE is on the right track. The fest is a sign that the art form is thriving in Vancouver compared to many parts of the world, Alteen says; LIVE, in fact, is the biggest festival of its kind on the continent. "It's so everywhere in Vancouver that you think it should be that way everywhere else, but it's not," he says. "Performance art exists here all the time in its own little underground, and if anything, LIVE is just in to get other people to realize this goes on." Even if he can't quite tell them what they'll be seeing. ■

MASSIVE SHIPWRECK READY TO SAIL

By the time Eric Neighbour put the finishing touches on a four-piece, 60-foot-long public artwork called *Shipwreck* at the end of September, almost 1,400 people had taken a hand in carving the work. The project, which took participants four months to chisel out of red cedar, is on display at the foot of Broughton Street by Coal Harbour. Neighbour, who has led community-art projects across the city, led the building of *Shipwreck* as artist in residence at the Coal Harbour Community Centre. The Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation is set to install the carved sections in a line in Harbour Green Park, which is located

at the north foot of Broughton Street, sometime in the next few months. The three horizontal parts of the artwork represent the rolling waves of the

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ocean, while the fourth, vertical section is an abstract rendering of a human being; together, they create an evocative, somewhat eerie, and unmistakably West Coast image of a person being swallowed by the sea.

In the early part of the project,

Neighbour encouraged people of all ages and experience to help carve the pieces; at the end, he set an age limit of 12 years and older for the people finishing the final details. "It was wonderful and terrible all at the same time," Neighbour told the *Straight* about the project's logistics. Pointing out that the artwork has nearly 2,000 linear feet of column fluting, he said, "It took seven weeks just to carve that, and that included more than 800 people."

Getting the downtown community to literally chisel out a public artwork on such a scale was a massive undertaking, but also a rewarding one,

Neighbour said. "I guess I got accused of being a Tom Sawyer on numerous occasions," he said with a laugh. "But I think it's much more than that: so many people are missing tactile experiences of any kind these days. Using tools you've only heard about on an enormous piece of public art that will be on-site for many years is a heady thing: at first they'd say, 'You don't want me to ruin your work—I'm not an artist.' But once you got past that, they'd say, 'I'll give it five minutes,' and end up staying there for hours."

TALLYHO Arts Club Theatre artistic director Bill Millerd is once again lead-

ing a theatre trip to England—and this time, to Paris as well. On the company's 10th annual *London Theatre Tour*, November 30 to December 9, Millerd will host preshow chats. Productions on this year's roster are *The Royal Family*, starring Judi Dench; the hit ABBA musical, *Mama Mia!*; the musical version of *Peggy Sue Got Married*; and a new presentation of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In addition, travellers will go by train through the Chunnel to Paris for a tour of the Paris Opera. Information is available through Sharon Amos at Uniglobe Travel at 604-532-0406 or by e-mailing wc.travelex@uniglobe.com.

• JANET SMITH