

Diana Sherlock, ed., *Rita McKeough: Works*, Calgary: EMedia Gallery & Production Society; M:ST Performative Art Festival; Truck Contemporary Art in Calgary, 2018, 162 pp. colour illus. \$ 45.00 (hardback); \$ 75.00 (hardback with 12-inch vinyl boxset); \$ 280.00 (hardback with vinyl and limited edition art multiple) ISBN 978-09867369-2-6

Mireille Perron

Volume 44, Number 2, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1068333ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068333ar>

[See table of contents](#)

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

Perron, M. (2019). Review of [Diana Sherlock, ed., *Rita McKeough: Works*, Calgary: EMedia Gallery & Production Society; M:ST Performative Art Festival; Truck Contemporary Art in Calgary, 2018, 162 pp. colour illus. \$ 45.00 (hardback); \$ 75.00 (hardback with 12-inch vinyl boxset); \$ 280.00 (hardback with vinyl and limited edition art multiple) ISBN 978-09867369-2-6]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 44(2), 210–212. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1068333ar>

and art, fostered a large international community of scholars. Such organizations as the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ASLE) and the Association for the Study of Literature, Environment and Culture in Canada (ALECC) have been active supporters of the genre. While the work of scholars such as art historian Alan Braddock and literary scholar Christoph Irmischer—co-editors of *A Keener Perception* (2009), one of the first edited collections of eco art history—are acknowledged by Cheetham, few other ecocritical scholars find mention in this book. This is disappointing, as the work of Greg Garrard, Ursula Heise, Catriona Sandilands, and Stephanie LeMenager could have enriched Cheetham's discussion of aesthetics, representation, and the role of the artist in raising questions about the current state of our planet.

There is no question that ethics and responsibility haunt the ongoing discussions of how eco art can address such massive problems as climate change or the human right to clean air and water. Yet rather than focusing on the elements of activism present in eco art, as the art historian T.J. Demos has done in several recent books, Cheetham aims to focus on the "articulation" (11) of the environment through aesthetics. Cheetham's methodology deliberately privileges the affective importance of eco art, underlining its intrinsic value and its potential impact on the viewer's growing awareness of the interconnectedness of all living things, which he treats separately from art's political implications.

In "Case Study 3: Indigenous Landscapes—," Cheetham makes an exception to this affect-oriented approach by emphasising the role of land and environment in the practices of Indigenous artists working in Canada, including Kent Monkman, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, Arthur Renwick, and Bonnie Devine. In his

evocative prose, Cheetham explores the environmental commentary of these artists, who use a variety of techniques, from nineteenth-century picturesque to modernist landscapes, alongside Indigenous ways of knowing, to comment on the ongoing impact of colonialism on Indigenous and settler relationships to land. He also makes important reference to the current debates around settler-colonial art history and the place of the privileged art historian in addressing these histories, drawing on the work of Ruth Phillips and Damian Skinner, to argue for the inclusion of Indigenous artists within his largely Western art history of eco art. While he acknowledges his position as a settler art historian writing in Canada at the beginning of the book, and gives mention to the writings of scholars such as Loretta Todd, Cheetham leaves out from this section mention of the rich work of Indigenous ecocritical thinkers, missing an opportunity for a stronger interdisciplinary discussion of Indigenous knowledge and artistic practices.

Cheetham's primary commentary on eco art is that, as a practice, it does not require an artist to be activist. Instead he believes "that it is an encouraging development that artists who do not portray themselves necessarily as environmentalists, and whose practices include a wide range of concerns, nonetheless address ecological issues with great acuity" (204). In an age of global crisis and environmental collapse, this argument may not fully convince or satisfy readers who wish for a more materialist or social art historical engagement with the ecological in art. Nevertheless, *Landscape into Eco Art* offers a thoughtful and historically grounded reflection on an important and growing practice in contemporary art, and its promotion of "ecological thinking." ¶

Dr. Karla Kit McManus is Assistant Professor of Visual Arts (Art History) in the Faculty of Media, Art, and Performance at the University of Regina.

Diana Sherlock, ed.

Rita McKeough: Works

Calgary: EMedia Gallery & Production Society; M:ST Performative Art Festival; Truck Contemporary Art in Calgary, 2018

162 pp. colour illus.

\$ 45.00 (hardback); \$ 75.00 (hardback with 12-inch vinyl boxset); \$ 280.00 (hardback with vinyl and limited edition art multiple)

ISBN 978-09867369-2-6

Mireille Perron

Rita McKeough: Works is a substantial monograph spanning over forty years of the artist's collaborative and performative multimedia works. Edited by Diana Sherlock and published by three Calgary artist-run spaces, it is a critical acknowledgment of the major productions of this leading Canadian contemporary visual artist whose installations address violence against women, human and animal relations, and environmental deterioration. Mirroring McKeough's fierce feminist practice, thirteen texts bear witness to the collaborative process of layering very distinctive voices into a collection that nevertheless remains resolutely provisional.

Rita McKeough: Works exists in three versions: as a standalone book, as a book with a vinyl record reworking five key soundtracks, and as a set including the book, the record, and a playful multiple: a carrot with its adoption certificate. Designed by Dana Woodward and printed by Friesens, the quality of the production is remarkable, from the rounded page corners that recall artists' sketchbooks to the abundant colour illustrations, including a close-up of leaves enhancing the inside front and back hard covers, lifted from McKeough's *Veins*, a multi-media installation that makes reference to the Alberta landscape (2016).

This comprehensive monograph complements the many catalogues of single projects already published, such as *Rita McKeough: The Lion's Share* (2012), *Rita McKeough: an Excavation* (1994), and *Dancing on a Plate* (2000).



Photo: M.N. Hutchison.

Over the years, McKeough's oeuvre has held the attention of many feminist scholars such as Jayne Wark and Joan Borsa, to name a few, and her work is featured in broader feminist anthologies such as *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian women* (2004) and *Inversions: the female grotesque* (1998). This monograph supplements personal evidence of her inclusive process through the voices of her collaborators, at the same time giving evidence of the importance of artist-run culture in the development of her practice. Thus, it significantly expands our understanding of a leading feminist artist, one who has also drawn the attention of authors of other types of thematic anthologies such as *Alberta Art Chronicle: adventures in recent contemporary art* (2005) or *Oh Canada: contemporary art from North North America* (2012).

The foreword attests to the artist's enduring impact and her contribution to the politics and ethics of artist-run culture. Vicki Chau (EMMedia Gallery and Production Society), Desiree Nault (M:ST Performative Art Festival), and Ginger Carlson (TRUCK Contemporary Art in Calgary) acted as publishers for the monograph, having also been co-producers of recent installations by the artist. This collaboration among artist-run centres was vital as none had the necessary resources on their own. In their foreword, Chau, Nault, and Carlson emphasize the need for spaces that make room for difficult conversations and marginalized voices otherwise swept under the rug of dominant narratives.

The introduction presents a succinct summary of the book, and is followed by "Thinking Out Loud," a sizable investigative exchange between Diana Sherman and McKeough. As elsewhere in the book, the text emulates the artist's practice by constructing a feminist space through the convivial exchange of ideas. The conversational space thus created allows for queer and gender-fluid identities and experiences. Moreover, the cordial tone is an invitation to all readers to join in, thus enacting the possibility of a more inclusive future.

The following three essays and an additional conversation by former fellow collaborators Jude Major, Eli D. Campanaro, Deirdre Logue, and Cheryl L' Hirondele give evidence of their participation in key works. This allows readers privileged access to very complex productions. Tellingly, their voices overlap when recollecting *In bocca al lupo—In the mouth of the wolf* (1991–92). This ninety-minute multidisciplinary opera made overwhelmingly visible the collective fear and trauma associated with patriarchal violence. A feminist tour de force performed five times around the country, it is rightly seen as a decisive deployment of queer genealogy in feminist performance art that is now informing the practice of younger generations of feminist artists.

Mary Scott intervenes just past the middle of the book with "If I." Scott is known for her polyvocal feminist reworking of language. Scott's poetic text makes sure the reader is not getting too celebratory or comfortable in "(t)here." Repeating words make their meaning unstable. "If I" is slippery. It slips, slips, and slips, and thus emulates McKeough's insightful practice and process of making the familiar seem peculiar.

Jeanne Randolph follows with a piece of speculative ficto-criticism set in 2084. Dr. Randolph's "Dr. Doolittle's Death Diary" aptly maintains the feeling of displacement enacted by Scott. Dr. Doolittle is the only human survivor of the end of the

world. His journal recounts his delirious conversation with, among others, a salamander and a parrot. The colourful eccentrics concoct a parable of all that has gone wrong between human and non-human animals, echoing McKeough's concerns, as expressed in several installations.

This post-anthropocentric future is picked up by Johanna Householder, who forays into a discussion of two works: *Long Haul* (2006) and *H* (2013). Her text also signifies a shift towards broader analytical stances by the remaining authors. *Long Haul* and *H* gave agency to a robotic tree and a giant squirrel. In the first instance, the tree and the artist strolled the streets of Banff in amiable companionship. In the second, the robotic tree becomes the assistant of the giant squirrel running an emergency hospital for old or sick cell phones. Householder's analysis shows how McKeough deploys these characters as capacious metaphors for aging and death, and as exemplars of the place of care and empathy.

Anthea Black analyzes *slipping by*, an installation she organized with McKeough while working for Stride Gallery in 2005. This performative installation aimed at making viewers collectively aware of the paradox of capitalist time. On closing night, surrounded by sixty viewers, McKeough dangled disquietingly from the ceiling for sixty minutes, while sixty one-minute audio pieces marked the passing of the hour.

The last two texts are by emerging critics Elizabeth Diggon and Areum Kim. Diggon discusses compassion, reciprocity, and humour as explored in *tender* (2015), a hospital for the rehabilitation of hot dogs traumatized by their previous fate. (The hot dogs were part of the artist's earlier installation titled *The Lion's Share*.) Kim examines *Veins*, the artist's most recent work. The complex, immersive multi-media installation disrupts the logic that defines some as non-human by giving voice to all, and from shifting viewpoints.

The only analysis missing from *Rita McKeough: Works* is an examination of the challenges facing transformative artists, such as McKeough, under our prevailing economic and political neoliberal conditions. To read a work critically one needs to see the underlying infrastructure that makes legible its aesthetics and political condition. In a few instances, the artist and a few authors briefly refer to the anthropologist Marcel Mauss' notion of "the gift" but do not pursue an in-depth critical analysis of how the gift functions in a capitalist context. Similarly, the genuine circulation of deep love in the "bocca family" is very tangible; but love cannot shed a clear light on supporting infrastructures.

This criticism does not diminish the book's achievement of archiving McKeough's manifestations of marginalized voices and her legacies of collaboration on such a comprehensive scale. On the contrary, it glaringly reminds us of the work that still needs to be done in order to make certain the feminist futures for which McKeough so fiercely wishes will remain in our reach. ¶

Mireille Perron is a visual artist, writer, educator, and founder of the Laboratory of Feminist Pataphysics (2000). She is Professor Emerita at the Alberta University of the Arts (formerly the Alberta College of Art and Design).
—mireille.perron@auarts.ca

David Smith
Collected Writings, Lectures, and Interviews

Susan J. Cooke, ed.
Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018

312 pp. 28 color photographs, 11 b/w illus.
\$38.00 (paperback) ISBN 9780520291881

Charles Reeve

Now that you've started reading this sentence, you can't stop. This silly psychological fact would have annoyed David Smith had he lived to

see this review, given the antipathy for art historians like me that repeatedly surfaces in this collection of his essays, lectures, interviews and occasional writings. "There is no true art history, no true appreciation," he observes in a speech from 1960 (332). Expanding this complaint a few paragraphs later, he adds:

We have all let anthropologists, philosophers, historians, connoisseurs and mercenaries, and everybody else tell us what art is or what it should be. But I think we ought to very simply let it be what artists say it is. And what artists say it is, you can see by their working. I would like to leave it just like that. (333)

For Smith, only art says anything worthwhile about art. The work speaks for itself. By contrast, with rhetorical tricks and gold-plated erudition, critics, historians, and curators distract the art-going public from the heart of the matter—the art—instead piling up irrelevancies like influence, biography, context, meaning, and stylistic analysis. Moreover, for Smith, this is about principle. That's an ethical "ought" in the passage above ("[W]e ought to very simply let it be..."). Art flows from individuals asserting or expressing themselves. Art historical bafflebaggery interferes with the right and obligation of artists to express who they are. As Smith writes in an essay from 1955, "The theory-laden historians' truth-beauty calculations of



past ages have no connection with us" (247). *Sauve qui peut*. Stop reading now.

Or don't: Smith hedged on this matter more than these excoriations

suggest. While teaching drawing and sculpture at Sarah Lawrence College in 1950, he produced a typescript several pages long wherein he directs students to sympathetic bookstores, provides an annotated bibliography of books by and about artists like Hieronymus Bosch, Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, and André Masson and, coming to his conclusion, lists among the "untold numbers of books you should have or should read" Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* along with Robert Goldwater and Marco Treves's *Artists on Art* (94). And artists never outgrow the value of reading about art. In an interview from 1964, when he was in his late fifties, he said, "I love to read art books. I want to know everything that has ever been known by any man" (382). But that interview itself warrants a comment: it is the book's longest and most generous conversation and its interlocutor is Thomas B. Hess, at the time among the United States' most prominent art critics. And other art writers also appear in this volume in conversations with Smith, including dancer-become-dance critic Marian Horosko and Frank O'Hara, better known as a poet but seen here courtesy of his day job as the Museum of Modern Art's assistant curator of painting and sculpture. Reading these interviews alongside the extensive question-and-answer sessions that often follow his talks, one gets the sense, despite Smith's prickly message, that he is happy to discuss art historical and critical concerns. And the archival footage available online (such as the substantial excerpt from the O'Hara conversation posted on vimeo.com as "David Smith: Sculpting Master of Bolton Landing") reinforces this impression, as does Smith's interest in the literary activities of painters like Robert Motherwell (founding editor of the "Documents in Modern Art" series to which this book belongs) and Barnett Newman, a regular contributor to such mid-twentieth century small magazines as *The Tiger's Eye*. Moreover,