

STARTING OUT FROM VÉHICULE ART

With thanks to Klara du Plessis who got me
thinking about the old days at Véhicule Art Gallery

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The mission of Véhicule Art Gallery was primarily the exhibition of contemporary visual art, including conceptual art, installations, photographs, drawings and paintings, and the artists that exhibited there came from across Canada, the United States, and other countries. That was the gallery's main focus: exhibiting avant-garde contemporary and experimental visual art

My impression, even at the time, was that the people who founded and then ran the gallery, a collective of mostly English-speaking Montreal artists, were surprised that poetry could be as popular as it turned out to be; every Sunday afternoon at 2 p.m. the gallery was full of people there to hear poetry being read or performed, and this was good for the gallery. Poetry readings increased the number of events they held and the number of people who came to the gallery. This also greatly benefitted poets who had a space in downtown Montreal where they could hold poetry readings.

Somehow, out of the poets who visited the gallery, whether by propinquity or chance, a group of us became friends and this group became known as the Véhicule Poets; we are still friends over forty years later. The Véhicule Poets are a direct result of Véhicule Art Gallery; Véhicule Art Gallery was the institution and the physical location that gave us the opportunity to meet each other, publish together, and to organize poetry readings at the gallery. The gallery wasn't our beginning as poets but it was the hub, the place that brought us together; that time at the gallery has become an essential part of our individual history as poets.

The Véhicule poetry reading series came into existence after the reading series at Sir George Williams University had ended; however, the readings at Véhicule Art continued a tradition of promoting contemporary poetry similar to that of the SGWU series. I remember Al Purdy's reading, some black and white photographs I took of Purdy reading at Véhicule are in my literary papers at Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University. I remember Robert Kelly's reading, with his wife recording the reading sitting in the front row of the audience. I brought in Clayton Eshleman, he read at Véhicule Art and at Champlain Regional College where I was teaching, I think that was in early May 1978. I also brought in The Four Horsemen, to Véhicule and to Champlain Regional College; there are many slides I took of bpNichol and The Four Horsemen in performance in my McGill papers; anyone interested in The Four Horsemen would benefit by checking out these many slides of the group performing. I remember Kenneth Koch's reading and speaking on the phone with Anne Waldman about her reading at Véhicule; Anne Waldman had known Claudia Lapp at Bennington College in Vermont.

Along with the others, I was at the gallery every Sunday afternoon for the readings and for other events. I remember when the whole group of us, that would be Artie Gold, Ken Norris, Claudia Lapp,

John McAuley, Endre Farkas, Tom Konyves, and myself, met one afternoon at Bob Galvin's apartment on St. Mathieu Street (Bob Galvin was a friend of Ken Norris). We read a few poems and I remember Artie correcting someone, it was me, on my pronunciation of "Orion". But there was another more important meeting, it was to discuss if we wanted to be considered a group, an umbrella for the seven of us who had similar ideas about poetry and who shared a common history at Véhicule Art Gallery.

We met on the evening of 1 February 1979 at Artie Gold's home; I guess we were all in attendance. Ken wanted us to accept what was already a fact, that we were a group called the Véhicule Poets. Ken was writing his dissertation at McGill on Canadian modernist literature, more specifically on little magazine publishing in Canada; several groups of poets came out of publishing little magazines, the Contact poets, the First Statement poets, and others. Ken could see the advantage of being in a group as well as being individual poets; that is, the historical context of seven poets who shared a common bond. But three of us didn't agree; Artie, Claudia, and I opposed the idea of the group. All we did, I said, was organize poetry readings at Véhicule Art Gallery. Ken, Endre, Tom, and John agreed to the name. Dissension continued as to "what & who & why & wherefore" regarding the group and the name; Tom Konyves assured me that Ken would work to justify accepting the group name. I am not sure if this was the meeting when we decided to publish our first anthology, *The Véhicule Poets* (1979), edited by John McAuley. Then came Artie's condition for accepting Ken's proposal, it was contingent on allowing him to write the introduction of the anthology, "saying just what & if we are or exist." I was very skeptical, I thought "so the 'Véhicule Poets' will make their appearance even tho no such creature exists—& Artie and Claudia and I know so—". Looking back on it I see that Ken was right, I am glad he persisted in defining us as the Véhicule Poets.

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Véhicule Art Gallery opened on 13 October 1972. As far as I know, Guy Birchard, Artie Gold, and I organized the first reading at the gallery and it occurred eight months after the gallery opened, on 24 June 1973; the readings organized by Claudia Lapp and Michael Harris came a few months later, in the fall of 1973. Guy Birchard introduced me to Artie Gold and I often visited Artie on Lorne Crescent in the spring and summer of 1973. I remember putting up posters with Guy for the 24 June reading. I invited Richard Sommer; Guy Birchard invited Cam Christie; Artie Gold invited Glen Siebrasse and Joan Thornton; and the three of us also read. Joan Thornton was a talented poet and it is unfortunate that she decided not to attend the reading.

Here is my diary entry, the writing of a young poet at the beginning of things, just a few hours after the reading:

Sunday/June 24th/'73—

(20:25) about 30 to 40 people showed up—not many but a nice feeling to it—Joan Thornton phoned Artie earlier to say she wldnt/ show, one guesses she was too nervous—so Artie read and he was really good, he had one poem which really knockt me out—("my mother's cunt is a fork, she picks yams out of bottles" with the idea of her marrying men she puts up in bottles)—then I read and it was a few poems I collected last nite & didn't bother to rehearse or even read them over too much before I read (not in this order), "meditation 1", "oldman oldman oldman", then in the middle of the reading "regard as sacred" with Guy; I began with "Shaman on the back of a grizzly", I threw in my "Van Gogh" poem—so that went well & as I sat down Artie wrote a poem about my reading which I cldn't make out because of his handwriting and Anne [Heany] askt for a copy of "meditation 1"—

The reading on 24 June at Véhicule was only my second reading; the first time I read my poems in public was two months earlier, in April 1973, at Karma Coffee House, located in the basement of the SGWU Student Union building on the south-west corner of de Maisonneuve Bouvelard West and Crescent Street. Again, it was Guy Birchard who invited me to read on that occasion and both Artie and Guy were in the audience. The first reading I gave at Véhicule was in 1973; I gave readings every year at Véhicule Art, and my last reading there was in 1980. In fact, I am surprised at how many readings I gave in those years, at Véhicule Art, Powerhouse Gallery, and other venues, for the most part these were solo readings which are rare today, group readings bring in an audience. Louis Dudek told me that in the old days it was only prominent poets—W.H. Auden, T.S. Eliot, and others—who gave readings, most poets never gave readings unless they achieved something substantial in their literary work. In the late 1970s I was part of a group reading at the Unitarian Church on Sherbrooke Street West, the beautiful church that burned down, invited by Louis to read with him and several other poets. It was hosted by the owner of Mansfield Book Mart.

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One of my English professors at SGWU was Richard Sommer; Richard told me that he and his wife had driven to Vancouver in their van around 1969-1970, where they met and were impressed by West Coast poets and artists. I know he participated at the Charles Olson Memorial Poetry Reading in Vancouver, in March 1970, just three months after Olson's passing. Previous to this Richard was probably fairly conservative; he was an academic, his Ph.D. was from Harvard (he gave me a monograph, *The Odyssey and Primitive Religion* (1962), that he published and which I still have), and he spoke of meeting Robert Frost at a reception at Harvard.

In August 1963, ten years before our first Véhicule reading, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, and other American poets attended the Vancouver Poetry Conference; these were poets Donald Allen included in his anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945 - 1960* (1965). A lot of other poets, not included in Donald Allen's anthology, had a similar approach to poetry as the poets Allen anthologized; some were Beat poets, others were influenced by Charles Olson's projective verse or by Black Mountain poets, there were confessional poets, concrete/visual/sound poets, poets influenced by Jerome Rothenberg's *Technicians of the Sacred* (1968), and others.

There were also important voices in Canada; these included Louis Dudek, Irving Layton, Raymond Souster, P.K. Page, Earle Birney, and Al Purdy; not to forget Phyllis Webb, Daphne Marlatt, George Bowering, Frank Davey, Lionel Kearns, bpNichol, and bill bissett. And others, for instance Doug Jones, Leonard Cohen, Pat Lowther, John Newlove, and Alden Nowlan. No doubt I have left out poets who should be a part of this list. But, still, what a great time for Canadian poetry! The SGWU poetry series recognized the importance of this cohort of Canadian and American poets by inviting some of them to read in Montreal; further recognition of the importance of these poets is evident in who read at Véhicule Art Gallery; as well, this new poetry, this new approach to poetry, influenced and encouraged the creative work of the Véhicule Poets. Of course, the formalist poets in Montreal disliked everything about new American poetry, West Coast poetry, the Véhicule Poets, and the readings at Véhicule Art Gallery; they disliked us personally; but formalistic poetry seemed pretty dull and old fashioned when compared to what was happening on the West Coast and at Véhicule Art in the 1970s.

It must have been that summer of 1973 when I used to visit Richard Sommer at his Draper Avenue home; I was 23 years old, fairly naive, and would graduate from SGWU in the fall of 1973. I

remember meeting Roy Kiyooka at Richard's home which had formerly been Roy Kiyooka's home when he lived in Montreal and taught at SGWU. Sitting together in his second floor office-library Richard helped me compile a mailing list for *what is*, a concrete poetry newsletter of experimental poetry. I edited and published fourteen issues of *what is* from 1973-1975; a few years later, from 1978-1985, I published *The Montreal Journal of Poetics*. Both were mailed out and free to the poets who received them. Whether *what is* was a newsletter or a magazine was something Wynn Francis discussed with me at her home in Montreal West. I also published my own concrete poetry in *what is* and other periodicals; that is how I first came into contact with Vancouver poets like Gerry Gilbert and Ed Varney.

The gallery welcomed and even encouraged an avant-garde approach to poetry. I learned of John Cage from Richard and the readings I gave with my first wife, Pat Walsh, were events, not readings with one person standing up and reading their poems. By 1976 or 1977 Pat Walsh and I began to call ourselves, for performances, Cold Mountain Review, after Han-Shan (from Burton Watson's translation, *Cold Mountain: 100 Poems by the T'ang Poet Han-Shan*, 1970), and we did readings together at Véhicule Art, Powerhouse Gallery, high schools, and other venues; I still remember these reading-performances, especially those given at Véhicule. They were readings of randomly chosen texts, poems read simultaneously by several voices, the purposeful inclusion of silence in a performance, and the use of randomness in texts and their performance; this also included the influence of William Burroughs and Brion Gysin's cut-up technique. A performance at Véhicule might include having the whole audience reading texts simultaneously out loud, it was a cacophony of meaningless human voices; the implications of these readings were open-ended and lent themselves to a variety of interpretations. My first reading for voices, performing my poem "regard as sacred", was with Guy Birchard at the 24 June 1973 reading at Véhicule Art.

One of the most memorable poetry performances I attended at Véhicule was by Tom Konyves who joined the gallery in 1977, it was his long poem, *No Parking*, Tom read this poem accompanied by a cellist; it was brilliant! He also had a poem entitled "Véhicule R"; see his book, *Performances* (1980). I met Tom at Vicky Tansey's dance studio, Vicky was Richard's wife and the dance studio was located behind their home on Draper Avenue; it had been a garage and was converted into an art studio by Roy Kiyooka. The occasion was the launch of Bob Morrison's *Anthol* magazine, probably issue #2, published in 1973; Tom had some work in this issue. It seems to me that it was Endre Farkas who was the impetus behind us working collectively, Endre was always interested in doing collaborations with other artists, including poets, dancers, and actors. I met Endre, very briefly, at the McKay Street location of Explorations One, a two year experimental programme in which I was a student at SGWU beginning in 1969-70. I doubt I made any impression on either Tom or Endre but they made an impression on me, I tend to keep a low profile; however, I do have a good episodic memory and I am a diarist. Ken Norris arrived at the gallery around 1975 and attended the readings. For a while Pat Walsh had been one of the roommates of Ken's girlfriend, Jill, and I heard about Ken from her. Most of my relationship with Ken has been in the form of letters and E-mails, because of this I have probably had more to do with Ken than any of the others. John McAuley and I organized the reading series in 1976-1977; John was also the gallery administrator in the late 1970s. My mother worked at the Norris Building library of SGWU and some people involved or peripherally involved in literary things also worked there, for instance John McAuley's first wife, Diana Brewer; by the way, Diana Brewer's parents lived next door to Richard and Vicky Sommer on Draper Avenue and Diana's mother was a good friend of Pat Walsh before I met Pat, it really is a small world; Nancy Marrelli, Simon Dardick's wife, also worked at the Norris Building, Simon is the publisher of Véhicule Press and Nancy was an archivist at Concordia. In 1974-76 I worked at the SGWU library, in the Shuchat Building and the Hall Building library. The First Annual Spring Marathon reading was a joint Véhicule - Concordia literary

society production, held on 16 May 1975 in H-820 of the Hall Building; the Marathon readings moved to Véhicule Art Gallery for the second annual spring reading, on 21 March 1976. These readings could go on for many hours which was the intention of the reading. I think it was Tom Konyves who was behind the marathon readings; one of the last marathon readings that I attended was held in the Hall Building at Concordia/SGWU, possibly in 1980. Just for clarity, Sir George Williams University was renamed Concordia University in 1974 with the merger of the downtown Sir George Williams Campus with Loyola College in Montreal's west end.

I graduated from Sir George Williams University in the fall of 1973; then, a year later, I was a graduate student at McGill University, studying that first year with Louis Dudek, and at McGill until November 1976; only two weeks after graduating from McGill I began teaching at Champlain Regional College. I invited poets, including Artie, Tom, Endre, and Claudia to read before my classes. In addition to poetry I was interested in the writings of J. Krishnamurti and I attended his series of annual lectures in Saanen, Switzerland, in July 1973; in Ojai, California, in 1976; and in New York City in the early '80s. I got married in August 1976 and my son was born in January 1979; later in 1979 we moved to a country home near Huntingdon, Quebec, and I only returned to live full-time in Montreal in 1997. I met Carolyn Zonailo for the first time in 1991, she had published my book *Family Album* (1987) and I offered to meet her at the airport and drive her to where she was staying on the campus of John Abbott College for The Writers' Union of Canada AGM; Carolyn is from Vancouver, she founded and ran Caitlin Press, co-founded The Poem Factory press with Ed Varney, and she was one of the founders of the Federation of BC Writers; six months after the AGM she moved to Montreal and we have been together since then. Carolyn and Cathy Ford were in Montreal in May 1978 for a League of Canadian Poets AGM and met Artie Gold and possibly Ken Norris at Artie's Lorne Crescent flat.

While living near Huntingdon I became good friends with George Johnston who moved to his country home in south-west Quebec when he retired from teaching at Carleton University; George was a meticulous poet and translator, he was friends with George Bowering, Jay McPherson, Northrop Frye, Cid Corman, and George Whalley, and he had travelled in the UK giving readings with Bill Bissett and Susan Musgrave. Louis Dudek was a friend and, like George Johnston, he is one of my poetry mentors. I want to say that Louis and George were not simpatico as poets but they were two of the kindest people you could meet. As well, Carolyn and I spent a lot of time in Vancouver and I got to know many poets there because they were friends of Carolyn's; we also gave readings, at UBC, SFU, The Kootenay School of Writing at Artspeak Gallery, an art gallery in Deep Cove, and book stores and art galleries in the lower mainland including reading on Gerry Gilbert's radiofreerainforest. Other good friends were Ed Varney, Marya Fiamengo, Ralph Maud, Jean Mallinson, Nellie McClung, and Trevor Carolan. I used to have more poet-friends in Vancouver than in Montreal. I first visited Vancouver in late April 1976, passing through on my way home from California and Mexico; I was between flights and walked outside of the airport, it took me no time at all to fall in love with that beautiful city.

Poetry readings were the main literary event held at the gallery, but I would like to include other Véhicule events that were of a literary nature; other than Véhicule Press there was Allan Bealy's *Davinci* poetry magazine and then the offshoot of *Davinci* which was the Eldorado Editions chapbook series published in 1974; Eldorado Editions was named after a restaurant near the gallery. I think there were four chapbooks in all, Claudia Lapp's *Dakini*, Andre (Endre) Farkas's *Szerbusz*, and titles by Ian Ferrier and Tom Ezzy. Ian Ferrier was this young kid who aspired to be a poet, and he is

now one of the most original and prominent spoken-word poets in Canada. I included a flyer for these chapbooks in an issue of *what is*.

Another event held at Véhicule Art, a literary-dance-performance event, was presented by Vicky Tansey; she gave other performances at the gallery but one that I participated in was a dance interpretation of Gertrude Stein's novel *Ida*; I narrated Stein's text during the performance. I don't remember the date for this, maybe 1976 or 1977. Vicky Tansey also performed at Roy Kiyooka's *Poetry/Video/Text* performance at Véhicule Art in December 1973, an event I attended.

This was a time of creativity, a time of meeting people and forming friendships, of hearing new poems and poets at the readings, a time of being in a milieu of openness in the arts. This was an exciting time for some of us; it was when we were young and just starting out from Véhicule Art Gallery.

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