

SOFT TRANSMISSIONS:
7A*11D FESTIVAL OF PERFORMANCE ART

SHALON T. WEBBER-HEFFERNAN

ABOUT THE FESTIVAL

7a*11d is a not-for-profit, artist-driven collective that curates and produces English Canada's oldest ongoing biennial of performance art. Since its inception in 1997, the festival has acted as a collective in unparalleled ways; informed by artist-run culture in Canada early on, 7a*11d chose never to have staff—a model few other festivals have taken on in the country and was established by a group of performance artists, collectives, and organizers, eager to develop a forum for performance art in Toronto, but also nationally and internationally. As Johanna Householder mentions, “since the beginning, we have been trying to stretch the boundaries and definitions of what performance art is and what it can do. The festival has always had concentric circles of programming: local, national, and international” (Webber-Heffernan, 2023). The mandate of supporting artists from a wide range of generations, geographies, genders, abilities, races, and artistic points of view in the realization and reception of their work has always been at the forefront. Leaning more toward horizontal organization in its collective structure creates, as Francisco-Fernando Granados states, “a rare opportunity where emerging artists are exhibiting right alongside often fairly legendary or longstanding artists” (ibid). Their success as a Canadian festival is, Paul Couillard says, “very much tied to an unusual fealty to collectivity” (ibid). This loyalty to collectivity and its smaller scale sets 7a*11d apart in the Toronto festival landscape and is conveyed to the fes-

tival's audiences through a felt sense of community that does not always translate in larger festivals that happen in the city.

THE 2022 PROGRAM

In the wake of a more than two-year lapse in live performance events in Toronto (and other places), the 2022 iteration of the Toronto Performance Art Collective's 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art felt particularly infused with a sense of intimacy and softness. Being together in space feels almost new again, vulnerable—like a relationship you took for granted only to realize its value, once threatened to disappear. I welcomed this tender charge in the audience every night of the week-long festival—an ineffable sweetness I have not encountered in some time. This essay reviews four standout performances while also contemplating some of the factors that make 7a*11d festival unique. In 2022, the series included artists from across North America as well as internationally, including Alain-Martin Richard, Archer Pechawis, Rita Camacho Lomeli, Lucky Pierre, Jessica Thompson, Jana Omar Elkhatib, Taiwo Aiyedogbon, Geneviève et Matthieu, Kiera Boulton, Julie Lassonde, Jackson 2bears and Janet Rogers, Jusuf Hadžifejzović, keyon gaskin, and Michelle Lacombe. It also comprised a number of events, including an embodied research project facilitated by lo bil, a performance on-camera workshop led by video artist Rah Eleh, and a virtual launch of the digital reissue of w.o.r.k.s.c.o.r.e.p.o.r.t. on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the W.O.R.K.S collective, composed of artists Clive Robertson and Paul Woodrow.

TORONTO ART FESTIVAL SCENE

Many of 2022's artists were originally invited to participate in the 2020 festival, but we all know how that went. Performing instead two years later, and in the face of an ever-present coronavirus environment, thematic traces certainly surfaced—housing, race, bodies in space, memory, precarity, time, eco crisis, and speculation. Yet, these peripheral themes never dominated or even emerged clearly; rather, they floated like echoes across the festival. This was refreshing, as predetermined curatorial agendas have become somewhat *en vogue* (and Toron-

to seems particularly prone to curation that “defines” or attempts to provide clear rubrics of understanding—especially as it pertains to notions of place). 7a*11d differs in approach from other large-scale destination festivals that often participate in the economic instrumentalization of artists, or that focus on promoting models of the “creative city” (a concept that argues creativity should be considered a strategic factor in urban development) made popular by the American academic Richard Florida (2002). During last year’s Nuit Blanche Festival, I attended a panel discussion called “Toronto as a Creative City” that enthusiastically proffered methods the creative classes can use to contribute positively to urban development, economic growth, and increasing corporate partnership. I was confused by the lack of dialogue at this event around some of the darker elements of strategies oriented to promoting creativity in cities—like, how these tactics might also promote inequalities inside the city, such as the housing crisis in Toronto, displacement, and gentrification.

As a smaller, more grassroots performance festival (with less accountability to corporate funders or the bureaucracy involved with using large civic spaces), 7a*11d can, at least momentarily, turn away from this kind of instrumentalized curating and programming, divorce its artists from the need to be entrepreneurial extensions of neoliberal capital or the entertainment industry. In her book *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, Jen Harvie questions the ways in which market-influenced trends in performance and international festival circuits might be “complicit with the agendas of neoliberal capitalist culture like so much else is, passed off as critical social interventions when they are actually nourishing to neoliberalism’s inequalities”. She asks, might these tendencies “offer a spectacle of communication and social engagement rather more than a qualitatively and sustainably rich and even critical engagement? Might they exacerbate inequalities more than they diminish them, for example by effectively limiting how much agency they actually divest to their audience”? Whether it is an issue of scale, form (ephemeral art), receiving less funding, or collective curating, I cannot be sure—but 7a*11d maintains a distinctive ability to bring people together in space without becoming rote consumptive; it is a place where Couillard says, “we can ritualize how we become a community in a way that’s always open to being transformed” (Webber-Heffernan, 2023).

The city of Toronto itself is a site of constant change, making it difficult for the festival to occur in the same location twice, and Granados points out, these transformations are a way to reflect on how “performance art is a living practice, and that always puts the festival in a position to shift and change” (ibid). The work *7a*11d* presents often challenges conventional assumptions around performance as entertainment as well as the presumptions around the endurance that a public has as an audience. Granados continues, “I have noticed that our emerging, local artists tend to get some of the biggest audiences. But at the end of the day, if you take a cross-section of the festival, there is a wide range of people from the Toronto arts community, and beyond. You will see people from film or experimental video, you’ll see people from theatre and dance, you’ll see family members. This extended format we have often mirrors the durational nature of performance and solicits its public in ways that are different from bigger, more commercial festivals” (ibid). Amani comments, “what’s exciting about our audience is that our artists shape it, and our audience is not this static thing. It is constantly shifting and growing in diverse ways” (ibid).

ALAIN-MARTIN RICHARD - TWO-HEADED ANIMAL

I am aware of the surrounding audience and shifting Toronto landscape while watching Alain-Martin Richard’s *Two-headed animal* with my 2.5-year-old daughter outside in the hot September sun. Not yet knowledgeable about displacement and gentrification processes, my child watches with rapt curiosity as the dapper animal, wearing a fox mask, black tailcoat and pristine white gloves, painstakingly picks up pieces of rubbish within a fenced-off area and wipes each one clean with gentle care. Possessing both a fox’s attentiveness and a man’s sadness, Richard invites viewers to reflect on the state of the territory—climate emergency, corporate capitalism, alienation from nature... and my child asks, “why is the fox cleaning garbage, mama? Is he making a house?” I am struck by the vastness of her simple questions and the shocking responsibility of answering them. He picks up a crumpled beer can, empty liquor containers, and discarded Nestlé water bottles.

Standing outside of the boarded up, to-be-developed 99 Sudbury building (at the time of this writing, the building is gone entirely—once an industrial



Figure 1. Alain Martin Richard, "Animal bicéphale [Two-headed animal]"

glass factory, recently a popular Toronto events venue), the performance confronts viewers with the site's complexities. Surrounded by condos, cranes, and scaffolding, reminders of development abound. Fox-man coyly paces the length of the abandoned building, traipsing over weeds shooting through concrete. He looks to the whirring train, the passing cars trespassing through land, eyes glistening in the sun. He places each trash object in a delicate pile, his sweet acts of cleansing gesture toward reciprocity, collective need, and grief.

ARCHER PECHAWIS – NŌHTĀWIY AWA [THIS IS MY FATHER]

Similarly contemplating environmental concerns, Archer Pechawis' *nōhtāwiya awa* [*this is my father*] takes the form of an outdoor "workshop" in the not-so-distant future where participants learn how to fish for rats out of a sewer—a practice necessary due to changes brought on by climate change and the impacts of ongoing colonization. Folks in Pechawis' dystopian future have been forced by circumstance to change eating habits, shift gathering practices, and make significant cultural changes. Using a bait of cheese and pepperoni, our guide

carefully drops the lure between the sewer grates while eager students (audience members) circle around in the streetlamp’s hazy glow. Sitting on a plastic milk crate wearing a LAND BACK t-shirt and tool belt holding skinning and filleting instruments, Pechawis holds his fishing rod steady.

Waiting for a rat to bite, our workshop leader implicates his own family by telling the story of how his father was once the Dean of St. Michael’s Residential School in Alert Bay, British Columbia, a school that operated from 1894 to 1974. Eventually we learn that Pechawis’ father embezzled money from the school and church, and the family later left town. Weaving in and out of the workshop, personal narrative and pressing environmental considerations create a disjointedness that reflects the realities of colonial trauma for Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) people living in Canada, and we are reminded that the residential school experience has not ended. Sitting there, I keep thinking about *Canadian Art* magazine’s Fall 2017 article “We Lost an Entire Generation” that jaw-droppingly stated that Archer Pechawis was dead. I could not shake the irony of this editorial error, paired with watching him “fish for rats” in 2022. In response to the statement of his being falsely declared dead, Pechawis wrote: “I have had the opportunity to meet, work with, and learn from the giants who blazed the trail for us against seemingly impossible odds, combatting racism, incomprehension, and indifference to make a space for us in the larger Canadian art milieu [...] Given this history as an Indigenous artist, it is especially disturbing to be erased by a mainstream (read non-Indigenous) publication that is the ‘preeminent platform for journalism and criticism about art and culture in Canada’ (2019). *nōhtāwiy awa* [*this is my father*] displays how erasure, colonization, and disregard for land stewardship have created the conditions for—essentially—fishing for rats. Indeed, and as Pechawis stated in the performance, “it is a mournful thing to fish for a rat.”

JESSICA THOMPSON – DOUBLEBIND

7a*11d has integrated digital technologies into the festival for a long time, whether through interactions with film, experimental video, or audio, understanding that the history of performance art has always involved technology. As Amani reminds us, the festival has been “considering how social media and digital realms are legitimate and valuable spaces for perfor-



Figure 2. Archer Pechawis, nōhtāwiy awa [this is my father]"

mance art predating the pandemic” (Webber-Heffernan, 2023). An example in this year’s festival that extended into the digital realm was Jessica Thompson’s wearable media project *DoubleBind*, which positions body as site and explores the duality of the hoodie, making apparent that this hyper-charged garment has different meanings depending on the positionality of its wearer, as well the social setting in which the garment is worn. Following the 2012 shooting death of an unarmed Trayvon Martin by self-appointed neighbourhood watchman George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, the hoodie has gained widespread legibility globally as a symbol for practices of racial profiling and stereotyping that disproportionately inflict violence on Black individuals and communities. The hoodie has also become representative of protest and public uprising against this injustice. Thompson’s kinetic apparatus is designed to be worn in two ways—either covering the wearer’s head or zipped into a collar around their neck. Depending on how and where it is worn, tweets are algorithmically generated and include descriptive content from Airbnb listings, local restaurant reviews, and segments from the Black Panther Manifesto. Placing users in a performative situation wherein their choices are complicated by the knowledge that tweets will be visible to their social networks thus sets pol-

itics upon the wearer (an imposition that can happen to Black people in the public sphere). Thinking about the (white) public desire to perform solidarity in the face of racial terror, to put on a hoodie and relate to blackness—whether on social media or to participate in an art project—, reminds me of bell hooks’ “eating of the other” analysis that speaks to the fetishizing of the Black body that results in consumption of “the other” in white imaginaries through cultural and physical proximities (hooks, 1992).

DoubleBind struggles in the context of a performance festival because the work is indecipherable without background information. The tweets themselves are not evocative enough to provoke meaningful public dialogue as they are mostly nonsensical. For folks who happen to scroll upon them, there are no strong references that could indicate the deeper resonances of this work. For example, a couple of my tweets: “*A rotating pop-up shop opens on Ossington. The \$1.2 million for a good solution for the communities in this situation*” and “*Apartment On Queen st W. ROOM in Queen West. This new food shop on Queen West is getting a Rose and Sons.*”

That said, in an era of intense virtue signalling, the risk taken by participants to relinquish control of their online identity, even briefly, is a powerful element. The conceptual rigour of this work is commendable and it without doubt succeeds (if you are privy to the details of the project) in illustrating how bodies and sartorial markers are inherently political.

In their curatorial selection process, the collective members each have one selection with a no veto rule to serve differing opinions and aesthetics. Householder affirms, “we share responsibilities in caring for the artists; it is fluid. The curation is taking care of the artist as well as the work. We try to be convivial, offer hospitality, and opportunities to gather. These are important aspects of curating—you want the artist to be comfortable because they are the work—curating is care” (Webber-Heffernan, 2023). Granados explains, “it’s rare for folks working in performance to be curated with this level of focus and specificity—where they don’t feel slotted in as programming. More often than not, it’s like ‘show up with your buckets and do what you do,’ so it’s less often to find this level of curatorial care” (ibid). Following up, Amani says, “when our artists are cared for and happy and able to make the work that they intended to make in a fulsome way, that makes

us feel really good. We judge our success a lot by being able to satisfy the artists more so than satisfying the audience” (ibid).

KEYON GASKIN – ITS NOT A THING

I acknowledged the importance of this level of curatorial care while watching keyon gaskin, who established audience intimacy early on in *its not a thing* by offering small cups of a mysterious blue bourbon elixir to audience members milling around the lobby before the performance. Guests are eventually invited into the theatre space by gaskin, cloaked in all black. Shortly after, the artist walks out, leaving the seated audience alone in the darkened theatre. About five minutes later (still in dark silence) we begin to hear gaskin muttering, clamouring, moving all around us. When he reappears, a single spotlight in the corner of the room is turned on and viewers are asked to leave their seats and come down to the floor. The blinding light blazes from a corner of the room and faint music pours out from headphones as gaskin moves through the space—coming up close to people’s faces, then sliding out to the periphery, imitating audience members’ stances; almost mocking at times, skittish at others. The clever use of shadows and light speaks to the politics of both the invisibility and hyper-visibility of Black bodies. Chaotically staggering around, gaskin chants “No lives matter... There is no hope... It doesn’t get better...” Lil Wayne’s 2011 track “She Will” starts to play from the loudspeakers, and we are asked to reframe the lyrics, metaphorically applying “she” to mean the institution, the workers, immigrants, refugees, those doggedly trying to keep their kids fed and their bills paid:

*Karma is a bitch, well just make sure that bitch is beautiful
Life on the edge, I'm dangling my feet
I tried to pay attention but attention paid me
[...]
She will, she will, she will
Maybe for the money and the power and the fame right now
(2011)*

Black ink drips down his face like tears in the hot white light. He spits dice from his mouth into a cast iron frying pan, reminding us that success is about chance, not pulling yourself up by the bootstraps. Self-reliance and



Figure 3. keyon gaskin, "its not a thing"

hard work are not enough. gaskin's use of stereotypical imagery (hoodie, backpack, stripper heels, handcuffs) brings forward racial tropes made visible by a climate of anti-Black violence. His high heels are replaced with tap shoes and like the ghost of a song-and-dance man, gaskin often disappears from view, flitting around to negate the gaze of a mostly white audience. He removes his pants and underwear and begins to tap dance, his body glistening in the light. At the end we are asked not to clap, but to just leave.

CONCLUSION

Discussing the ongoing importance of performance art and the work of 7a*11d moving forward, Granados reflects, "there are certain art works, cultural representations, processes, and issues that need to be out in the world that can only be worked through the interplay of bodies, time, and space and whatever materials one might choose. Performance art is radically inclusive in the degree that many of us arrive or depart from it—to do things that involve gaming, deep community involvement, architectural interventions, teaching, or writing" (Webber-Heffernan, 2023). Amani furthers this sentiment, "we relate to each other's

bodies differently than we do to objects and materials and so as long as we are interested in people and humans there is going to be a need and desire to hold space for the gestures, the experiments, the expressions that just want to flow out of us. And I feel that the space that has carved out the most room for the experiments is that performance art space. It's where we can do things that you can't necessarily get away with in other spaces—where breaking the rules is expected" (ibid).

Returning to my daughter's question, *why is the fox cleaning garbage?*, I am reminded that her voice and framework for experiencing the world and the work offers a generative way to approach the question of why engaging with performance continues to matter. Her probing is like a riddle, understood perhaps only by intuition. Attending the 7a*1d festival every night has the affect of *evoking* something—not a clear rubric of understanding but rather a relational experience, an opportunity for contemplation, grappling with, we could say, buildings bulldozed to the ground, ongoing residential school legacies, the threat of environmental collapse, contemporary gender and racial terror, art world value systems, homelessness, opioid crisis; it goes on... Taken as a compositional whole, the aesthetic power of the festival can be found in its patchwork ability to imitate the collective moment we find ourselves in—there is no unifying narrative or defining structure, and these are indeed disorienting, indeterminate, and chaotic times. And so, not tamed by a central agenda, but rather choreographed by intuitive and visceral frequencies. The festival allows one to sit through these moments, attune to feelings, float between dreams, attend to thoughts and experience unsettling discomforts: to be present with ourselves and others.

WORKS CITED

Florida, Richard (2002). *The Rise of the Creative Class and How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. Basic Books: Cambridge.

Harvie, Jen (2013). *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*. Palgrave Macmillan.

hooks, bell (1992). *Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance*. "Black Looks: Race and Representation." Boston: South End Press.

Lil Wayne (2011). "She Will." *Tha Carter IV*. Genius, 2022, <genius.com/Lil-wayne-she-will-lyrics>.

Nixon, Lindsay (Fall 2017). "We Lost and Entire Generation." *The Idea of History*. *Canadian Art*, vol. 34, no. 3, pp. 138-141.

Nuit Blanche + RUTAS Symposium: A Home for Our Migrations (September 27 - October 3, 2022).

Pechawis, Archer (2019). "I Am Not Dead." *Other Places: Reflections on Media Art in Canada*, edited by Deanna Bowen. Media Arts Network, co-published with Public Books Toronto, otherplaces.

Webber-Heffernan, Shalon T. (2023). Personal interview with collective members Golboo Amani, Paul Couillard, Johanna Householder, and Francisco-Fernando Granados.

PHOTO CREDITS

Figure 1: Henry Chan. 7A*11D, International Performance Art Festival. Toronto, 2022.

Figure 2: Henry Chan. 7A*11D, International Performance Art Festival. Toronto, 2022.

Figure 3: Henry Chan. 7A*11D, International Performance Art Festival. Toronto, 2022.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shalon T. Webber-Heffernan is a writer, independent curator, public educator, and performance art scholar. Some of her recent writing can be found in *Performance Matters*, *Theatre Research in Canada*, *C Magazine*, *Comparative Media Arts Journal*, *Peripheral Review*, and *Canadian Theatre Review*.