

**Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder, eds, *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian women*.
Toronto, YYZ Books, 2004, 444 pp., 19 colour and
219 black-and-white illus., \$39.95 Cdn.**

Jessica Wyman

Volume 30, Number 1-2, 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069673ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069673ar>

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Wyman, J. (2005). Review of [Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder, eds, *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian women*. Toronto, YYZ Books, 2004, 444 pp., 19 colour and 219 black-and-white illus., \$39.95 Cdn.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 30(1-2), 140–141. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069673ar>

im 16. Jahrhundert. Nova and Schreurs's is a heavy tome, in terms both of real size and weight and of figurative depth and breadth; as such it serves as an admirable reminder that scholars of the Italian Renaissance can ill afford to ignore contemporary German publications. Like Cole's and Gallucci's books it poses

new problems and opens fresh avenues of inquiry, attesting to the vitality of Cellini studies in a new century.

GWENDOLYN TROTTEIN
Bishop's University

Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder, eds, *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian women*. Toronto, YYZ Books, 2004, 444 pp., 19 colour and 219 black-and-white illus., \$39.95 Cdn.

While it would be overstatement to say that reading the prefatory remarks by the editors of *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian women* provides all one needs to know about performance art in Canada, the editorial texts at the beginning of this book do provide a kind of guide to understanding its contents and parameters. For it is within the pages of Tanya Mars's "Preface" and Johanna Householder's "Apologia" that the terms of engagement for the compilation of this volume become clear. Without these texts, one might be left to wonder at what could appear to be the generational biases of *Caught in the Act*, or at what might seem to be certain historical commitments or artistic over-representations within its pages.

In reading these introductory texts, however, it becomes clear that this book represents the histories of performance art by Canadian women that the editors and authors know best and can speak to most coherently – the 1970s and 1980s, "that time when women made an impact on the contemporary art scene" (p. 11) – leaving room for the writing of future and subsequent volumes that will take on the myriad methods of performance that follow. Indeed, Mars and Householder declare the desire and necessity for such future writing to be undertaken.

If accusations of historical or artistic bias were to become tempting, one would do well to remember Householder's admonition that this book was undertaken because it "showed no signs of coming into existence on its own" (p. 18). While this is certainly true of all books, it is particularly the case for a book on the histories and practices of performance art. As so many of this book's contributors note, performance art is characterized by its persistent undefinability and resistance to historical concretization. In part this is due to its absent-object reliance on memory and personal narrative. Performance art has also been "an expedient, almost involuntary, political positioning for artists who had little interest in creating work within the confines of pre-existing genres, media, or mechanisms for production and distribution" (p. 13). This urgent drive to produce per-

formance is not easily represented within texts that seek to establish performance's historical and current relevance.

And while it is the case that performance art is largely under-represented in the history of art, *Caught in the Act* takes up the additionally important task of representing performance art by women in Canada. Existing histories of performance do consider works by women, notably such artists as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, Laurie Anderson, but until very recently, rarely in detail as fulsome as that attributed to some of the male artists whose work seemed to embody the heroic and risk-taking tendencies of early performance art – artists like Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, and Hermann Nitsch. Serious considerations of women's performances have often considered female body art but have been less concerned with other modes of performance by women, thus speaking at the same time to a presumed (and sometimes explicitly stated) feminist politic, while occasionally furthering the subjugation of women through an ongoing essentializing of the female body.

If performance art is considered to be a liminal practice, or set of practices, within the history of art, so too has consideration of Canadian content largely taken place on or within the margins of art history, even in Canada. This book critically functions to demonstrate the eminence and vanguardism of Canadian women's performance to scholars, students, and practitioners within Canada, and also to those elsewhere who may study performance but know little of this country's contributions to national and international networks of performance practice.

Locating the starting point for this consideration of performance history in the 1970s – a moment widely recognized as one at which performance emerged fully into the art world as a set of radical and politically-inflected practices – this book sets the development of Canadian performance by women not just in the context of those artists to come to the fore in America and Europe, but within the particular social and cultural formations of Canada. These formations include the relevance of national and regional arts councils and the national network of artist-run centres to the production and presentation of performances over the past forty years. Without these networks, much of the activity described in this book might not have taken place, and *Caught in the Act* includes performances that were facilitated by and presented at such supportive spaces as Western Front in

Vancouver, La Centrale in Montreal, A Space in Toronto, and Eye Level Gallery in Halifax. This book truly represents performance practices of women from across Canada working in both official languages and engaging the politics of art and artmaking as well as local and cultural politics. This breadth of engagement is exemplified by writing about The Hummer Sisters' decision to run for mayor of Toronto against conservative candidate Art Eggleton in 1980, because of the art community's apparent lack of interest in local rather than international political issues, and about Rebecca Belmore's performance that honoured and commemorated the killing of First Nations activist Dudley George at Ipperwash.

Structurally, *Caught in the Act* is comprised largely of artist profiles, which offer in-depth considerations of artists' practices. The profiles are preceded in the text by several thematic essays, which address such subjects as humour and costuming in Canadian performance, the centrality of the artist's body in performance, and the impact of second-wave feminism on west coast performance art by women. It is notable that, while the range of artists addressed in this book is inclusive, certain artists figure very heavily within the pages of this book, appearing as authors, sometimes of several texts, and also as the subject of profiles. It is natural that in a book representing such a particular subject area as Canadian women's performance art there will be recurring names; however, the frequency of appearance of certain artists (who are included not frivolously, it should be noted, but because of serious and ongoing commitment to relevant practices) can cause a reader to wonder at the openness of the circuitry within such communities of artists. Even with this book's identification of the multiple ways in which performances were produced, it may be construed as representing a somewhat "exclusive" set of artists who establish in these pages the version of performance history to be followed by women performers to come.

It is true that such a history of Canadian performance, especially by women, has been lacking, and *Caught in the Act* goes far toward rectifying that historical absence. It seems to bear consideration, however, that while many of the women represented in this book took an "anti-historical position"

(p. 13) in developing their performance practices, these very practices are now being offered as historical positions. What will be the implications of these positions for young women whose practices have since emerged and those that are now emerging with sets of concerns informed not only by these earlier important practices but by recent media and discourses remains to be seen.

Alongside the 1991 book *Performance au/in Canada*, edited by Alain-Martin Richard and Clive Robertson, *Caught in the Act* serves as essential reading for those who are learning local and national histories of performance activity, as well as a timely document of activity that has thankfully been inscribed with regard for the words and thoughts of the artists represented. For many students of art and art history there has not been, until now, a resource to rectify the near-absence of Canadian presence in "authorized" accounts of the field of performance art.

Among the lessons to be gleaned from this book is the importance of "doing it for one's self," the "it" being: making performance, forming collaborations, staging events, developing critical language, and writing history. Certainly, the women represented in this book did not wait for sanction of any kind before deciding that there was value for each of them in choosing performance as a way of making art and engaging with the worlds of ideas and politics. While several of the women profiled refer to common sources of influence, such as George Manupelli, each of them took on their own form of performance-making, whether it was inflected by uses of the spoken word, dance, physical theatre, public intervention, or staged event.

From the profiles, a reader might desire to glean certain trends in ways of working across the country, or seek to discern local tendencies. While this would be an impossible task, one destined to demonstrate exceptions more than rules, *Caught in the Act* makes clear that the capacity of Canadian women performance artists for invention, experimentation, and introspection is, thankfully, endless.

JESSICA WYMAN
Ontario College of Art and Design