

PRESENTATION HOUSE GALLERY
SEPTEMBER 11 TO NOVEMBER 7, 2010

FLAKEY

THE EARLY WORKS OF GLENN LEWIS

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CURATED BY HELGA PAKASAAR AND REID SHIER

September 11 to November 14, 2010

Vancouver artist Glenn Lewis was an influential force in the cross-disciplinary, interactive practices that informed a remarkable period of vitality and experimentation in west coast art. Embracing the spirit of inventiveness and belief in the transformative power of interaction, he developed a highly performative practice. To this day the ideal of bringing art and life together through experiential and discursive experiences

remains an important one for Lewis. This exhibition draws out the humour and conceptual rigour at the heart of his rarely seen works from the late-1960s to the mid-1970s.

In the late sixties, Lewis's ceramics practice—which until then had focused largely on pottery—expanded into porcelain tableaux of domestic tableware—teacups, salt shakers, eggcups.



Deformed by imperfections and cracks, these ceramic pieces reveal the many chance processes of working with clay, and followed from ceramic traditions that placed high value on material “truth”, even to the degree of highlighting accidental transformations such as, for example, filling cracks with gold. Often displayed under coloured Plexiglas and on mirrored plinths, Lewis’s ceramic sculptures are imbedded in a reflective environment and impart a self-conscious, multisensory experience.

In 1970, Lewis produced **Artifact**, a ceramic mural commissioned for the Canada Pavilion of the Osaka World’s Fair. The 176 tiles are arranged in a 22-day calendar that records the production of eight salt shakers a day. For twenty days, Lewis crafted them on each tile. On the two days he “took off” he impressed poetic texts about his activities on the tiles as if they were ancient tablets. *Artifact*’s ordered grid of ritualized procedures is interrupted by a chaotic field of white ceramic salt shakers in various states of erection and breakage. The mural is a type of diaristic archive that reveals the contingencies of everyday life through the alchemical interactions of glazing and firing clay. The somewhat lunar, glistening landscape suggests a topography—a spatial map as well as a record of marking time.

Beginning in the early 1970s, Lewis moved away from ceramics towards performance art, often directly involving his body. His early performances ranged from elaborate theatrical and scripted events to actions on the street and in private settings. Shot at the New Era Social Club with an early portapak video camera, **Japanese Cabbage** shows the artist, disguised in a Mickey Mouse mask, earnestly demonstrating a cabbage recipe in a spoof on television cooking shows. In these years, Lewis often assumed the role of chef, whether for dinner parties or art events, and was an early pioneer in exploring the generative and relational dynamics of social rituals. These experiments in discursive social interaction were further tested in Lewis’ ongoing performances as Adolf Hitler, who he uncannily resembles, enacted as casual and adhoc appearances in costume or to give a speech, or through more elaborately planned and casted dramas, as in **Hitler at Wreck Beach** (image previous page) of 1972.

In the early seventies, Glenn Lewis adopted a persona, Flakey Rose Hip, that characterizes the festive and playful spirit of his socially engaged activities. With a nod to Marcel Duchamp, this alter ego underscores the fluidity of artistic identities in a decade when authorship was easily subsumed in

collective activities. Indeed Lewis wore many hats during the era, from object maker to performer, writer, curator and producer of elaborate multimedia events. He was part of a cultural ecology intent on generating alternative systems of communication and creative enterprises. The **New York Sponge Dance School of Vancouver**, which Lewis began in 1970, was one such collective, and involved performance, correspondence and synchronized swimming events. He participated in an international system of exchange for disseminating art and ideas via the postal system that came to be known as the Eternal Network. Typical of Lewis’s collaborative generosity, he turned an early seventies government commission, The Great Wall of 1984, housed at the National Research Library in Ottawa, into a call for participation from his correspondence art community. This living archive of 365 Plexiglas containers holds diverse personal artifacts from artists and friends across the globe. It also has yet to be filled, with empty boxes that will be added to on the occasion of this exhibition via an internet call to the artist’s current networks.

With the introduction of offset printing in the early 1960s, artists could easily and cheaply produce their own books and distribute them widely through correspondence

art systems. The booklet **Sea Shells in the Forest at Storm Bay with Bedroom**—a photographic collage poem of repetitive sequences and variations—puts the reader into an active negotiation with visual order and disorder. The booklet appeared as a section of the special edition of the B.C. Almanac on Process Art, produced by the National Film Board of Canada, and was printed on Roneo four-colour mimeograph, a very low-tech machine by today’s standards, but which at the time was an essential new technology for artists such as those involved in the Intermedia Society who were creating new correspondence and distribution networks.

In the 1970s Lewis also began actively working with still and film cameras. His approach was experiential, often governed through body movements, primarily walking. His performance film loops document simple actions in real time, with the artist literally going in circles, transforming indeterminate spaces into temporary containers that fuse a sense of time and space. In 1970’s **Forest Industry** (cover image), a camera follows Lewis arduously trekking 2 1/2 miles through the forest on the Sunshine Coast demarcating a rectangle of land with surveyor’s tape. **Blue Tape Around City Block** (image follow-up page) of 1969 charts the metropolitan



grid through a depiction of Lewis, dressed in overalls, running tape around a downtown Vancouver block. Camouflaged as a labourer involved in a purposeful task, the artist articulates space through his action of seemingly unwinding film while at the same time producing one. His absurdist gesture and Chaplinesque movements heighten both the gravity and humour of these endurance performances, with their ironic references to colonial explorers, urban planning, and property ownership. Lewis' fascination with mapping urban geographies was also articulated through photographs—made processually and sequentially very much like film sequences—of close-ups of sidewalks, gutter debris and storefronts. The slide work **Greenwood Hill, New York** produced in 1971, similarly exploits the temporal and perceptual capabilities of the camera. Here Lewis tracked changes in weather and light in a landscape over the course of several seasons through a static camera which he used to take one image a day.

Lewis' camera works and performances evoke the explorations of artists involved in procedural and land art at the time, particularly those growing from minimalist and early conceptualist practices who were crafting ephemeral, abstract forms. Lewis' interest in the imposition of geometries

on the environment as a form of drawing is particularly evident in photographs that document **Four Hundred Yards of Burned**

Paper in a Square (image below) from 1969. These show a group action where students at the University of Calgary assisted Lewis



in making, igniting and then collecting the residue of a huge paper square, the result of which, a pile of ashes, was put in a mirrored box. The work is an example of Lewis' growing interest in exploiting the poetics of entropy through subtle gestures that cut through space, and in how the temporal cartographies of the diaristic already evident in the *Artifact* mural were to be amplified in geographic and time-based works that followed. Collectively, Glenn Lewis's prescient experiments in mapping everyday life and urban geographies showcase the ideals of early interactive art, and the centrality of a philosophy that sought to bring art and life closer together.

Glenn Lewis was born in Chemainus in 1935 and studied at the Vancouver School of Art, UBC (where he also taught art later) and with the ceramicist, Bernard Leach in England. Initially working in ceramics, by the mid-1960s he began developing a remarkably expansive art practice that has been widely exhibited, performed and screened since then, and is in major public and private collections. His prolific output includes sculpture, performance, environments, synchronized swimming events, radio plays, multimedia happenings, installation, correspondence art, script-writing, film, photography, dinner parties and parades. A

founder of Vancouver's legendary Western Front, Intermedia Society, New Era Social Club, Lux Radio Players and The Canadian Shadow Players, he lives in Vancouver and remains an influential figure well beyond the west coast. Often involving travel across the globe, many of his creative projects have been collaborations and, in keeping with his questioning of artistic authorship, remain unidentified. He has had solo exhibitions at Oboro in Montreal, Belkin Satellite in Vancouver, Burnaby Art Gallery and the Vancouver Art Gallery and has participated in major group exhibitions about the period such as *From Sea to Shining Sea*, *Making It New: The Big Sixties Show*, *Museums by Artists* and his early films are in *Traffic: Conceptual Art In Canada 1965-1980*. His most recent local project was producing a zany parade in the downtown eastside, *Procession of Performing Circles*.

EVENTS

Opening Reception

Saturday, September 11, 2010, 7 PM

Launched with a Glenn Lewis kimchee cooking demonstration performance

Performance: 400 Yards of Burned Paper in a Square, 1969

October 6, Noon

At Spanish Bank Beach West on NW Marine Dr, furthest concession west

Room Divided, 1969

September 29 to October 17

4 Intersections, 1970

October 21 to November 7

Performance of his 16 mm film *Forest Industry*, 1970

October 26, 8pm

All three above events at Satellite Gallery

560 Seymour St, 2nd floor

Hours: Wednesday to Saturday noon to 6pm and Sunday noon to 5pm

PRESENTATION HOUSE GALLERY

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GALLERY HOURS: WEDNESDAY TO SUNDAY NOON TO 5PM

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Room Divided courtesy CAUSA collection.

All works in the exhibition are courtesy the artist, unless indicated otherwise.

