

arts

Not your habitual ritual

Performance artists create rituals for contemporary society at PLATFORM



ArtBurn

Sandee Moore

visual art review

RITUALIZ'D

Until June 26, PLATFORM Centre for Digital and Photographic Arts

RITUALIZ'D isn't some cheesy rave band from the '90s, but an exhibition at PLATFORM Centre for Digital and Photographic Arts that brings together the work of three Winnipeg performance artists. These artists expose the desire for ritual to create social cohesion and assist in times of change, occasionally exposing highly individualized rituals that are constantly being created from the mundane activities of our daily lives.

Using a palette of gestures gleaned from online fetish videos, such as filling one's navel with pudding, media artist/dancer Freya Olafson addresses the dual nature of sexual performance — both alluring and repellent. The seductive quality of Olafson's stroking, gyrating and posing is undone by her use of a distorting fish-eye lens of her web cam. A necessary supplement to her performance are the live reactions of a Chat Roulette

audience, which doesn't seem to understand that her performance mimics not genuine seduction but the dried-out ritual that unfolds in strip clubs and the like on a nightly basis.

Working with raw, personal and risky material from her life, Leah Decter has developed a ritual process to domesticate sickness and fear. Decter's hair has only recently grown back following her cancer treatments. Inspired in part by Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, in which the artist wore her best suit and offered a pair of scissors (and the opportunity to disrobe her using them) to the audience, Decter offered her newly grown locks to the audience.

In marked contrast to Ono's work, which played with aggression and sexual mastery over women, the packed gallery was drawn together in its desire to protect and nurture Decter. Often the cutting was accompanied by a gesture of affection — a kiss on the cheek or a squeeze of her hand.

In her performance, Decter sacrifices this symbol of her return to health, mastering her fear of losing her hair and health again while reconstituting it as a symbolic self adorning the gallery walls.

Finally, Michael Dudeck, who refers to himself as a "witch doctor" on his website and curriculum vitae, developed his own religion, with himself as leader, for the occa-

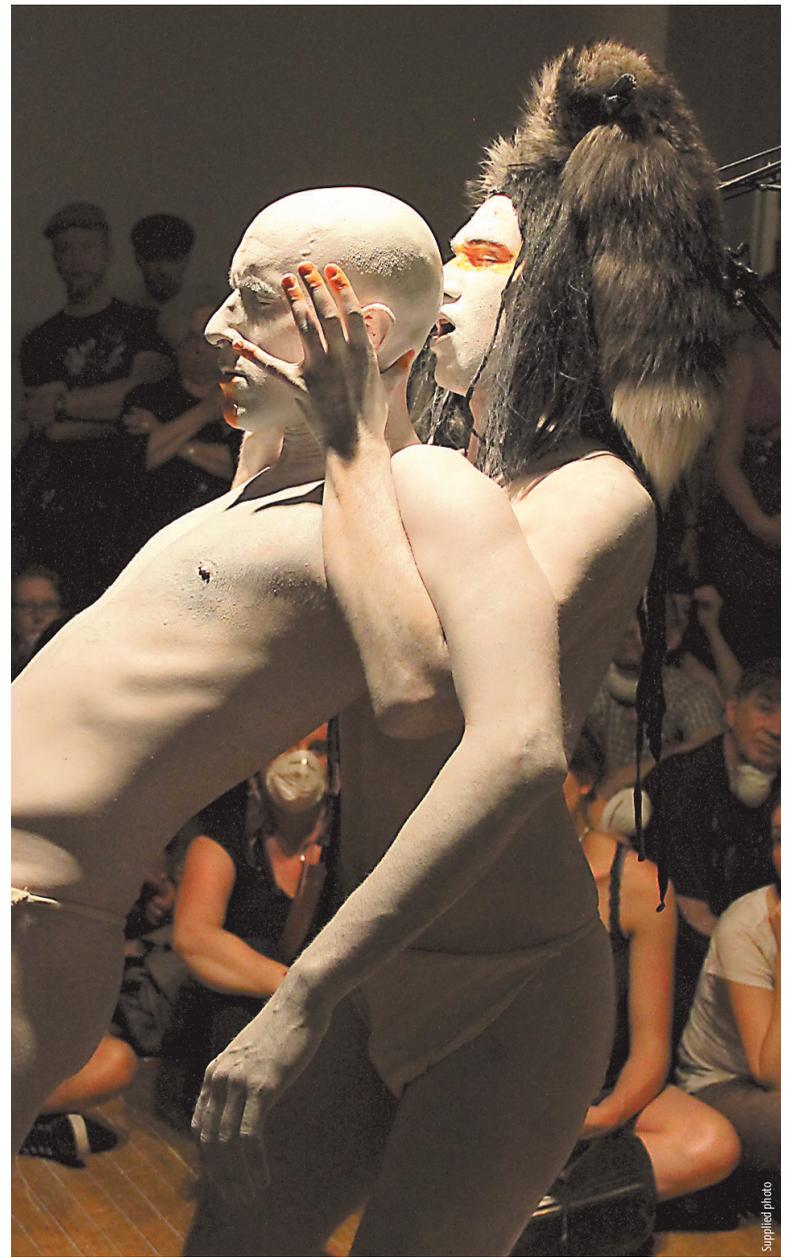
sion of *RITUALIZ'D*.

A cross between a Marilyn Manson concert and a Butoh performance, Dudeck's performance was slow-paced, solemn and highly aestheticized.

The symbols in play may have well-understood or guessed meanings — white symbolizes death and a connection to the spirit world, nudity is humility, cleansing is a healing ritual — and yet the purpose of the ritual remains obscure. Some further clues are provided by the soundtrack, which proceeds from chaotic white noise to peaceful and otherworldly tinkling to heavy metal riffs for the big exit.

Dudeck's performance left me with questions, but all of the works succeed in connecting at the gut level. Traces of each performance will reside in the gallery until *RITUALIZ'D* closes its doors on June 26. Olafson's two-way Chat Roulette performance makes the transition from live performance to document most effectively. Decter's performance continues throughout the exhibition run and Dudeck's work is represented by some gorgeous photographs.

Sandee Moore left the mild climes of her B.C. home for the warm embrace of the Winnipeg arts community six years ago. She is an intermedia artist, a former director of Video Pool and occasional arts writer.



A scene from Michael Dudeck's performance in *RITUALIZ'D*

Art born from suffering

Keith Garebian's powerful poetry tackles a dark chapter of Armenian history



Paper Trails

Quentin Mills-Fenn

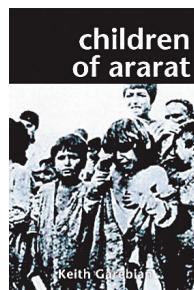
Genocide is the subject of *Children of Ararat* (Frontenac House) by Keith Garebian. It's a passionate and angry collection of poems focusing on the massacre of ethnic Armenians in Turkey in June, 1915.

Some of the poems detail the suffering inflicted on the Armenian minority, or, as Garebian writes, "death by wholesale abstraction."

The book, though, is more than a catalogue of atrocities. The poet notes that his father was five years and four months old at the time of

the massacre, and the book opens with a selection of poems that reflect on his father's story, "the whole mad history of it."

Other poems explore the effects of the genocide on the survivors and on the descendants of victims. Garebian also comments on how the genocide has affected artists of Armenian descent and their work: the paintings of Arshile Gorky, the plays of William Saroyan and the films of Atom Egoyan (the



latter's *Ararat* explicitly dealt with this subject).

The writing is evocative and full of powerful images. Sometimes, as Garebian describes, the whole landscape answered in pain: "Between the staked olive trees, the partridge/caught their spurs in wires/wrenching the skies with cries."

Acknowledgement of the genocide is still controversial, especially in Turkey. In the book's afterword, Garebian notes that even talking about the mass murder of Armenians and Kurds can result in a charge of insulting Turkishness. He writes that "Denial turns genocide into banishment from death."

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There was a time when knowledge of shorthand was a requirement for young women who wanted to work in an office. The system, consisting of simple strokes and symbols, was invented by Sir Isaac Pitman, educator and vegetarian, halfway through the 19th century.

A hundred years later, John Malone, an economist based in Chicago, created a 40-character phonetic alphabet he called Unifon.

Both of these systems, attempts to improve or supplement English orthography, are largely overlooked now. But Kevin McPherson Eckhoff has adopted them for his book *Rhapsodomancy* (Coach House Books), a collection of visual poems about the form that words and letters take.

Some of the poems are visually playful: *Gordian Denouement* uses drawings of ropes and knots to depict the letters of Unifon. A section called "Apantomancy" looks at various fortune-telling methods (reading palms or the flights of birds, for example) with shorthand characters.

Merging text and illustration, McPherson Eckhoff has created a book about what to do when words fail.

