"Performance," *Tuning to Oblivion* (Vancouver, BC: Casey Wei & Mountain Standard Time Performative Art, 2022), 104–118.

In 2018, while I was working at VIVO Media Arts Centre as Video Out distributor, archivist Karen Knights approached artist Elisa Ferrari (former VIVO Events & Exhibitions Curator) and myself to activate the Lenore Herb Cassette Archive for that year's iteration of Vancouver International Archives Week. Elisa and I both work in sound/music/performance, both are intimately familiar with the organisation, and both were excited for the chance to create something together.

In Karen's words, "Lenore was a punk, activist, artist, [and] did a lot of work back in the '70s and '80s with Metro Media. Very important, and very controversial." Herb's cassette archive consisted of two storage boxes containing a collection of 100+ cassettes of various length and content — pop albums, personal mixes, concert bootlegs, interviews, artist talks, discussions, jams, live recordings at the CBC, field recordings, and various other ephemera that, over time, created a soundscape not only of Lenore's life, but of the local arts community during the first years of Canada's developing artist-run centre model.

Elisa and I listened to, selected from, and transcribed Herb's cassettes to produce a publication titled *Pisces Midheaven: excerpts from the Lenore Herb Cassette collection* along with a companion mixtape and poster. Through transcribing conversations with Lenore, Angela Kaija, Mark Diamond, Scott Watson, and others, I learned about the strong intersectionality between punk, media art, and performance art of the era.

Theatre director Mark Diamond sassily misquotes Marshall McLuhan to describe performance art as "what you can get away with,"[1] while the ever-sharp curator Scott Watson pontificates that once performance "gets codified as some sort of art and categorised…then it's effectively dead."[2] Watson uses Artaud's 'theatre of cruelty' as a reference point. In an Artaudian sense, performance art must be subversive. Herb responds that true subversion is not possible when the art is state-funded, upon which Watson furthers to an endpoint in four logical statements:

1) *So, if performance art was really to survive, or flourish, or grow, it would have to find another patron, other than the state.*
2) *In theory, that patron would have to be the people, so that it would have an audience.*
3) *In order to have an audience, it has to become more and more like entertainment to interest the general public.*
4) *Art is not a general concern.*

The conversation falls apart here, where Herb's voice, full of emotion, cries, "You think it's just dying a slow death?"[3]

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[1] Elisa Ferrari and KC Wei. eds., *Pisces Midheaven: Excerpts from the Lenore Herb Cassette Archive Publication* (Vancouver: Vancouver International Archives Week: Recollectives, 2018), 29.
[2] Ibid., 36.
[3] Ibid., 38.

At the time I transcribed these tapes, I had my own bias *against* performance art. After encountering my fair share of it through art school, the art scene, and at VIVO, I had concluded that performance art was too esoteric, too self-aware, and therefore powerless to stir in its audiences any transformation of the kind Artaud or Brecht had envisioned. Instead of jolting the audience into action through the performance of a concept or a text, the majority of performance art I had seen tended to obscure the intentions of the artists through the very involved antics of said performance. "*In my opinion,"* Diamond stressed whenever making a claim about performance art, "there's a lack of real performance skill in a lot of the performance art I've seen… I don't mean they have to be actors, or dancers, or acrobats, but they do have to have some faculty of performance if they're going to get in front of an audience."[4]

There are also travelling international artists, who are invited to a place to 'do their thing,' to enliven the lackadaisical humdrum of an arts scene. At Live! Biennale 2019, American artist Preach R Sun, an "activist that incorporates performance art"[5] was invited to Vancouver to *do his thing*. Working "on the street with guerilla actions, but also in festivals and galleries," his art is, in the words of his festival bio, "not only inspirational, but instrumental in galvanising society towards the effort of TRUE liberation that brings into being universal freedom and humanity."[6]

On Saturday afternoon, Sun exited the Patricia Hotel (headquarters for the festival) on Dunlevy and East Hastings Street, wearing a black hoodie, a full mask covering his face, and big, golden shackles around his legs. He sat in front of the hotel and pulled down his pants to reveal his crotch, which was all except for his testicles covered with hazard tape. Taking a length of rope with hooks on either end, he affixed one hook to the American flag, and pierced the other hook into his scrotum. He then dragged himself and the flag around the neighbourhood while singing and screaming, for a reported three hours, followed by a camera crew and a small gaggle of festival attendees.[7] Such is an instance of performance art practised under the ethos of 'what you can get away with.' To be plopped in the centre of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside as a spectacle to behold is someone's idea of freedom. I asked a friend who works in the neighbourhood at a harm reduction centre what she remembered of the performance. She shrugged, "People don't give a fuck about some poser doing some dumb shit. He clearly wants people to look, and nobody's looking."

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During my residency, I didn't think much about freedom. I was more concerned about my performance as an artist. Not only had I not drunk the performance art Kool-Aid, I was also in a place whose history I am only just now, years later, beginning to grasp. The western canon of art is only a starting point when attempting to understand art being made outside it. I think of Chinese artists who ploughed through 100+ years of modernism during the '80s as the country began opening up with the state recognizing styles of

[4] Ibid., 28.
[5] "Preach R Sun," *Live! Biennale*, 2019, accessed February 16, 2024, http://livebiennale.ca/2019/preach-r-sun.
[6] Here, I recall the scene in Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*, when the narrator admits to having "listened to the stories of former guerrilla fighters, who had fought in conditions so inhuman that they pitied the Portuguese soldiers for having to bear what they themselves suffered. That I heard. And many more things that make one ashamed for having used lightly — even if inadvertently — the word 'guerrilla' to describe a certain breed of filmmaking."
[7] VANDOCUMENT, "Preach R Sun - LIVE Biennale - Vancouver Canada - Oct 3 2019," Vimeo, October 14, 2019, https://vimeo.com/366309491.

painting outside of socialist realism for the first time since 1949.[8] Or Adrian Piper's commitment to yoga and Vedic philosophy which taught her the "falsity of Cartesian solipsism [—- the famous 'I think, therefore I am' —-], Empiricist scepticism [— I can only know through sensorial experience —], and of Kant's account of noumena [— that which I know I cannot know —] as merely a limiting concept."[9]

In Bangkok, The Community Arts Festival was led by Jittima Len Pholsawek, one of my fellow M:ST residency artists. She had been working in the realm of community arts for 14 years, focusing on social, environmental, and cultural issues affecting what Canadian public discourse would call 'underrepresented communities.' While in art school, she began working with hill tribes in northern Thailand, where she taught children and helped villagers in their daily agriculture and childcare duties in exchange for food and accommodation.[10] This was following the Thammasat University Massacre in 1976, when thousands of ultra-royalist militia and police were deployed on student protesters on the grounds of Thammasat University, near the Grand Palace in the heart of Bangkok.

Entangled with the monarchy's role in society since the country's adoption of a constitution, Thailand's political struggles have always revolved around its people trying to free themselves from domination and exploitation of the ruling class. The struggle for power amidst the monarchy, the government, and the monastery, along with the added American presence throughout the Cold War to suppress growing communist activity — particularly in the northern hill tribes[11] — set the conditions for "one of the worst massacres in living memory."[12] The growing number of violent protests amidst government suppression finally led to an election in 1975 and the withdrawal of US forces in 1976. Strategic moves by the government to quash the student-supported elected government, followed by an alleged mock hanging of the crown prince in a stage play (which students have always denied), resulted in the "orgy of murder and brutality that shocked the world."[13]

An accurate death toll was never released, but reliable estimates suggest that over a hundred students were killed at Thammasat. In the aftermath, many activists sought refuge within rural, tribal communities to quietly form an underground movement. In 1983, Len dropped out of her last year at the College of Fine Arts to join the Thai Volunteer Service Foundation, which sent her up north where she continued to spend time with tribes in the Huai Pong, Wiang Pa Pao, and Chiang Rai regions.[14]

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Direct from our 10-hour drive from Nan, I met Len and her entourage of women (including Patree) in the late afternoon at the Bangkok Art & Cultural Centre (BACC). They greeted us, and Chumpon introduced me as "the Canadian artist who's performing tomorrow too!" Len's entourage, all wearing the same black

[8] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *What about China?*, digital (NTU CCA Singapore, Rockbund Art Museum, 2021).
[9] Piper, 107.
[10] "Jittima 'Len' Pholsawek," interview by Pongpan Suriyapat, *Notes on Curating 41* (June 2019), 97–101, https://www.on-curating.org/files/oc/dateiverwaltung/issue-41/PDF_to_Download/Oncurating41_WEB.pdf.
[11] Jeffrey Race, "The War in Northern Thailand," *Modern Asian Studies* 8, no. 1 (1974), 94, http://www.jstor.com/stable/311628.
[12] Marshall, 13.
[13] Ibid., 137.
[14] Suriyapat, 97.

t-shirt patterned with white block-cut leaf shapes, were setting up merch tables with tote bags, postcards, photo books, and various other products made by village participants from southern Thailand.

Chumpon and Len have been collaborators since 1991, where they met at a photography exhibition in Bangkok's Goethe Institute. Along with others across the nation, they have since then built up a network of performance artists whose work addressed "social, cultural, and environmental issues in local communities, especially places where the government's proposed mega projects threaten local livelihoods."[15]

I didn't know then how far back their friendship went, and it strikes me now how the smiles shared between Chumpon, Len, Toi, and the other senior artists carry a long history of resistance against Thailand's violent dictatorship. These artists command a different level of respect, here in a place where performance art is not dying a slow death at all. Subversion in a society with such severe censorship laws necessitates a certain distanciation, and to apply Watson's formula, the patron of performance art in Thailand is indeed the people. While Art is not a general concern, the Art here is in service of general concerns — the rights of the people outside of the royal family and a small ruling elite. "The value of the art lies in its consequence and its duty to serve [sic] the public domain."[16] Freedom of speech does not exist under lèse-majesté, and activists who challenge the royalist government's policies and who call for a return to democracy following the 2014 coup are too visible. "Art is less explicit in its criticism,"[17] and it is through the padding of 'performance' that people are able to practice their political agency.

A photography show was installed in the BACC lobby with images documenting the landscape and livelihood of the villages in the south affected by a recent government hydro-electricity project. Outside the centre, the wide open plaza was being set up with vendors selling food, wares, and art made by participants who came to Bangkok as a part of Len's Community Art Festival. Here, community art meant bringing an underrepresented rural community into the country's centre.

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On the first night, as the sun went down, a northern musician sang and played the *suang* (a traditional Burmese harp) while someone in the front row painted his portrait plein air style. Then, Pattree and Chakkrit took the floor.

Pattree wore a loose black dress, black pants, a black knapsack on her back, and thick red wool gloves. She walked to the centre of the stage area and set down what appeared to be a bundle of rope and a yellow bunch of cloth on either side of her. Chakkrit stood a few metres and began speaking Thai into a microphone. Out of her knapsack, Pattree removed a bundle of red fabric. She let her knapsack fall to the ground, then unwound the lengthy red fabric to reveal a stone with a drawing of a fish skeleton on its surface. She created a circle with the red fabric around her feet, then carried the stone in her clasped palms to the front row of the audience. Chakkrit, meanwhile, continued to speak into the mic. After

[15] Paritta Wangktat, "Changing their stripes," *Bangkok Post Spectrum* 9, no. 40, (October 2–8, 2016), sec: Culture, 3–5, https://www.pressreader.com/thailand/bangkok-post/20161002/page/83.
[16] Suriyapat, 101.
[17] Wangktat, 4.

circling around the audience, Pattree returned to her starting position, back within the circumference of the red fabric, crouched down to tie the rope to the stone, then wrapped the remaining length of rope a few times around her neck. In one hand she held the wrapped stone, attached to the rope, and with the other picked up the yellow bundle, which expanded into a circular netted cage. Then, she unsteadily rose on one foot, wavering back and forth, struggling to maintain balance. Chakkrit fell to the ground, tucking his legs into his body, speaking urgently, fervently into the mic. Tension was held until Pattree lost balance and the other foot touched the floor — signalling the end of the performance.

Following Pattree and Chakkrit, a trio consisting of a poet, a violinist, and acoustic guitar player took the stage; then, an acoustic blues rock duo; and, to close out the night, a full on jam band. During the last set, I meandered away to explore my surroundings via the pedestrian overpass which covered a gigantic eight-lane intersection — the same intersection that would transport the King past the Community Art Festival the very next day.

Kitty-corner to the BACC was the Siam Square shopping hub, where a full-on boxing match was underway on a professionally-lit, elevated ring. Cars flowed in a crisscrossing direction, as did people, while spectators clustered around the streetside arena. I watched mesmerised from the corner of a staircase leading to the overpass, with people shoulder to shoulder walking up and down past me. In that moment, I didn't really want to go back to the Community Art Festival, where a group of 50-something-year-old pals were jamming through some classic blues rock, but I also didn't feel compelled to enter any megamalls. A McDonald's was behind the boxing ring, as familiar and ordinary as anything. This was the mundane bustle of the spectacle. I wandered around the overpass some more, accepted the banality of the present, and watched the rest of the community art blues rock set from up above.

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The next day, hazy performed as the sun went down. It was a deeply alienating experience to play shoegaze love songs to a busy mega-mall intersection, where a sound tech tried to make my fuzzed-out cube amp sound clean as possible, like all the other rock musicians playing their electric-acoustic guitars. Here, in the context of a community arts festival heavily rooted in its rural activism, my music just didn't make any sense. Here, attempting to swim in a crashing vortex of culture, capital, and community, I had reached the limits of my practice, and I felt untethered from all the identifiers that brought me to this place.

Thinking back to that moment when I stood on the walkway looking down at the festival, it was there that I achieved freedom — not from my responsibilities, but from my identity. I felt so disconnected from what I knew as my own self, i.e., my ego that I had crafted and accumulated over the years. All I felt was everything else — the people, the architecture, the lights, the vehicles, the products, the signs — looking back at me, very indifferent. That was a moment of freedom, as extraordinarily mundane as anything.

"I want to be free," is still the immediate albeit idealistic answer I have when asked what I truly, deeply, more than anything, want. Immediately, Gil Scott-Heron's nihilistic play on the word 'freedom' — "free

doom"[18] — comes to mind, but also, here lies the choice that is made when one decides to live with intention. When Art becomes disseminated — moving through the narrative of Len's life, culminating in a group of old friends jamming through some blues rock outside the BAAC on a Saturday night while a boxing match is underway across the street —- it is as if a wave crashes back into the ocean.

Recently, I spoke to long-time Canadian performance artist and activist Margaret Dragu about how Thai artists changed my understanding of performance art. Without a beat, she replied: "Oh yes. The performance art in Thailand should be taught at every art school."

Audio Sources

1. Si Monkey (Lenore Herb and Dermot Foley), Track 1, *Pisces Midheaven: excerpts from the Lenore Herb Cassette Archive* (audio cassette, eds. Casey Wei and Elisa Ferrari), 2018, VIVO Media Arts Centre.

2. Lenore Herb, Angela Kaija, Mark Diamond, *Mark Diamond - Metro Media* (audio cassette), the Lenore Herb Cassette Archive, Crista Dahl Media Library, VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver BC.

3. Lenore Herb, Dermot Foley, unnamed woman, Scott Watson, *Scott Watson 1 + 2* (audio cassette), the Lenore Herb Cassette Archive, Crista Dahl Media Library, VIVO Media Arts Centre, Vancouver BC.

4. Chris Marker, *Sans Soleil* (France: Argos Films, 1983).

5. VANDOCUMENT, "Preach R Sun - LIVE Biennale - Vancouver Canada - Oct 3 2019," Vimeo, October 14, 2019, https://vimeo.com/366309491.

[18] Gil Scott-Heron, "Comment #1," track 4 on *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, vinyl (Flying Dutchman Records, 1970), https://youtu.be/8XtczY_KjO8.