

Several aspects of Shiver recurred in McKeough's installation and performance, *Dancing on a Plate*, held at Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery in Cornerbrook, Newfoundland, in 1996. Again the theme evoked departure from an oppressive situation, but also focused on the long period of trepidation and uncertainty before the decision to leave is made. In *Dancing on a Plate*, the gallery was divided into two spaces, and required visitors to pass through the first room across a gangplank suspended over a black surface representing water with “white caps” made of broken plates. An audiotape played a traditional maritime song, a melancholic lament with the lyrics altered to tell the story that precipitated the moment of departure. After passing through one of four doorways at the end of the gangplank, visitors found themselves in the second room, which represented a domestic interior with objects hanging from the ceiling as if they had been thrown in the air. The floor was made of two-foot square wooden panels on springs, so that, upon entering the space, viewers were literally thrown off balance and searched frantically for stable ground. Some of these panels activated audiotapes that played the percussive sounds of step dancing, a voice imitating fiddle music, and the caller of a square dance. On opening night, four couples attempted to square dance by following knot patterns on the floor, but collisions and entanglements constantly thwarted their efforts. Another couple faced each other silently across a kitchen table, and then repeatedly circled around and did sudden and violent shoulder rolls across the table. In the end, the woman in this couple finally walked away to the door, looked back once, and left. As the sound of all four doors closing was heard, the tension was broken and silence, like a wave of relief, flooded the space.

McKeough's more recent performances include *Shudder*, performed in 1998 at Ace Art Gallery in Winnipeg and again in 2000 at AKA Gallery in Saskatoon, and *Tower of Silence*, performed in 2000 at St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre in St. Norbert, Manitoba. In *Shudder*, McKeough again created a complex installation setting with multiple audio components, video projection and mechanized props in the form of heavy theatre curtains that rose and fell unpredictably to punctuate the actions of the performers, who included McKeough and five others. The audience was seated in this tightly enclosed setting and, as Louise H. Forsyth described it, was made to feel a collective shudder of fear in response to the performers' concentrated evocation of this powerful emotion, which has the ability both to paralyze and energize.³ The source of this fear went unnamed in *Shudder*, for it is not singular, nor can it be distanced from us as the experience of others to which we ourselves are immune. But by naming the emotion itself, and enabling its cathartic release within the performative experience, McKeough hoped to enact the possibility of wresting agency from its controlling and debilitating grip.

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Rita McKeough: An Ethics of Compassion.

Rita McKeough has been producing installations and performances across Canada since 1979. During the 1980s she worked primarily with installations, and has concentrated since 1991 on performance projects, that have often taken place within installation settings. McKeough's performance works are often large, even operatic, in scale, yet are structured so as to create a paradoxically intimate experience for the audience. As Barbara Lounder observed in writing about McKeough's 1996 performance, *Dancing on a Plate*, her technique of positioning viewers within sets or installations, in close proximity to the performers, can be related to the tradition of postmodern dance that emanated from the Judson Dance Theatre in New York in the late 1960s, whereby the strict and safe division of audience and dancer was done away with.¹ In McKeough's performances, this intimacy is heightened by the plenitude of sensorial elements, including complex spatial or architectural structures, strong emblematic or allegorical visuals, and the pervasive use of singing, speech, music and percussive sound.

As implied by the use of these multivalent forms and elements, McKeough's performances are also highly collaborative. While McKeough remains very much the author of these performances, she relies on the participation of numerous individuals upon whose specialized skills and strengths the impact and success of the performances depend. She has collaborated most consistently with Kathleen Yearwood, whose haunting singing and vocalizations resonate within many of McKeough's performances. While this collaborative approach is not a uniquely feminist one, it does underscore the collective and socially-oriented ethos that characterizes McKeough's work, which is evident not only in the formal aspects, but also in the thematic references to women's experiences and ways of knowing.

When I first met Rita McKeough back in 1979, she was working on her MFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD), where I was an undergraduate at the time. She was a printmaker then, and I remember the exhibition where she displayed her prints of lost and stray mittens that she had found lying forlornly in the streets of Halifax. They were sadly poignant and sweetly funny at the same time, not to mention showing quite a spirited independence from the Conceptual reductionism that was still so prevalent at NSCAD. McKeough is still taking in strays, mostly of the four-legged kind. Although her art practice today has diverged considerably from her early days as a printmaker, one binding point of connection is her ethical commitment, which, I might add, is utterly devoid of piousness or pompousness, to bringing attention to the lost and dispossessed, the disenfranchised and exploited, the victimized and silenced.

This commitment became especially evident in the prints, bookworks and installations McKeough executed in the 1980s after returning to Calgary from Halifax, which featured

In contrast to the cacophonous and chaotic release experienced in *Shudder*, *Tower of Silence* conveyed its opposite: the silence of prayer as another form of political and social voice. The setting for *Tower of Silence* was the ruined façade of the Trappist Monastery church located on the grounds of the St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre. McKeough's decision to focus on silence and prayer in this 49-minute performance was partly in response to the history of the monks who had once inhabited this site, and partly to the possibility of silence as a form of communication. Indeed, the principal structure of the performance setting was a large scaffold built across the church façade in the shape of the letter “H.” In the web site catalogue for this performance, McKeough cites a text by Hélène Cixious, who discusses the linguistic history of this letter in both French and English, where it is either silent or the sound of a breath.² As Cixious also notes, “H” is the form of a ladder, and for her, this ladder is writing, and it is therefore neither immobile nor empty, but animated with the movement it arouses and inscribes. In McKeough's performance, this H-shaped scaffold symbolized silence as a form of listening, and provided a structural apparatus on which the five performers continuously ascended and descended. These were not easy movements, for the performers hauled buckets of water, picks, shovels and ladders up and down the scaffold. This creation of a circle of communication was laborious work, but it was not without joy. Accompanied by pre-recorded audio tapes, Kathleen Yearwood stood on the bridge of the “H” singing seven songs that were composed for the performance: *Song of Understanding*, *Song of Forgiveness*, *Song of Repentance*, *Song of Healing*, *Song of Destruction of Oppression*, *Song of Gratitude*, and *Song of Peace*. The sounds of joy also emanated from the garden of fabricated roses, dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which encircled the façade of the church. These roses contained hidden audio speakers that played the sound of women laughing throughout the performance. Laughter is embodied joy, and has long been associated with women's defiant resistance to oppression. Seated among these flowers, the audience members were enclosed within this circle of feminist laughter, song and work, and were reminded that silence is not necessarily the absence of sound or speech, but is also an intrinsic form of reciprocity in communication and sharing.

In the work of Rita McKeough, art and feminism are conjoined in a symbiotic union of aesthetics and politics. Art is not a tool of politics, nor are politics simply a “content” for art making. For McKeough, creativity is itself political because it is a form of agency; indeed creativity is impossible in the absence of agency, and the struggle for agency is at the centre of all her work. While this agency is located within the individual, McKeough's work is emphatically not individualistic and solipsistic. The body is a constant metaphor in her work, both in its suffering and in its resiliency. And as she makes evident in her installations and performances, no individual can or should be isolated from the body politic, for these experiences are communal and collective. Above all, her art is an embodiment of an ethics of compassion, to which we all ought to attend.

McKeough's work has been produced in a variety of venues, including galleries, museums, and performance spaces. Her work has been featured in numerous exhibitions and publications, and she has received several awards and grants for her contributions to contemporary art.

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stray dogs, poisoned fish and old houses slated for demolition during Calgary's petro-dollar-fuelled building boom of the early 1980s. These houses, with their gaping windows, crumbling drywall and peeling paint, acquired a particular significance for McKeough and recurred in several performances and installations as emblematic motifs of the violence and destruction enacted on — not by — the weakest, poorest and most vulnerable members of society. In *Defunct* (1981), for example, a Calgary neighbourhood undergoing demolition was replicated in an installation at the Alberta College of Art. Each of the one-third scale houses was fitted with audiotapes that spoke of their reactions to the development and gentrification taking place in the city. As they were boarded up and torn down one by one, the gallery grew progressively quieter and then silent. In *Destruct* (1983), an installation at the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, the houses sprouted mechanized arms and legs to try and fight back at the bulldozers that came to destroy them; although the developers and contractors still won the day, the houses had begun to form a resistance.

McKeough continued to work along these lines though the early 1980s, but as Sandra Vida has noted, her 1986 installation at Stride Gallery in Calgary, called *Retaining Wall*, marked a dramatic change.² For one thing, the house now became configured not as the discrete object of urban and economic contestation, but as the space where family groupings and tensions mingle and clash in the interstice between private and public, individual and social, internal and external. For another, in this and subsequent installations and performances, the house structure, which had previously figured primarily as the object of victimization and destruction from without, now became the physical metaphor for violence and conflict from within the confines of familial relationships. From the late 1980s, with installations like *Blind Spot* (1987), *Mimicry* (1988) and *Tremor* (1989), and into the more specifically performance-based works of the 1990s, the house and its domestic trappings served as the literal and figurative embodiments of McKeough's feminist politics and poetics. In these installations, the effects of domestic violence were emblazoned on the scarred and broken walls, while audiotapes registered the almost insurmountable struggle to find words to speak, to give voice to profoundly painful and isolating experiences. For without the ability to name this suffering and give testimony to it, it remains repressed — and therefore perpetuated — within the historical, economic and cultural traditions that enforce the separation of the private and the public. As American theorist bell hooks wrote, this enforced separation is a tool of domination:

I know that in a way we're never going to end the forms of domination if we're not willing to challenge the notion of public and private ... if we're not willing to break down the walls that say 'There should always be this separation between domestic space/intimate space and the world outside.'³

On a more personal note, no profile of Rita McKeough should be written, at least not by anyone who knows her, without remarking on her charming, dare I say elfin, self. After leading the life of the itinerant artist for many years, Rita McKeough has resettled in Nova Scotia, where she teaches at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, makes art, and plays as a drummer in several bands. She is revered by her students, and is a friend and mentor to many others in the art and music communities of Halifax. Her generosity and humour shine through all she does.

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Jayne Wark, 2003

- notes:
- Barbara Lounder, “Dancing on a Plate,” in Rita McKeough, *Dancing on a Plate* (Cornerbrook, Nfld.: Sir Wilfred Grenfell College Art Gallery, 1996), n. pag.
 - Sandra Vida, “Passages: Rita McKeough's Art and Life in Alberta,” in Rita McKeough: *An Excavation*, ed. Annette Hurtig (Calgary: Glenbow-Alberta Institute, 1994), 73.
 - bell hooks, interview with Andrea Juno in *Angry Women*, ed. Andrea Juno and V. Vale (San Francisco: Re/Search Publications, 1991), 86.
 - Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 76.
 - Joan Borsa, “From the Edge of a Wound,” in Rita McKeough: *An Excavation*, 36.
 - Barbara Lounder, “Want of a Voice,” in *In bocca al lupo/In the Mouth of the Wolf*, ed. Mary Sparling (Halifax: Mount Saint Vincent Art Gallery, 1991), 11.
 - Annette Hurtig, “Enunciating Pain and Imagining Intimacy: Toward an Ethical Politics of Agency,” in Rita McKeough: *An Excavation*, 18.
 - Louise H. Forsyth, “The Art of Reva Stone and Rita McKeough: High Energy Encounters,” in *High Tech Encounter. Rita McKeough: Shudder and Reva Stone: Carnevale (Without Flesh)*, (Saskatoon, Sask.: AKA Gallery and The Photographer's Gallery, 2000), n. pag.
 - Tower of Silence* was published as a web-based catalogue, including video and audio clips as well as descriptive texts. It can be accessed through the web site of the St. Norbert Arts and Cultural Centre, www.snacc.mb.ca. The web site includes an excerpt from Hélène Cixious' *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

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The points of transition that link McKeough's installation works of the late 1980s to the performance work of the 1990s can be located primarily in this re-conceptualization of the house as embodied metaphor of gendered experiences, and in the use of audio components to animate and give voice to these experiences. The theoretical grounding for this turn in McKeough's work was derived from her readings of French feminists like Hélène Cixious, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, and of the American feminist Monique Wittig (although Wittig in fact renounces the theoretical positions and strategies of French feminism). The writings of these French feminists, whose work is shaped by poststructural discourse, redress the premise that the category “woman” is a void, an “empty set.” She may have been constructed as that within the patriarchal order, but in order for the hierarchies of the man/woman opposition to be addressed, the question of “difference” must be reconceived. The work of these French feminist theorists aimed not only to discover and validate the feminine, but also to undermine the certainty and confident mastery of the masculine position as the One, in relation to which all others must either be reduced to Sameness or else defined as negativity and waste. In that they identified language as the primary locus where the hierarchical oppressions of sexual difference are played out, we see an echoing of their strategies in McKeough's use of audio in particular, but also in her transposition of their textual strategies to the visual, material and embodied elements of her performances and installation settings.

In McKeough's first major performance of the 1990s, *In bocca al lupo/In the Mouth of the Wolf*, held at Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery, Halifax, in March 1991, these elements were all brought to bear on a theme that spoke directly about, and indeed embodied, women's resistance to repression and oppression. Within an architectural structure that schematically represented a body laid out horizontally across the gallery space, a corps of choir, solo vocalists, dancers and musicians performed along with prerecorded audio tape and video and slide projections in an operatic enunciation of pent-up and released anger. Audience members were closely positioned around the body, either precariously perched on stacks of books or seated in pews and school desks (alluding to the history of MSWU as a teaching institution for women founded by monastic women), while the performers moved in and out through openings in the body to interact with each other and the audience. In this way, intimacy was turned back on itself, to function not as the imposed mimesis that results, as Irigaray would say, in the repression of the feminine (in the body, in the spaces of domesticity), but rather as the playful, strategic repetition of mimicry, which allows for the recovery of “a possible operation of the feminine in language.”⁴ As the performers unleashed their vocal and embodied expurgations of anger through the symbolic sites along the length of the body (e.g., throat, heart, navel, knee), the audience members were conjoined, as Joan Borsa said, as “inclusive entities, participants in the ‘healing’ who had witnessed the complexity of the ‘damage.’”⁵ In *bocca al lupo* begins and ends with silence. As Barbara Lounder asserts, however, this is no longer the silence of the repressed, but the “aphonic revolt” that also empowered Freud's ostensibly hysteric patient “Dora” to get up and walk out when he ignored or invalidated her attempts at speech.⁶

slipping by

RITA MCKEOUGH

with the assistance of Robyn Moody

September 9 - October 15, 2005

Reception: Friday, September 9 at 8 PM

First Thursday: October 6, open until 7 PM

Performance:

Friday, October 14th at 8 PM



the Stride Gallery

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McKeough's next large-scale performance/installation, called *Take It to the Teeth*, was mounted at the Glenbow in Calgary in 1993. Again McKeough transformed the space into an anthropomorphic structure in which sites along the length of the gallery symbolically represented parts of the digestion system (e.g., mouth, esophagus, stomach, intestines, anus). The performance began with a carnivalesque parade on opening night, with the costumed performers wandering among the audience members, who were seated on kitchen chairs scattered throughout the gallery space, and welcoming them to “The Big Top.” Two performers, accompanied by musicians and vocalists, began searching the space for sounds and voices emanating from speakers concealed behind the walls. As they discovered the sources of these sounds, they tore at the walls and removed pieces with their teeth. These pieces were then dragged through the digestive system and brought to one of two half-circles of large teeth, where they were chewed up and spit out. This process continued for one hour every day of the exhibition until all the speakers had been uncovered and their buried and repressed memories released. At that point, the lush fullness of the audioscape was revealed, with its twenty-four tracks playing rhythmically and melodically to form a cohesive whole. As Annette Hurtig wrote in her curatorial essay for the exhibition, *Take It to the Teeth* transformed the gallery into both an allegory of the sensate body coming to speech and agency, and “a metonym for the social body, the body politic, which ... is a recurring narrative surface in the development of Rita McKeough's ethical inquiries.”⁷

These ethical inquiries reemerge in McKeough's other installations and performances from the 1990s. In *Shiver* (1995), an installation at Memorial University Art Gallery in St. John's, Newfoundland, the gallery was transformed into a shaky and unstable replica of an apartment building from which a woman had been forced out in order to escape its prison of violence and abuse. Images of this walking woman as she searches for privacy, warmth and safety were projected in a constantly moving circle around the upper part of the gallery walls. The floor was strewn with newspapers and littered with bits of furniture and lamps that were thrown out with her. By means of invisible wires and mechanized motors, everything shook and shivered. Two speakers chanted the words “Get Out. Thrown out. I'm out.” Two additional speakers, along with a suitcase and a kitchen table and chair set, were suspended from the ceiling in a corner of the space. Here the woman was offered a place of respite. These two audio tapes cycled through each other in a delicate balance, one speaking of the cold and weariness that consume her, and the other, through music and voice, speaking of warmth and survival. While fear, loneliness and pain were acutely portrayed in this installation, its promise lay in making visible the suffering and degradation of such supposedly “private” experiences, and thereby bringing homelessness into public view as a rend in the social fabric.

slipping by

SEPTEMBER 9 - OCTOBER 15, 2005

STRIDE GALLERY

PERFORMANCE:
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 14th
AT 8pm

RITA MCKEOUGH

Mountain Standard Time Performative Art Festival

The performance aspect of *slipping by* is presented in conjunction with Mountain Standard Time Performative Art Festival 2005, October 7 - October 31, 2005. M:ST 3 events and programming are organized through the collaborative efforts of The Calgary Society of Independent Filmmakers, Alberta College of Art and Design, EMMEDIA, The Nickle Arts Museum, The New Gallery, Stride Gallery, TRUCK Gallery, Walter Phillips Gallery, and The Southern Alberta Art Gallery.

For up-to-the-minute details on M:ST festival events and programming, visit www.msifestival.org, or call Renato Vitic, Festival Coordinator, at 403-263-5001.

Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian women

In conjunction with the exhibition, Stride is proud to offer *Caught in the Act* — an anthology of performance art by Canadian women published by YYZ Books, which includes a chapter on Rita McKeough's practice: *An Ethics of Compassion by Jayne Wark*. The book is available at the gallery for \$42.75.

BIOS:

Jayne Wark is Associate Professor of Art History at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. She has published articles and exhibition catalogue essays on video, performance and conceptual art. Her book, *Radical Gestures: Feminist Performance Art in North America, 1960s-c.2000*, will be published in 2006 by McGill-Queen's University Press.

Rita McKeough is an installation artist, musician, and former disc jockey; who has worked in radio, written an opera and incorporated audio into her work in integral ways. McKeough has exhibited works nationally and a retrospective of her influential feminist work was exhibited at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1993. McKeough also teaches at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, and has created audio installations and sculptural performances since the 1970s.

This is a Stride Gallery brochure written by Jayne Wark who has been chosen by the artist because of her particular interest in the project. These publications provide regular opportunities for diverse writers to publish work that furthers critical discourse about contemporary art.

Director: Anthea Black
Assistant Director: Pavitra Wickramasinghe
Design: M.N. Hutchinson
Photographs: courtesy of the artist



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gallery hours: Tuesday — Saturday, 11 — 5

exhibition dates: September 9 — October 15, 2005



NOVA SCOTIA
Tourism, Culture and Heritage



Dancing on a Plate
photo — David Morrish



Tower of Silence
photo - Shiela Spence



Outskirts
photo — Steve Farmer



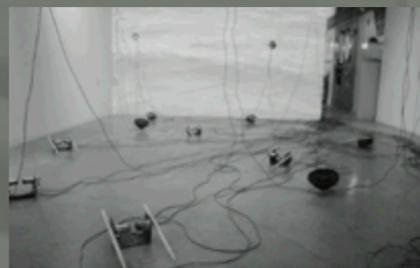
Take it to the Teeth
photo — Anita Dambergs



Defunct
photo — Charlie Fox



Defunct
photo — Charlie Fox



Wave over Wave
photo courtesy of the artist



Porcupine
photo courtesy of the artist



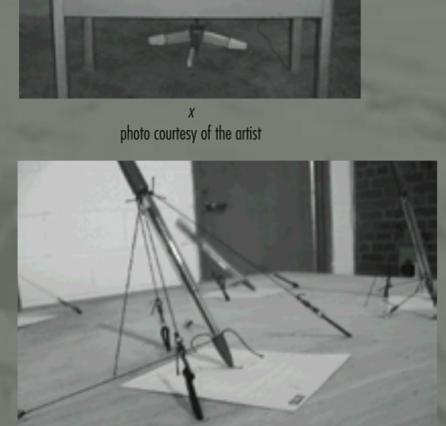
Tremor
photo — Helen Marzolf



X
photo courtesy of the artist



Shudder
photo — Angela Sommerset



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photo courtesy of the artist