

Rita McKeough: Works, EMMEDIA Gallery & Production Society, M:ST Performative Art Festival, TRUCK Contemporary Art in Calgary

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Rita McKeough

Works, interior pages & cover, 2018.

Photos : Marc Hutchinson

Rita McKeough: Works

The book launch for *Rita McKeough: Works* (2018) took place in a crowded hall at one of Calgary’s Royal Canadian Legions on a cool October evening. One after the other, artists, curators, and cultural workers took to the microphone to praise McKeough as a creator, mentor, organizer, and activist. Humbled by the outpouring of admiration, McKeough was magnanimous in her remarks, a model and a beacon of hope in an art world fraught with self-preservation, apolitical leadership, and the pursuit of individual success.

Rita McKeough: Works documents the artist’s collaborative artistic practice starting in the late 1970s through a series of essays, interviews, and stories; colour photographs and sketches; and a vinyl record containing audio excerpts from previous works. Edited by Diana Sherlock, this monograph is a unique object cataloguing and revisiting the artist’s prodigious career exhibiting in seminal Canadian artist-run centres, performance festivals, universities, galleries, and museums. The publication outlines the depth of her practice as it fluidly combines visual and media arts, performance, installation, and sound. From Halifax to Vancouver, her work resonates with ecological and socio-political concerns, foregrounding contemporary issues with urgency. Disarmingly humorous yet poignantly gut-wrenching, her interventions are immersive and captivating. As described by Areum Kim, with *Veins*, one of the most recent projects featured in the catalogue, McKeough creates “an environment where multiple perspectives collide and critical conversations might take place.” In Johanna Householder’s essay she names this ability to develop complex events as an “empathic loop, literally bringing the viewer inside the work.” McKeough binds spaces, objects, and individuals together, generating community and intimacy.

A recurrent theme across the publication is McKeough’s particular care for fostering collaborative environments for marginalized people(s), specifically by establishing intergenerational, queer, feminist spaces. While the artist’s own

voice is represented through reprinted sketches and conversations with Sherlock and the artist Cheryl L’Hirondelle, insight into McKeough’s process-driven pedagogy is articulated by the contributors’ accounts of their personal experiences. Echoed throughout is her unabashed commitment to making difficult and uncompromising work. Depicted by Jude Major as a “dynamo,” by Eli D. Campanaro as a “fearless warrior,” and by Deirdre Logue as someone for whom there is “no holding back,” McKeough queers prescribed gender roles inscribed by domestic architecture. The publication repeatedly illuminates how her aesthetic, the product of a highly skilled craftswoman, a visionary ensemble-maker, and a theoretically savvy mind, generates events rich in labour, ideas, and audio-visual content. For this reason, analytical descriptions of McKeough’s oeuvre like Anthea Black’s reading of *slipping by* (2005) or Elizabeth Diggon’s reflections on *tender* (2015) work in tandem with the poetic, speculative worldbuilding contributions of Mary Scott and Jeanne Randolph. The accompanying record, a standalone item that complements the imagery of the catalogue with acoustic texture, effectively remixes voices, instruments, and noises from original installations. Like the body of work itself, *Rita McKeough: Works* feels like an ongoing collaborative project—a conduit between the artist, her concepts, and the viewer—and an invitation to witness and join an ongoing revolution.

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