

ART

THEORIES AND HYBRIDITIES

Theories and Hybridities, the first panel discussion of the 6th LIVE Vancouver Biennial of Performance Art took place Monday at the Grunt Gallery on E.2nd, consisting of Kristine Stiles, Jocelyn Robert, Warren Alcan and Glenn Alteen, director of Grunt and one of the directors of the board for LIVE. All respected, practicing artists from across Canada. Essentially, it was a casual discussion finally thrown open to the audience for questions. I struggled to keep notes, but the ideas flew so fast and freewheeling, what follows is an amalgam of things said, mostly without attribution, and my own reactions. Robert and Stiles bandied all sorts back and forth and Arcan acted as a second moderator, chipping in or redirecting occasionally the conversation while Alteen looked on, a beaming and benevolent host.

"As both an artist and an historian" says Christine Stiles, one of dozens of artists presenting/performing as part of the Biennial, "I operate on three different levels: History, Mythology and Intuition. I can't separate lived experience— I don't experience what I experience when I am experiencing it; it's only when I look back I understand. Perhaps Intuition is a fluid space in which we can 'look back' as something is occurring." As an historian, Ms Stiles attempts also to be aware of actual events, the real social and human necessities around those events and their impact on everyday lives.

According to modern physics and neurophysiology, Time, as much as we understand it, "moves" in any direction it likes and only appears to crawl linearly forward because our brains process stimuli one chemical synapse reaction at a time. However, while we exist in the present, we live in the past, because by the time our minds have made sense of what is happening to us, the moment is gone.

Some performances can't be photographed/videoed with justice. Telling people, describing in words, sometimes gives a better sense of what occurred in a performance or the effect it had, especially on the audience. The transmutation of intuition, materialising fluid understanding of the present through the lens of human experience into something concrete and repeatable, is the creation of art via one technique or another. Drawing a line constitutes a filtering of everything you have experienced into a communicable expression, which is technique. To draw a line you must first draw a line, and there is a whole tradition of that in art. So, should artists be concerned with developing a tradition of performance art?

Institutions, even progressively minded arts funding councils and established galleries, are creatures of tradition. Because performance is by its nature ephemeral, funding bodies require documentation, and, even more so, publication. Institutions need to look back and assess, which is why academics are always one step behind practicing artists in terms of theory. Artists are actively creating theory out of intuition while academics are attempting to understand retrospectively. Art is out there renewing our perceptions of the world, while the institutions try to ground this creation, rein it in, keep balance—they may desire progress, but not too quickly. Therefore, the substance of performance art and the difficulty (impossibility?) of stuffing it into the square holes required by application forms, of being considered by reactive academia, marginalises the field.

Here the conversation went on tangents constituting the other major theme of the discussion: the placement of artists within the pond-ripples of society. As became apparent during question time, the audience seemed to feel the panel were regarding artists as being on the fringes of society— and that hurts!— whereas in fact the panellists had stated numerous times they saw artists, within the context of creativity and society, at the centre radiating out. Economically, in terms of being viewed as small businesses, yes, artists are marginalised, but that is another article.

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