

**Femmes artistes invitées**  
**Célébration rituelle**  
**Artists in Residence**  
**Women's Performance Art in Toronto**

David Buchan

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# Femmes

# tistes artistes *artistes artistes artistes artistes* *invitées* célébration rituelle

Artistes à l'intérieur d'un rôle.

Artistes occupant un territoire conquis.

Artistes chez elles, travaillant sur un schéma.

Artistes invitées.

DAVID BUCHAN



à reproduire. Souvent hantées par leurs propres souvenirs, en tant que femmes, les comédiennes font appel à leur propre expérience pour exorciser les énergies non libérées lors de ces événements à incidence sociale.

Dans *Queen of the Silver Blades — A Salute to the Vertical Smile*, la poésie de Susan Swann et les projections de photographies de Mary Canary et la chorégraphie de la comédienne-danseuse Margaret Dragu s'unissent pour évoquer la possibilité du sourire sardonique, version *Playboy*, ou l'éternel sourire de la célèbre patineuse de fantaisie Barbara Ann Scott. Lors d'une représentation pluridisciplinaire au St Paul's Centre, les 26 et 27 juin 1975, et plus tard, au Cinéma Lumière, en octobre-novembre de la même année, poème, danse et diapositives sont mises à concours pour combler la distance entre la femme réelle et son *image*. D'une forme résolument théâtrale, ce spectacle sert de point de référence pour les autres productions de nos comédiennes.

A l'approche de l'été, Marien Lewis et ses aides envahissent deux chambres de l'hôtel Edgewater et, à l'aide de la vidéo et des comédiennes, préparent une thérapeutique préventive dans les cas de mariage imminent. Le traitement et l'atmosphère de *Soap Dance* sont aussi très rituels et recréent les préparatifs d'usage dans les mariages nord-américains d'aujourd'hui. Elle utilise l'application de maquillage (le masque), des chansons et des passages extraits de revues destinées à la future mariée (l'incantation), la robe (les objets fétiches), tout cela pour évoquer l'esprit entourant cette autre réalité qu'est la noce. Sans broncher, Marien reçoit un traitement facial, des conseils pour le maquillage et la coiffure; elle retire les bigoudis de ses cheveux et ricane nerveusement de plaisir; ensuite, elle revêt sa robe au grand complet avec le voile et la traîne et, suivie de sa dame d'honneur et de plusieurs dames de compagnie, se porte à la rencontre des parents et amis dans la pièce voisine. Marien se marie! L'époux, lui, reste singulièrement absent; il ne compte pour rien; il n'a rien à faire là. Ce qui compte, ce sont les préparatifs.



1. Love-Letter.  
(Phot. Rodney Werden)

2. Glamazon.

Ces quelques phrases décrivent les spectacles produits par des femmes artistes travaillant à Toronto. Les rôles culturels des défilés de mode, du patinage de fantaisie, des mariages, des spectacles de cabaret ou bien les intrigues de romans à dix sous fournissent la matière première de ces spectacles. En écrivant le rôle de leurs personnages, en les costumant, en concevant leurs déplacements sur scène, ces artistes mettent virtuellement leur personne au service de leurs idées, dans le but de produire une œuvre qui témoigne de leurs vues personnelles. Globalement, l'œuvre tend à devenir conceptuelle, à la suite de larges emprunts aux conventions théâtrales, et le style ordinaire des émissions d'information se voit doté d'un contenu nouveau ou modifié.

La représentation de la pièce est d'ailleurs chargée d'allusions aux intentions de l'œuvre, allusions qui sont généralement voilées dans une parodie des intentions propres au genre lui-même. La mythologie contemporaine demeure la première source d'inspiration. Estrades, piédestaux, podiums servent à isoler l'auditoire du message de l'œuvre et, en même temps, pour s'assurer qu'il le comprenne. Compte tenu du lieu et de sa configuration, la représentation prend une allure très rituelle en modifiant l'espace pour lui donner un air d'église et en éléver la représentation au niveau d'un rite; même les places aux balcons appartiennent à l'espace sacré. Sur le plan politique, l'œuvre recherche l'actualité et l'efficacité qui sont le plus souvent obtenues par l'utilisation de sujets populaires dans les média. Les deux buts sont atteints: transcender l'intention et rendre l'œuvre accessible. C'est le rapport entre ces forces antagonistes qui caractérise le ton de ces pièces: la distanciation de l'interprétation vis-à-vis la trivialité du sujet abordé. Tout en demeurant à un niveau familier, la représentation théâtrale et l'observance d'un rite offrent à l'artiste la rare occasion de travailler à deux niveaux, celui, métaphorique, d'une cérémonie religieuse et celui, plus familier et terre à terre, du sujet choisi — parade de mode, numéros de cabaret, romans roses — qu'il se trouve en fait

# artistes artistes artistes artistes artistes artistes

et l'importance que leur accordent les femmes qui vont se marier. Présentée à l'automne de 1973, c'est l'une des premières pièces montées à Toronto par le Women's Performance Art; et elle a contribué à familiariser les spectateurs avec ce genre.

*Glamazon*, un défilé de mode en trois actes, conçu et réalisé par Dawn Eagle et Granada Gazelle, reconstitue une présentation de vêtements pour véhiculer son message. L'emploi de patrons de couture comme *plans des temps anciens* démontre comment les femmes se percevaient et étaient vues. Durant l'heure que durait la représentation donnée, les 14 et 15 décembre 1975, au St. Paul's Centre, on voyait défiler quarante robes, costumes, vêtements sports et du soir présentés par six charmantes personnes. Les mannequins Jane Buyers, Leslie Patten, Anna XXX, Judy Holm, Dianne Lawrence et Isobel Harry portaient les vêtements avec beaucoup de grâce et de sensibilité. On les voit dans diverses situations: se mariant, travaillant dans la cuisine, devenue enceinte, divorcée, *nouvelle en ville*, à la plage, à l'université et amoureuse. Certaines sont habillées pour tuer et d'autres pour être tuées. Les mannequins, deux sont des professionnelles et les autres des amateurs, font preuve de leur connaissance du métier de manière troublante ainsi que des gestes requis pour vendre un vêtement et vous convaincre. Ils est facile de voir que c'est là une seconde nature chez elles. Il semble que l'entraînement reçu depuis l'enfance ait porté ses fruits. On dirait des porte-vêtements animés et dotés de tous les accessoires d'époque: coiffure, maquillage, sac à main, chaussures et autres colifichets. L'impression générale est renforcée à l'aide d'un montage musical de Carole Pope, du genre *Rough Trade*, et du scénario des créateurs de *Glamazon*, lu par Suzette Couture. Certaines libertés prises avec le commentaire accompagnant le défilé ajoutent une note anthropologique en soulignant qui porte quoi, quand elle le porte, et souvent pourquoi elle le porte. Jusqu'à un certain point, le spectacle montre comment l'industrie de la mode a pu passer à travers certaines phases difficiles de l'histoire comme la crise, la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, le mouvement de libération des femmes, les transformations morales et les changements de mode de vie. C'est le scénario qui nous dit comment lire *Glamazon*. Au fait, comment le voir.

Prenons pour exemple cet échantillon du commentaire afin de voir comment on réagit à la mode d'aujourd'hui. Isobel Harry fait son entrée. Elle est une artiste de Toronto au style très particulier, possédant une culture et une conscience esthétique toutes personnelles et pleines de références au Far West, disons une salle de quilles située rues Queen et Coxwell. (Un quartier populaire de Toronto. Note du trad.)

Midi arrive avant même qu'elle s'en rende compte. Elle travaille dans la maison et surveille l'émission *Concentration*, vêtue de jeans

noirs Carhart et d'un tricot d'orlon vert foncé. On est au début des années soixante, et le vêtement se fait beaucoup plus décontracté. Heureusement, son mari, Bert, lui a laissé la voiture familiale pour l'après-midi et Iso en profite pour faire quelques courses. Elle enfile ses sandales de vinyle vert et prend son sac de couleur assortie. Oh! j'allais oublier son manteau court. Il est en cuir beige, traité pour avoir l'air d'une cuirette. Épaules raglan jusqu'au coude et rejoignant une manche qui va s'amincissant. (Elle agite les clefs de la voiture.) Tu vas à la quincaillerie, Isobel?

Cet hommage aux tissus et aux phrases synthétiques est fondé sur la couleur, la ligne, la symétrie, les proportions et le style — quelque peu formels en eux-mêmes. Il témoigne de l'inspiration et de la compétence technique de ses créateurs. Quarante de ces vêtements, d'apparence diverse, tous des sculptures portables et des objets trouvés, sont susceptibles, par eux-mêmes, d'évoquer une atmosphère. Ils trouvent leur achèvement dans la personne du mannequin, le scénario, la bande sonore et les autres détails du spectacle. Ce sont les modes de vie qui sont commandés par les vêtements, et non le contraire. En tant que documents historiques, ils sont ramenés à la vie et portés. Le choix des types féminins a été fait parmi les deux cents que les comédiennes avaient soumis; il s'agit d'une sélection de rôles assignés aux femmes: la ménagère, l'étudiante, la jeune première, la professionnelle, le joujou sensuel, et, parfois, les beautés fanées et fatiguées. Elles sont réanimées grâce aux rappels d'une esthétique surannée et avec le concours des objets-fétiches correspondants.

*Torch Showcase* fut annoncé comme une soirée de «chansons arrangées», organisé par Robert Handforth, le directeur de la Galerie A Space, où le spectacle fut présenté le 25 juillet 1975. Dans les rôles de chanteuses, Brenda Donahue, Dianne Lawrence, Carole Pope et Suzette Couture interprètent quatorze chansons, trois chacune, plus un chœur, au début et à la fin. Elles sont toutes des comédiennes accomplies qui ont toutes tenu des rôles au théâtre, hormis Mlle Pope qui, en tant que chanteuse du groupe *Rough Trade* pour lequel elle a écrit des paroles, s'est créé un personnage pour la scène, fondé sur sa vie et ses amours imaginaires. Dans *Torch Showcase*, il émane des chansons choisies une dimension ironique à cause des modifications à double tranchant pratiquées dans les chansons et de l'interprétation qui en est donnée. Entre le traitement strictement théâtral du sens des chansons et leurs réactions instinctives à la musique, qui canalisait les énergies intérieures du comportement collectif féminin, il s'étend une certaine zone, celle-là même qui venait d'être occupée. Il s'agit d'un équilibre atteint entre une fille perchée sur un piano dans un bar enfoncé et l'application qu'une comédienne met à camper le personnage. Il convient de souligner la grande maîtrise de Brenda Donahue, à demi possédée

par l'esprit de Tammy Wynette, Dolly Parton et Loretta Lynn, et la simulation méthodiquement contrôlée des personnages. Intérieurement, une réaction émotionnelle naturelle, et, extérieurement, une connaissance intellectuelle de la culture qui a été acquise.

*Torch Showcase* s'ouvre sur une version mi-parlée, mi-chantée de *C'est magnifique* qui oscille entre les blues des femmes noires des années trente et les suppliques musicales d'aujourd'hui, du genre *Mersey Beat*. Music-hall anglais. Western américain. Le temps et le lieu varient d'une chanson à l'autre mais l'arrière-plan demeure inchangé: c'est le côté cœur esseulé. *Help Me Make It Through the Night* (Brenda), *I Can't Give You Anything But Love* (Dianne), *The Man I Love* (Suzette), *You're My World, You're Everything* (Carole). Voix sirupeuses, parfois brisées, implorant la tendresse ou le pardon, soupirant après l'amour, brûlantes de passion! Dans l'unique chanson écrite pour ce spectacle, Carole Pope nous présente le drame d'une fille dont l'amour n'est pas payé de retour. Comparable à l'interprétation de *Surabaya Johnny* (Brecht-Weill) donnée par Lotte Lenya, elle se fouette pour se punir de son incapacité à répondre aux exigences du désir et de la passion. «*Lorsque vous me regardez, c'est comme dans les films de deuxième ordre, je ne marche pas*»; mais elle doit quitter la scène de force, humiliée, fondant en excuses. De la représentation de ces chansons d'auto-punition et de masochisme au nom de l'amour romantique, il découle un effet purificateur parce que leur contenu mythique est mis en évidence. Il ne faut pas non plus oublier le cadre de la galerie, et une fois de plus nous cherchons le décodage des signes. Il s'agit d'une distance prise avec le sujet et d'un commentaire à son sujet. Très peu et très peu souvent les actrices reconnaissent que leur art tient de la simulation. Dans le cas présent, c'est au directeur de la Galerie que revient le mérite d'avoir créé le cadre de référence pour l'œuvre et les *citations culturelles* qui délimitent le spectacle et son contexte. Finalement, ce qui importe ce n'est pas le corps ni ce dont il est revêtu, mais la distance qui est entre eux.

*Love-letter*, de Susan Harrison, présenté le 15 janvier 1976, à la Galerie A Space, est une lecture accompagnée de diapositives qui nous restitue les épisodes d'une autre de ces histoires d'amour entre une fille nommée Nellie et un garçon répondant au nom de Al. De leur première rencontre jusqu'au dénouement plutôt obscur, où le destin de Nellie est entre les mains d'un homme qui «l'aime beaucoup trop», nous les voyons vivre dans une suite de scènes mises en diapositives par l'artiste et photographe torontois Rodney Werden. Le texte de A. S. A. Harrison est lu par Judy Holm et Whitney Smith. Presque à chaque ligne, on y fait appel à des clichés pour décrire des lieux communs. La vérité contenue dans les clichés devient toutefois assez évidente ici. Il n'en faut pas plus.

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3. *Torch Show-case.*  
(Phot. Rodney Werden)

Nellie: «Si tu veux vraiment partir, alors je veux que tu partes.»  
Al: «Mais je veux savoir ce que vraiment tu désires.»  
Nellie: «Je veux seulement te rendre heureux.»

La scène n'est pas terminée qu'ils se querellent, et les voilà encore dans une situation péniblement familiale. Et ça continue au long de vingt scènes, chacune étant illustrée par une diapositive nous présentant un texte écrit qu'il faut lire comme étant le film des pensées de Nellie, projeté à l'intérieur de sa pauvre tête fiévreuse d'amour. Dans une série de projections fixes nous voyons vivre Nellie, mais selon l'angle où elle se voit. «Une grande fille, et amoureuse!... dans une gare, dans les bars, dans sa chambre, dans la cuisine, dans la rue. Partout en ville, Al et Cupidon viennent se heurter à cette poupée amoureuse, et Nellie saisit ce qu'elle peut à la volée. Les textes sur les murs, ou plus exactement sur l'écran, se lisent comme des confidences de journal; ils fournissent aux spectateurs une vue d'ensemble et lui rappellent que l'auteur-interprète Nellie maîtrise la situation. Quelques exemples de ces phrases prises à la fin d'une scène:

«Je cesse de t'aimer mais je le voudrai toujours  
«Je me fous de notre amitié.»  
«Je ne veux pas ce que je désire, je veux seulement le désirer.»

*Love-letter* illustre les mythes de la passivité, de la faiblesse et de la sujétion, mais distingue en eux des leviers pour renverser l'ordre politique. L'illusion de leur existence constitue une assise suffisante pour établir une forme de pouvoir, et Nellie apporte la preuve de son idée: «Vous obtenez toujours ce que vous voulez». En même temps qu'elle joue la victime de l'amour, c'est elle qui domine la situation et la dirige. En se transformant en petite mare d'eau aux pieds de Al., elle lui fournit un miroir qui lui renvoie sa propre image, et il paie le prix de sa vanité. Comme située dans un lieu abstrait, la toile dressée sur le chevalet, entre l'artiste et son sujet, devient la surface sur laquelle il faut lire *Love-letter*. Comme les ficelles reliant les marionnettes au manipulateur, ce que nous voyons finalement, c'est une bipolarité faite d'activité et de passivité, un mouvement de va-et-vient entre l'attitude détachée et la passion; l'amour et la haine finissent par s'équilibrer. Même chose pour Mlle Harrison et son personnage, qui atteint son but et sa raison d'être.

Si leur jeunesse était pauvre en héroïnes romantiques, par contre la saccharine ne manquait pas; nos comédiennes sont entourées de valeurs désuètes, de carrières avortées, de lambeaux de vie épars à leurs pieds. Laissées pour compte des écoles de charme, à peine des chanteuses de genre, starlettes, mariées, patineuses de fantaisie, mannequins: autant de reines de beauté jamais couronnées. Les limites inhérentes à tous ces genres de vie étaient plus qu'évidentes pour les femmes qui ont créé

ces spectacles, avec l'intention de confirmer la vacuité de ces mythes et leur prétendue profondeur, uniquement parce que des générations de femmes les ont reproduits dans leur pensée et leur comportement. Leur adaptation à ces modèles est aisée à détecter; on en devient conscient par l'expérience qu'on en a fait soi-même et par leur rejet subséquent. La reconnaissance de leur unidimensionnalité aussi bien que de leur complexité existe toujours. Les subtils arrangements dans ce genre de spectacles, la capacité de les percevoir en tant que composants sociaux, riches de contenu culturel, s'ajoutent au besoin intérieur, quasi physique, d'interpréter ces personnages. Les femmes qui ont, devant un public, reconstitué ces contraintes qui les environnent — celles qu'elles ont édifiées elles-mêmes et celles élevées par les autres — ces femmes ont conquis une certaine part de liberté. Par procuration, il s'y adjoint le plaisir de revivre des situations où elles étaient candidement ignorantes de la dimension politique liée au sexe, des attitudes convenues et de l'acculturation. Face à un auditoire, cela devient une mise à nu psychologique et un geste thérapeutique. Le double point de vue du regardeur et du regardé décrivent assez bien ce genre de spectacle. La déstructuration des événements de la culture populaire fournit la forme, alors que le contenu est ajouté par l'interprétation et l'information. S'il semble que le résultat produit est celui venant du mariage de la conscience féminine de la fin des années soixante et de l'art contemporain, alors il est probablement le produit de cette politique de fortune, bricolée avec les ressources disponibles. L'information technique est toujours la dernière de nos priorités. Néanmoins, on fait grand cas des coutures, et le produit fini est un collage culturel. La ligne de démarcation entre les comédiennes et leur sujet d'inspiration est souvent imperceptible. Il y a beaucoup à attendre de ces spectacles dans l'avenir. L'attitude qui fait réfléchir. Dans les jeux télévisés, les hôtesses ouvrant la porte d'un réfrigérateur avec style et sensualité. Les hôtesses de l'air mimant l'utilisation des masques à oxygène. Beautés sculpturales décorant le gâteau de la vie moderne. Interprétation par des comédiennes, des non-comédiennes et des comédiennes improvisées. Toutes les trois le font encore: «Le faire encore, Comme une actrice dans une pièce au collège, Le faire encore, Comme une pute en vacances . . . »<sup>1</sup>.

1. Droits réservés — *Dream On Music*, chanson de Carole Pope.

(Traduction de Gilles Rioux)

rience and the frightening intuition of personal danger and mortality that followed it. Once again we appreciate Campbell's exquisite visual sense. Windows, flowing curtains, reflected trees and bodies combine in elegant and evocative images, spare yet eloquent. Grainy and translucent greys give a painterly texture to the whole. However, the quality of the writing in this newest work does not match the very positive formal aspects of the tapes.

Sexuality is a constant for each of these artists, often very specifically.

Rodney Werden is frankly fascinated by it, and uses video to probe into motive and effect in several of his works. A relative new-comer to the medium, Werden nevertheless shows a natural sophistication in his tapes. *Pauli Schell*, some 70 minutes long, is simply an interview with a young woman. We hear questions every so often (apparently from the unseen cameraman) and watch her sitting comfortably on a sofa as she talks about herself, and about her interest in and practice of sado-masochism, her childhood experiences, her laconic comparisons of various types of whips, leather cords, her personal fantasies. Casually matter-of-fact, Pauli Schell reveals herself as an aware, complex personality. The entire piece was shot in an afternoon, and is virtually unedited; Werden's control of the situation was such that previous run-throughs on audiotape made the final video session smooth and compact, fully arranged and presentable in just one take.

His newest tape, *Typist* (Summer 1976), seems quite a shift. The 18-minute piece is very amusing, Werden sitting down to "perform" at his typewriter with accompanying singer-guitarist; the typed text overlays this scene to tell us "It all began the last day of grade 8..." In fact this piece is another autobiography, lightly running through Werden's own hit-and-miss career typing for customs brokers, cartage companies, the list goes on and on. "Now I have my own business C... O... D... Typesetting. This is not pure typing but is the closest compromise I could find for day-to-day exercise. I am also available for pure typing performances at a nominal fee..." All of this is only partly tongue-in-cheek; one could easily replace "typist" with "artist" for an all-too-common story of making-do at one's career, finding compromises which make a survival possible.

Rodney Werden's message seems less urgent than that of Steele or Campbell; his presentation is more "media", a kind of mock-network approach, and aims not to reveal too much of what goes on inside. But it's all there, a loosely-brushed self-portrait.

This use of broadcast-television formats leads us directly to a consideration of the work of General Idea. Video began for them as one means among many, but became increasingly important as a way to record (and package) their large-scale performance pieces. General Idea hardly fits directly into the personal/autobiographical context of the other artists considered here. Yet the "glamour" stance assumed by G.I. is clever camouflage for operating behind the lines: "We wanted to be famous, glamourous and rich. That is to say we wanted to be artists and we knew that if we were famous and glamourous we could say we were artists and we would be... We knew we had to keep a foot in the door of art and we were conscious of the importance of berets and paint brushes. We made public appearances in painters' smocks."<sup>2</sup>

The recent videotapes are confected masterpieces. *Going Thru The Motions* (1975-76, 53 minutes) presents a rehearsal of the audience for the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant. The

tape is a reworking of a major performance of the same name at the Art Gallery of Ontario in September 1975, where those in attendance were informed that this was a television studio and that they, the audience, were all extras in the show. Entrances, exits, standing ovations, "May I Have The Envelope Please", all were rehearsed. The applause was thunderous, the evening was a success.<sup>3</sup>

A recent performance (August 1976), by comparison, was almost entirely private. Carmen Lamanna, owner of the Carmen Lamanna Gallery and General Idea's representative in the commercial world, plays the part of Foreman Lamanna as he is interviewed in front of a jigsaw-puzzle backdrop: the plywood construction hoarding for the Site of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pavilion. This hoarding fragment is a concrete metaphor; as Foreman Lamanna, manager of the construction site, notes: "Just as the Hoarding defines the limits of the site and the project in general, we have also attempted to use the media to the same end. We have expended just as much energy erecting the Hoarding for the media as we have in erecting it on real estate. It has to be real before they will report it, but it is not really real until they do..."

General Idea always operates concurrently on several levels, and for all its punning wit, G.I. is deadly serious about what it is doing. The art world, with its well-worn rôles, its highly-developed language, its rewards to the winners, may be likened to a beauty pageant, and General Idea is acting out this whole construct with its pageants and performances. But this is also a battleground: "As artists we intend to survive. We intend to survive in a no man's land between content and context, our brushes and palettes our only weapon. Glamour's our only defence... We are obsessed with available form. We manoeuvre hungrily, conquering the uncontested territory of culture's forgotten shells — beauty pageants, pavilions, picture magazines and other contemporary corpses. Like parasites we animate these dead bodies and speak in alien tongues."<sup>4</sup> General Idea is carrying out a structural investigation of the phenomenon of culture, through deconstructing it, piece by piece. They have made this process part of their lives, and all of their poses and pronouncements, their real concerns, move towards the completion of one grand scheme: the construction of the 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant Pavilion.

Each of these artists is different. Steele and Campbell express a deeply-felt existential sense of loss, of searching after an as-yet-unknown personal truth. Rodney Werden investigates histories, an observer fascinated by the details of an "ordinary" life. General Idea shows us an elaborate metaphorical construct, where media participates naturally (culturally) in the performance. Each has a reality formed by particular experience, objectified through narration or the addition of symbolic or myth-filled details. Narrative sequencing, the naming of feelings and ideas, the structuring into story format, all these remove the final tapes further from their intimate sources. And all of this is video.

1. See Peggy Gale, *Colin Campbell: Windows and Mirrors in Video by Artists*, Toronto, Art Metropole, 1976, for a discussion of the early work.

2. General Idea, *Glamour in File*, Autumn, 1975.

3. See Peggy Gale, *Video Art in Canada: Four Worlds in Studio International*, May/June 1976, for a fuller description and script excerpts from the tape.

4. General Idea, *Glamour in File*, Autumn, 1975.

## ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE: WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE ART IN TORONTO

David BUCHAN

Artists inhabiting rôles.

Artists occupying conquered territory.

Artists at home, manipulating formats.

Artists in residence.

The preceding phrases describe the performance art being done by women artists working in Toronto. The preformed cultural phenomena of fashion shows, ice follies, wedding ceremonies, cabaret entertainments or dime-store novel plots determines the shape the events take, the raw material out of which the fabric of the work is made. The artists, writing words for their characters to speak, creating clothing for them to wear, choreographing their movement, virtually take over their bodies to mobilize their own ideas, with the intention of creating finished works that bear witness to their personal visions. Drawing heavily upon theatrical convention, the overall quality of the work tends to be conceptual in nature, using established styles of information presentation to house newly designed and reshaped content.

The actual performing of the pieces is laden with reference to the intention of the work, but usually cloaked behind an ironic translation of the original intention of the genre. Contemporary mythologies are the prime source of inspiration. Platforms, pedestals and runways are used to separate the audience from the meaning and ensure that they get it at the same time. Providing the external shape, or form, the performance takes on highly ritualized overtones, turning the spaces they exist in into church-like environments, elevating the acts to the level of rites; reconfirmation of the existence of galleries as sacred. On a political level, the work strives to create an immediacy, a relevance, the opportunity more than possible with the use of popular media events. Both interests are served: the elevation of the concept is achieved and the work is made accessible. It is this interplay between opposing forces that most singularly characterizes the feel of these pieces. The distance of the artist versus the proximity of the actual subject. While remaining on familiar ground, the keeping of the act, the observance of ritual allows the artist the luxury of two levels of operation: the metaphorical one of the religious service and the actual familiar ground-level of the available format, which it in fact duplicates. The fashion show, night-club act, or Harlequin Romance. Often haunted by images of women in their past, the artists take advantage of their experience and use it to exorcize unwanted energies in these socially parenthetical situations.

In *Queen of the Silver Blades* (A Salute to the Vertical Smile), the poetry of Susan Swann, the photographs of Mary Canary, in slide form, and the choreography of dancer/artist Margaret Dragu combine to ward off the possibility of the *Playboy* version of risus sardonicus, or permanent smile of figure-skating heroine Barbara Ann Scott. In a multimedia performance at St. Paul's Centre, June 26 and 27, 1975, and later at Cinema Lumière, (October-November, 1975) poems, dance and slides are used to resolve the difference between the real woman and her *imago*. Formally theatrical in its approach, it offers a contrast to the approach used by the visual artists whose efforts are described below.

Marien Lewis and cohorts, in pre-Hummer days, take over the two suites in the Edgewater

Hotel and use video and performance as preventative medicine for impending nuptials. Also very ritualistic in its approach and effect *Dance Soap* is the re-creation of the pre-wedding activity typical of North American contemporary wedding customs. It employs the application of make-up (the mask), selected readings from *Bride To Be* magazines and song (the incantation) and wedding apparel (the fetish objects) to invoke the spirit of plastic bridal reality. Playing it straight, Marien gets a facial, along with hints for cosmetics and grooming, takes the curlers out of her hair, and giggles nervously in anticipation. She then slips into her gown, replete with veils and train, and enters with her maid of honour, and several bridesmaids, the adjoining suite to meet with loved ones. *Marien Gets Married*. The groom is non-existent, beside the point — totally unnecessary, in fact. It is the service which matters here, and what the women involved bring to it. Executed in the fall of 1973, it is one of the earliest pieces of Women's Performance Art done in Toronto, of the format occupation variety, and to a certain extent helps to acclimatize the audience to the medium.

*Glamazon*, a fashion show in three acts, conceived and constructed by Dawn Eagle and Granada Gazelle, recreates the runway fashion show format to make its point — using sewing patterns as "blueprints of former times" to document how women saw themselves and were seen. During the course of the one-hour performance, which took place at St. Paul's Centre, on December 14 and 15th of 1975, we see forty costumes, day dresses, sports wear and evening wear, being modelled by six charming ladies. Models Jane Buyers, Leslie Patten, Anna X, Judy Holm, Dianne Lawrence and Isobel Harry, wear the clothes, tapping a variety of skills and intuitions. We see them pregnant, getting married, divorced and "new in town". In the kitchen, at the beach, on campus, and under the influence. Some dressed to kill. Others dressed to be killed. The models, two of them professional and the others amateurs display a physical knowledge of the appropriate gestures necessary to 'sell' clothing alarmingly and convincingly well. It's plain to see that it's all second nature to them. It would seem the training since early childhood has paid off. The part of the model is played with the appropriate grace. Living clothes horses, completely accessorized in period paraphernalia — hair, make-up, shoes, hand bags, numerous props; the effect with the help of the score, collaged by Carole Pope of *Rough Trade* fame, and a script prepared by *Glamazon*'s creators and read by Suzette Couture, is strongly reinforced. With a certain amount of deconstruction of the fashion show commentary, heavily anthropological in its approach, it locates the clothing in terms of who wore it, when they wore it, where, and often why. To a certain extent it documents how the fashion industry and designers get over such historical humps as the Depression, the Second World War, Women's Liberation and just plain changing morals and lifestyles. And it is the script which tells us how to read *Glamazon*. How to see it, in fact.

Take for example this sample of the writing used as the accompanying text to a vision of to-day's fashion sensibility. Enter Isobel Harry, a Toronto artist with a style all her own. An aesthetic, consciously cultivated and highly personalized, with numerous references to the Far East, say a bowling alley at Queen and Coxwell.

It was almost noon before she knew it. Working around the house and watching Concentra-

*tion* in her black Carhart jeans, and her muted green orlon sweater. The sixties have started and the need for formality is decreasing. Luckily, husband Bert has left Iso the station wagon for the afternoon, and she can get a few errands done. She slips her feet into green vinyl mules and grabs her matching handbag. Oh, I almost forgot — her clutch coat. Beige leather, made to look like leatherette. The raglan sleeves are cut to the elbow and joined in a point to the tapering sleeves. (waves car keys) Going to the hardware store, Isobel?

This salute to synthetics in words and material is based on colour, line, symmetry, structure, proportion, and style — quite formal in its concerns. It reflects the inspiration and technical proficiency of its creators. Forty such pieces, diverse in appearance, all wearable sculptures, found objects, are capable of generating atmosphere on their own. They are accessorized by the model, the script, the sound-track, everything in fact. Lifestyles as extensions of clothing, instead of the opposite. As historical pieces they are resurrected and inhabited. The choice of patterns, made from over two hundred collected and assembled by the artists, represents a selection of feminine personas — the housewife, school girl, debutante, career girl, sensuous plaything and jaded, somewhat faded beauties. They are brought back to life with the invocation of departed aesthetics, with the help of the corresponding fetish objects.

The *Torch Show-case*, A Space, July 25, 1976, was billed as an evening of "song stylings", co-ordinated, or curated if you will, by Robert Handforth, artistic director of the gallery. Posing as chanteuses, Brenda Donahue, Dianne Lawrence, Carole Pope and Suzette Couture sing a collection of fourteen songs, three each, with a group introduction and finale. All are actresses of some accomplishment on the local scene, participating in selected pieces of theatre, with the exception of Miss Pope who as writer and lead singer for *Rough Trade* has created a stage persona based on her fictitious lives and loves. During *Torch Show-case* they use the selected material to duplicate the ironic, double-edged charm found in their interpretation of the lyric, and the accompanying performance of it. The territory existing between their theatrically disciplined understanding of the song's meaning, and their instinctual reaction to the actual music, tapping the internal resources of collective feminine behaviour, is what is occupied here. Carefully balanced between the girl trapped on the piano in a smoky bar, and the artist's studied impersonation of the rôle. Most notable was Brenda Donahue's perfect location at the point midway between a possession by the combined spirits of Tammy Wynette, Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn, and a methodical, controlled reproduction of the character. An internal emotional reaction to nature, and an external intellectually developed awareness of culture.

Opening with a talking/singing version of "*C'est magnifique*", *Torch Show-case* offers everything from thirties black women's blues, to contemporary musical supplication, Mersey Beat style. British music-hall material, American country and western. Time, locale, and mood vary from song to song, but the prevailing instrument in the background is undoubtedly the bleeding heart. "Help Me Make It Through the Night", (Brenda), "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" (Dianne), "The Man I Love" (Suzette) and "You're My World, You're Everything" (Carole). Voices infected with saccharine, sometimes tough, pleading for affection, forgiveness, yearning for love, torches burning. In

the one original song written for the occasion, Carole Pope offer a version of one girl's battle with unrequited love. Reminiscent of Lotte Lenya's performance of *Surabaya Johnny* (Brecht-Weill), she lashes herself for her inability to stand up to the demands passion and lust makes of her. "When you look at me it's like any Grade B movie, I don't wanna let go", but she does and is forced to leave the stage — humiliated, and apologetic. Taking the myths so transparent in these songs of degradation and masochism for the sake of romantic love, and acting them out, driving them out in fact has somewhat of a purifying effect. One never forgets the gallery environment as well, and once again we look for decodification of the signals. A distance from the material, an editorial comment. There are few here and rarely do the actresses recognize the erection of the façade. The curator, in this case, bears most of the credit for creating the frame of reference for the work, the "cultural quotation marks" that bracket the event, its context. What we finally consider is not the body, nor the object worn on it, but the space between them.

Susan Harrison's *Love-letter*, also at A Space, January 15, 1976, was a reading and slide show that chronicled the all too common kind of love affair between a girl like "Nellie" and a guy like "Al". From their initial meeting/pick up to their somewhat obscure end, where Nellie's fate lies in the hands of a man who "loves too much", we follow them through a series of incidents documented in slide form by Rodney Werden, Toronto photographer and artist. The script, written by A.S.A. Harrison is read by Judy Holm and Whitney Smith. Nearly all one liners, it uses cliché language to describe cliché situations. The truth hidden in cliché, however, is quite visible here. Little more is needed. Nellie: If you really want to go then

I want you to go.

Al: But I want to know what you really want.  
Nellie: I only want to make you happy.

By the time the scene is over they are fighting, and the situation is painfully familiar. And so it continues, twenty scenes worth, each scene punctuated with a slide offering written visuals that read like a rear projection screen at the back of Nellie's lovesick mind. In stop frame fashion we catch Nellie seeing herself, and being herself. "A big girl, in love", in train stations, bars, bedrooms, kitchens and on the street. Al and Cupid bounce this kewpie doll all over town, and Nellie grabs what she can on the rebound. The writing on the wall, or screen in this case, reads like confessions in a diary. They provide us with the overview as well, and remind us of the control the author/artist/Nellie has over the situation. Samples of end of scene quotes —

"I always stop liking it but

"I'll never stop wanting it"

"I don't care about the relationship."

"I don't want to have what I want,

I only want to want it."

*Love-letter* illustrates the myths of passivity, weakness and subjugation, but recognizes them as tools to invert the political order. The illusion of their existence is enough of a basis for acquiring a power structure, and Nellie proves her point. "You can always get what you want". While masquerading as the victim of passion she manages not only to steer the ship, but chart its course. By becoming the puddle at Al's feet, she creates the mirror for him to see his own image, and vanity takes its toll. Residing in a no man's land, the painting on the easel between the artist and her subject matter is the surface on which we read *Love-letter*. This interfacing between activity and

passivity — the strings connecting the puppet to the puppeteer — is what we finally see.

This see-sawing back and forth motion between active and passive, involved and detached, love and hate achieves a natural balance, just as the distance between Miss Harrison and her alter ego finds its point of contact with its purpose, its fulcrum.

Raised on a diet of romantic heroines, high on sugar content, we see the artists surrounded by abandoned values, aborted careers, lives lying discarded at their feet. Dropouts from the charm schools, nearly song stylists, starlets, brides, figure-skaters, model women: beauty queens never crowned. The limits to the lifestyles were more than obvious to the women who created the work as testaments to the flatness of the myths, and to their acquired depth, as generations of women layer them with their thoughts and actions. Their involvement with these models is plain to see, and it comes from the knowledge only experience and removed observance can bring together. The recognition of their unidimensionality, and a respect for their complexity as well is always there. The sophisticated manipulation of these genres, the ability to see them as social constructs, thick with cultural reference, is combined with an internal physical need to play out the rôles. Women who have achieved a certain amount of freedom via the public re-creation of the walls they see surrounding them; the ones they built themselves, and the ones built by others. At the same time there are the vicarious thrills available by reliving those moments when they were safely ignorant of sexual politics, rôle modelling and acculturation. Before a live audience it takes on the appearance of psychological stripping, a therapeutic act. The two-sided position of seeing and being seen typifies the work. The reconstructing of these popular cultural phenomena acts as the form, and personal interpretation and information fill it with content. If at times it seems as if the results are the result of a marriage between a late sixties feminist consciousness, and contemporary art, then it is probably the result of devising this make-do politic, patched together with the resources at hand. Technical information is always last on the list of priorities. The seams are celebrated however and the finished fabric is a cultural collage. The boundaries between artists and their inspiration is often negligible. Performance art of the future may give us the real thing. The pause that reflexes. Game show hostesses opening Frigidaires with poise and charm, airline stewardesses doing mime performance of the location of emergency oxygen supplies — the sculptured beauties decorating to-day's cake. Performed by artists, non-artists and found artists. All three are still doing it:

"Doing it again,  
Like an actress in a high school play,  
Doing it again,  
Like a whore on a holiday . . ."

1. Copyright — *Dream On Music*, lyric by Carole Pope.

readily labelled in terms of his materials as a 'painter' and, in relation to his style (with whatever qualifications), as a 'modernist', Michael Snow's activity and allegiances are more diverse. There are some paintings of importance and, with only a little hesitation, one might happily call other pieces 'sculpture', but the totality includes not only books but also photographs, performances, videotapes and video installations as well as the films which have till now been the most regarded of his works. In relation to styles and movements one might think of 'Minimal Art', but also of 'process'; a few pieces relate to 'Conceptual Art' and a 'structural' approach is dominant. The fact of diversity as much as its nature locates him with equal clarity in relation to another tradition that stems from Duchamp and includes people like Bruce Nauman and John Baldessari among contemporaries. The truth is that the best Canadian art of the last decade finds its deepest level of significance as an appendage to developments now naturalized in America.

*Cover to Cover* may be the most balanced, most fully rounded and most fully realized of Michael Snow's major enterprises, but it comes a bit late in the day. The self-referential book as art was a product of the period of the late sixties and early seventies that saw Michael Snow's own self-referential films as art. In the days of the conceptual book the publishers, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, were right on the ball with important works by Lawrence Weiner, Daniel Buren and Gerald Ferguson; when the game moved another way they dropped it. *Cover to Cover* was produced, not by the Lithography Workshop (like those works) but by the Press and it comes in the context of a scholarly series dealing with source material in the contemporary arts. If this quirk of circumstance gives *Cover to Cover* another gratuitous level of self-reference as the document of itself as source material, it also conveys a sense that the art might have felt more comfortable to be history.

The front cover is completely filled with a black and white photograph of a door. At left and right the edges of the door coincide exactly with the edges of the cover. The door is hinged at the left just like the cover of the book. At the right the chain lock is disconnected, the clip on the Yale lock has been pressed down to fix it in the open position, and we guess from the empty keyhole underneath the door knob that the door is unlocked at that point also, and will swing open at the touch of a hand that might be our hand as we move to open the book.<sup>1</sup>

The photograph achieves a unique identification of the format of the book with the reality of its narrative content. The door is more than a metaphor of our access to the story. As we reach out to lift the corner it is as if we were also activating the first episode ourselves: "A door is about to open" and at that point, it is as if we also had the power to determine the course of the action: "A door half opens and closes again", "A door stays shut".

It is of the nature of books to be mute, inert objects that will sit unobtrusively on shelves or on coffee-tables keeping their thoughts to themselves — I am thinking by contrast with people who shout to us from across the street. The book awaits our convenience, passively to be taken down and perused. The meaning we get out of it is as crucially dependent on our physical act of engagement with it — putting out our hand and turning the pages — as on all the time, energy and ingenuity the author may have put into the ordering of its contents. The message we take away with us comes about

through an interplay between our willful bodily commitment and the indications the marks upon the paper are able to convey.

The title, 'Cover to Cover' on the spine indicates the primary level of subject-matter is the book's own physical structure as an accumulation of pages with a thicker paper (price \$12.50) or cloth (price \$20.00) cover at each end. By implication it follows that the primary level of action is the 'reader's' act of exploration as he turns the pages. The door is only the first of many cues that serve to make him self-conscious in its execution.

The book is all black and white photographs, both sides of (almost) every page. From time to time hands appear at the corners and turn back the pages, or they may close in the centre leaves revealing earlier incidents on the left and later ones on the right. To understand the logic we have to follow the same procedure ourselves. Somewhat past halfway the photographs swivel around and turn themselves upside down so the book finishes like one of those typically Canadian bilingual publications that begins again the opposite way up at the other end in the other language. In this case, however, turning the book around causes the narrative sequence to be inverted; the figure of the artist is evidently walking backwards.

The illusion of the front cover suggests a one-to-one equivalence between our sphere of action as we move to open the book and the narrative space within which the story-line will unfold. More often the relationship is antithetical. Pausing just a little longer, we notice that we approach the door from the inside; in entering the book we may expect to be leaving the house. When, however, we do open the cover we do not step outside, but find ourselves confronted with another door and, when we open it, another door and another after that.

The genre of narrative photo-sequence is like cinema in that it records successive images on film, but photographs printed on paper refuse to melt into each other like the changing patterns of light across a movie screen. They have a temporal and spatial discreteness as substantive as that of a door in front of us, and so we pile door upon door as we turn the pages of the book. The inside of the cover sustains the illusion, the same door from the other side and, waiting to come in, the figure of the artist. We turn the pages but are powerless to admit him. He swings around with the door and piles up with the rest as we pass on. Inside the fourth leaf his left hand grasps the door knob. The door disconnects itself from the page. We lose our grip upon the material substance of the plot and now turn only paper pages as the figure enters.

Leaving the door open, he walks quickly past and out of our field of vision. Two cameras and two camera-men confront each other across the threshold. The illusionism of the front cover, with inside and outside equating with the front and back of the door, comes about through careful manipulation of a more general strategy that forms the basic structural motif of the work. (Almost) every shot is duplicated by camera-men on opposite sides of the subject facing each other at an angle of 180°, and matching shots continue to appear on opposite sides of (almost) every leaf. As doors or figures move aside we are reminded of the basis in mechanical contrivance of the naturalistic imagery of the photograph; the presence of the camera is a part of every photographic subject.

In the first dozen pages of *Cover to Cover* we progress from a magical realm of illusion almost on the level of the child's pop-up book — but more persuasive because it is achieved without

## MICHAEL SNOW'S COVER TO COVER

By Eric CAMERON

Jack Bush and Michael Snow emerge not only as the major artists presently working in Toronto, but also as the major figures in contemporary Canadian art. While Jack Bush is