

WITHIN YOU WITHOUT YOU



| Edith Dakovic, Lyla Rye & Joyce Wieland |

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Edith Dakovic, Lyla Rye and Joyce Wieland

*Curated by Kerri George*

6 March to 26 April 2009

**Owens Art Gallery**

## WITHIN YOU WITHOUT YOU

The flow of my life out from my private accounts, expressed through my anatomy and into the world of others, the flow of your life into the sensitive, sensual domain of my fragile reality — this flow enables human culture to be understood as a congress of pooled assets, and it is the essential liquidity of the concept of "body" and the oceanic tide of what we still nervously refer to as "soul."

**Frank J. Macke**

*Body, Liquidity and Flesh:  
Bachelard, Merleau-Ponty  
and the Elements of  
Interpersonal Communication*

This exhibition, featuring the work of three contemporary Canadian artists, Edith Dakovic, Lyla Rye, and Joyce Wieland, draws attention to the physicality of the making and viewing of art. The work of these artists deals with the nature of the body's presence in art by making references to skin, breath and learning through interaction with our environment.

We interact with objects, sounds, colours, environmental conditions, and people on a daily basis. This is life. Much of the time our experience is set to autopilot, where we transition from moment to moment with little perception of what is happening within us and around us. Visual artists question what they see around them, honestly explore what is happening and manifest interpretations of their experience in physical form. What are the relationships, and what are they trying to communicate? How do they feel about life? What do they find particularly engaging?

As viewers or receivers of their message we interpret, decode and dismantle the language that has been presented to us. Does the work ask more questions than it answers? Is it challenging our mind's capacity to learn? There is no right or wrong answer. Any work of art will always be capable of giving multiple impressions; there will be many interpretations. It all boils down to relationships and communication.

In a gallery, artwork is highly activated. It is set in a context that encourages our minds to stretch around space and objects. The work is taken out of the everyday experience and is presented to be viewed in a particular environment. As we look at art, we are sometimes taken out of ourselves while at other times our sense of our own physical presence is enhanced through the arrangement of artworks and the environment that has been created for viewing the work. Art historian Alex Potts makes reference to this phenomena in the sculptural installations of Louise Bourgeois:

One of the more characteristic and intriguing features of Louise Bourgeois' work is the way it stages such a vivid psychodynamics of viewing. There seems to be an unusual attentiveness on her part to the structure of a viewer's encounter with three-dimensional art works in a modern gallery setting as well as to the forms of psychic phantasy activated in such interactions between viewer and work.<sup>1</sup>

Sight says too many things at one time. Being does not see itself. Perhaps it listens to itself. It does not stand out, it is not bordered by nothingness: one is never sure of finding it, or of finding it solid, when one approaches a center of being.

**Gaston Bachelard**

*The Poetics of Space*

Notwithstanding the long philosophical tradition associating space with femininity, space cannot be defined as a feminine attribute. (Luce Irigaray) It is not something that can be assumed or "taken on" – and, in that sense, it cannot be "owned" – but it is, as these artists' practices diversely point out, inherent in any act of self definition. Space is no doubt something that we cannot live without, but far from assuming it as a given, the artists I have in mind investigate this premise, visualizing what must be recognized as new kinds of connections between space and subjectivity. ... At stake in the current production is rather a question of how a "woman," and particularly an artist who happens to be a "woman" – purely provisional or hypothetical as this category may be – could be defined as subject of space, a question inseparable, as we shall see, from the task of reimagining the relation between subjectivity and vision.

**Ewa Lajer-Burcharth**

*Duchess of Nothing: Video Space and the "Woman Artist"*

When women use their own bodies in their art work, they are using their selves; a significant psychological factor converts these bodies or faces from object to subject.

**Jayne Wark**

*Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*

Although the work of the three artists in this exhibition is very different, these artists share a number of common concerns and approaches. There is a strong association to the body, or a sense of the body having been there. They all have a connection with breath and air, and they deal with the ideas of identity, and our relationship with society.

Edith Dakovic calls her work "Mer-Made Products." Her inflatable rubber sculptures are constructed from silicone rubber, a synthetic material, and simulate the appearance and texture of skin while taking the form of a personal safety device. They include features such as tattoos and moles with human hair and band-aids. The work then takes on another living dimension after it has been infused with breath in the inflating of the work. Leanna McLennan, a Toronto based writer has said: "the lifelike skin Dakovic uses to create her work is rendered with such impeccable detail that it lures the viewer to reach out and touch it, to engage with the art as with a person. She inspires this longing to cross the threshold between life and art."<sup>2</sup>

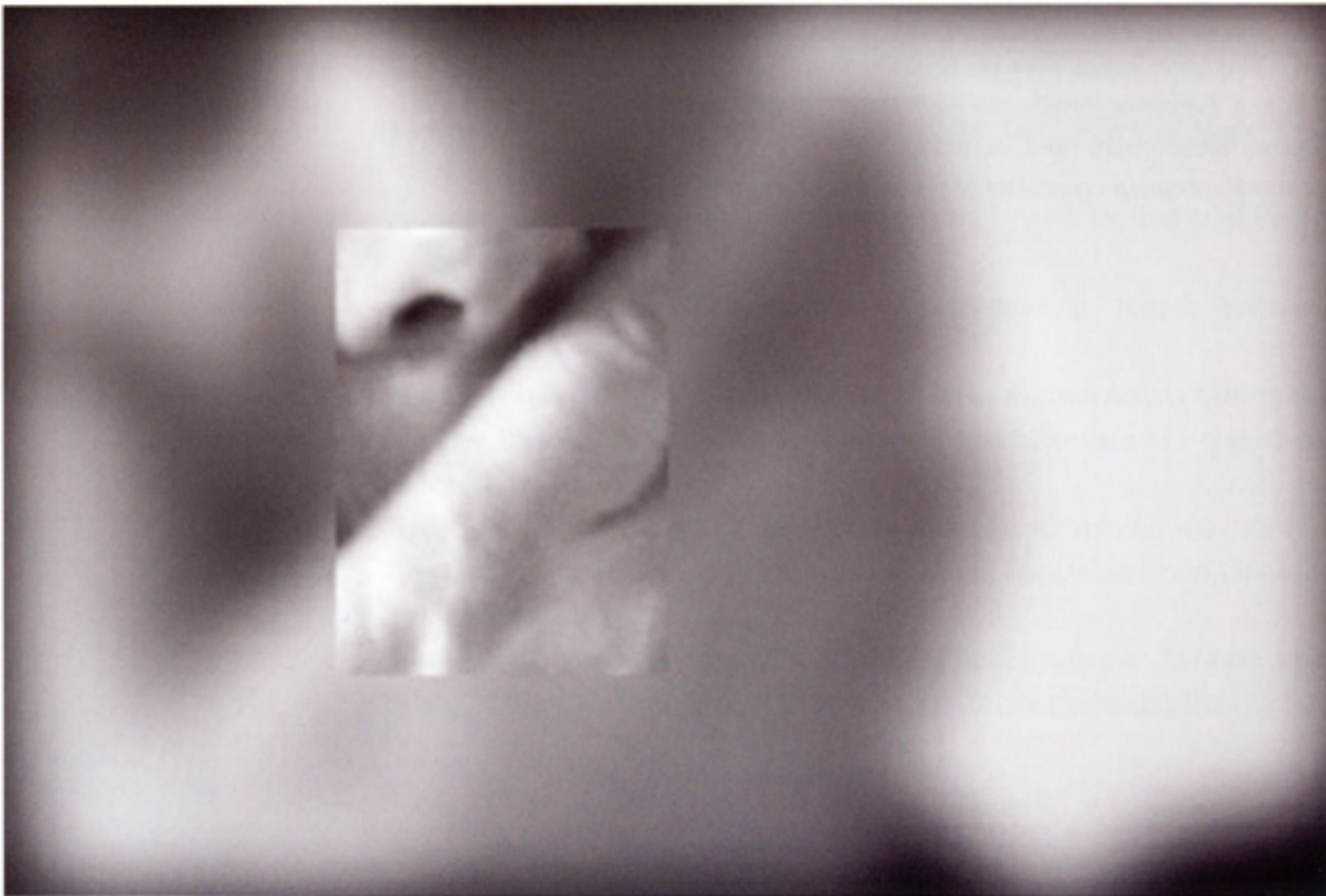
Lyla Rye's *Byte* is a multi-channel video employing several manipulations of the same clip. The video shows Rye playing a game with her infant daughter as she sings into the child's mouth. The sequence culminates with the infant biting Rye's lip. The viewers are presented with an unusual dynamic between mother and child and are left to question this scenario and its effect on their own level of comfort after having witnessed something a little strange. The work is presented in a way that mimics the presentation of information in modern times, as in the multiple monitor displays in electronics stores and public lounges. Rye notes: "My work explores the perception of space by creating installations that draw the viewer into subtly illogical situations. In a range of media I aim to throw the viewer slightly off balance; optically, physically and often psychologically. In doing so, the subliminal expectations of space can surface and be examined."<sup>3</sup>

In Joyce Wieland's *O Canada*, the artist has created a pictorial language. Incorporating the principle in lithography that oil and water do not mix, Wieland mouths the syllables to the Canadian national anthem, while kissing the lithography stone. In a passionate whisper, Wieland redefines her connection to a national icon. The anthem unites a society through song as we exchange breath and create sound. Wieland's *O Canada* embodies the embrace Canadians share with each other. During a rare interview, Wieland remarked that all of her art is autobiographical and that it emphasizes the importance of human interaction for society's well being.<sup>4</sup>



LYLA RYE *Byte*, 2002 (video still)

LYLA RYE *Byte*, 2002 (video still)



The idea for this exhibition began a few years ago with a gift from my brother; he gave me what I'm sure he considered a bit of a gag—a book about lips in art, a simple picture book with thick cardboard pages (I have to admit a comical one). It depicts a series of close up images of lips in works by artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Sandro Botticelli, Andy Warhol, Dante Rossetti and others. At that time, I had been reading about contemporary artists Ann Hamilton, who makes pinhole photographs with her mouth and Janine Antoni, whose installations of works made with her mouth intrigued me. Both of these women put their mouths into action with their art and all of this led me to consider the use of lips in art. I started researching and wrote a paper about it, which grew to include the work of Canadian artists Lyla Rye and Joyce Wieland.

Fast forward a few years when I have been given the opportunity to do an internship at the Owens Art Gallery, which allows me as part of the experience to curate an exhibition. Carrying on with the theme of the mouth, I continued to do research on art which explored ideas of the mouth, about breath, communication and the body and discovered the work of Edith Dakovic. Here I am with three contemporary Canadian artists who speak their truths in their art and inspire me to do the same.

KERRI GEORGE

1. Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? Thirty Years Later" p. 24.
2. Leanna McLennan, *Evocative Thresholds: Edith Dakovic's Mer-Made Products*, p. 15.
3. <http://lylarye.com/bibliography.html>, 04/02/09.
4. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/women/002026-523-e.html>, 03/02/09.

If you touch one of your hands with another, the one that touches will seem alive, the other like an object to be awakened.

**Susan Stewart**  
*Columbarium*

Janine Antoni in the 1990s has blurred the lines between sculpture and performance by producing objects and installations that are not so much representations of the body as enactments of it. ... Antoni's work engages with the history of sculpture, however broadly defined, not so much to parody its conventions and traditions as to rethink the relation of the body to the object in ways that foreground the gendered associations of embodiment.

**Jayne Wark**  
*Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America*

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