

Attitude reigns in performance-art history

MULTIMEDIA

Mondo Artie Episode #6070

A LIVE Biennial of Performance Art presentation.

At the Vancouver Art Gallery on

Saturday, October 13

• **By JOHN KEILLOR**

Mondo Artie Episode #6070—The Sleuth Lips Report was a big draw on Saturday (October 13) at the Vancouver Art Gallery: a surprising feat, perhaps, for a showcase of performance art about an FBI agent sniffing out American draft-dodgers.

Performance art can be subtle stuff, so when I arrived at 8 p.m. sharp in a foyer full of gorgeous people and good wine at \$2 a brimming glass, I suspected the show to be already in progress. It wasn't. After half an hour, this comely lot was ushered into the gallery's rotunda, from which the audience could see performers leaning over from the upper floors. Here the actual performance began. Despite its nominal theme, it was essentially a history of Vancouver's performance-art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. This entailed, among other things, a lot of name-dropping, food-throwing, a secret agent, art theory, Hitler, drag queens, leopard-skinned saxophones, and performance-art gurus of yesteryear who taped down sections of the audience. This was all accompanied by coordinated sound effects and big-screen projections of Mr. Peanut, a sprinting banana, someone on-stage somewhere wrestling a mattress, and a clock that continually reappeared displaying the actual time, so viewers always knew the program's sometimes glacial rate of passage.

Some performers were within arm's reach, and others were high above, often leaning to present additional historical tidbits. Sleuth Lips was the secret agent, performed by a handsome and professional Archer Pechawis. His was the only regular character amid this disjointed stream-of-consciousness melee. The audience learned history by following Lips' progress, and found solace in throwing hot-dog buns—which had been dropped from the third floor—at one another. However, they were not invited to throw eggs at the woman in an alcove wearing a leopard-print dress. The sound technician had clearance to pelt her, and gingerly did so.

Around 15 minutes into the performance, it became entirely about food, and for the next half-hour the focus was drag queens making puns about edibles. On the screen, the chopping of truffles was examined closely, and hot, meaty meals were filmed up close at rotating angles like majestic landscapes. This wore a lot of viewers out, so they wandered back into the foyer for more wine and nibbles. There was a good spread still waiting.

Meanwhile, those who remained inside were getting burnt-out on all the John Waters-like references to grub. The campy fever of victual double-entendres eventually broke, transforming into a defence of performance art in general (these were Sleuth Lips' findings) and this performance-art piece in particular. This good-natured tirade included a journalistic review of the show in progress, which in part resembled the notes I took. It also defended postmodernism, irony, surrealism, and so on, with cute, academic slogans like Collage or Perish! The confidence of this troupe in its endeavour was unshakable.

Nothing has as much attitude as a performance-art work, and if attitude has aesthetic merit, this evening was a sterling success. ■