

# CULTUREBOT

## MAXIMUM PERFORMANCE

### In conversation with Miriam Ginestier

Maura Donohue | June 7, 2016

The 30th annual **Performance Mix Festival** is underway. Wednesday night's **Edgy NYC + MTL** promises an evening of wild feminist performance and video by artists from New York City and Montreal. 15 years ago, I was presented at one of the **Edgy Women Festivals** at Studio 303 in Montreal. Distinctly *Undisciplined* and *Unapologetic*, after 23 years of feminist performances, **Edgy** has formally ceased activities. **Miriam Ginestier**, director of Studio 303 in Montreal, shared some thoughts on the end of Edgy, the continuation of Edgy, a 10-year exchange with Performance Mix, and bad feminisms.

*In your [online statement](#), you mention that among several factors that prompted the decision to end the Edgy Women's Festival after its 20th anniversary show in 2013, Studio 303 lost 85% of its presenting funds. What did that do to you?*

Our funding cut was 100% related to our presenting activities, which represent about a third of Studio 303's programming (we are as equally invested in professional development and creation support). Meanwhile, Edgy was our only festival and it ate up about half of our presenting budget. In order to survive the cut, we axed Edgy back to a 3-night condensed event and cut our communications position. Now, our 4 full-time staff each wear at least 2 hats! Because we highly suspect that the funding cut was politically motivated and specifically in reaction to Jess Dobkin's Lactation Station project that we produced, we determined that trying to maintain the funding without compromising our programming was not possible. So Studio 303 boycotted this source of funding (Canadian Heritage) as long as the former government was in power. We may re-apply this Fall!



Jess Dobkin photograph by David Hawe

*You mentioned a malaise about the name as “gendered and anglophone.” Can you speak to that a bit more?*

Hard to say, but I was uncomfortable with the name for a few years. It felt dated in an increasingly trans-aware and trans-positive context. I never got flack for it and the F to M transgender artists that were presented in the context of the festival were supportive of the name, and comfortable. But, I imagined many artists felt excluded and that’s not good!

*In what ways have you seen feminist performance art shift over 2 decades? How does that connect with expansive (or conservative) definitions of feminism?*

I never studied feminist performance art per se, and it took me a while to associate the word feminist front and center with Edgy Women. I knew that I personally felt intrigued and empowered by female artists behaving in unexpected ways. And, traditional political art forms and practices (for example, folk music, spoken word) weren’t doing it for me. I desperately craved weirdness, complexity, contradiction and surprise. I’ve come to realize that I’m drawn to artists who are intensely driven by curiosity and who explore discomfort and grey zones. It’s hard to talk about how feminist performance art has shifted over 2 decades because from my twenties to my forties I have changed so much, as has my exposure to different forms etc...

But when I came out as queer and feminist in the 80’s in Montreal, it was at the tail end of a lesbian separatist era, so the shifts have been warp-speed! We need to honour different points of view while seeing how we can unite – how else can we keep the quality of debate strong and alive?

*I ask because I’m recalling a colleague who got mad that I was reading Roxanne Gay’s “Bad Feminist” because (without understanding anything about the context within which Roxanne – a professed dick sucking, black woman – couldn’t see herself as a “good” feminist) ranted about people who should identify as feminists but don’t.*



Miriam Ginestier photo by Miriam Ginestier

Sometimes I feel like a bad feminist too. I’m a bit lazy, not really up on my reading or theory. I often don’t feel equipped to articulate my views or feelings, and I do much of it through my programming practice! Some people are unable to move forward if they aren’t sure they’re doing something right, but this paralysis is very dangerous I think. Blunders are ok. Let’s keep talking, keep moving.

*What I loved about the “edgy women” was the messy, performance art messy, boundaries of sexual and sexualized that allowed feminism to inhabit a 3rd-wavish, sex-positive relationship to performance and body. It was pro-active and subversive.*

Thank you!!! This is a prime example my self- expression through programming which is then articulately described by someone else!

*But, did the word “edgy” start to get to you?*

I like the word edgy, it makes me think of fringe, periphery, perspective, impatience... Some may associate it with neurotic... I don't like that. But the word is anglo and that's a source of discomfort in a francophone province where many people feel assaulted by anglophone imperialism!

*Can you share some thoughts on your 10 year long relationship with Karen and Performance Mix? How has that evolved and existed over time?*

If Karen had never come to Montreal, the Edgy Women festival may have never existed. Or, at least, not under that name or in that form. Karen came with a few New Yorkers and a program of short work by women (a coincidence) from Montreal and New York was created. My co-director Paul called it Women from the Edge (or maybe Karen came up with the title – all I know is it wasn't me!). Karen embodied this weird quality that I loved that reached my feminist heart and soul. She was totally deconstructing notions of beauty, femininity, gender, youth, virtuosity, contemporary dance and her work really connected with me and our audiences.

We had similar programming structures at the time. Both New Dance Alliance and Studio 303 were programming short works on a shared program throughout the year. An exchange was an easy, natural thing to do. I don't even remember how we curated it. I think we'd propose artists to each other and choose 3 each and programmed them at some point. Karen and the other New York artists would often end up being programmed in Edgy Women as we shared a taste for off-beat feminist performance. The exchange stopped working when our programming structures were no longer in sync. Studio 303 no longer programmed much short work and Performance Mix became a festival, but we're still in touch and we still collaborate every now and then, whether informally or formally like this year.

*What are your thoughts about this particular program? How did you curate the NY artists versus the Montreal artists?*



Rebecca Patek photo by Vincent Lafrance

Karen had already invited Nathalie Claude and Rebecca Patek to Performance Mix. She asked me to complete the curation and to link it to the Edgy Women Festival. I remember her saying you'll probably say no as the festival is ending, but on the contrary – what a wonderful way for the festival to live on in a new way! After 20 editions of the Edgy Women festival and 3 years of a condensed version (Edgy Redux), Edgy was finally put to rest in March 2017. The event's end was celebrated via a brilliant funereal themed suite under my colleague Andrea Rideout's direction. Our catchphrase was *Edgy is Dead – Long Live Edgy!* ... which it turns out, was prophetic. Our blog contains [an archival oral history project](#) with interviews by several of the artists performing this week.

*And, what are you hoping will come up for the Long Table?*

Despite years of exchange with NY, it's actually rare that the artists have time to sit down and actually verbally exchange. I'm more interested in providing a good context and format form, as I'm sure the discussion will go where it needs to go. I'm excited to try Lois Weaver's form and I've asked TL Cowan to moderate.

*In these exchanges and over time do you have any observations on differences between the NY crowd and the Montreal crowd?*

Yes, but these are hard to articulate and identify. The contexts have been different too and that's going to influence how the work is read... At Studio 303, it's a bit more casual and there is often beer involved.

*How do you think the current political environments of Canada and the US are showing up in the work of artists?*

I can only really speak to my (limited) impression of the experimental performance scenes of New York and Montreal. I was at American Realness and at COIL a few months ago and was struck by how much of the work I saw (niv acosta and Keyon Gaskin, among others) spoke to the Black Lives Matter movement (from my visitor's perspective anyway). It viscerally connected me to stuff I'd been reading about in the news and in social media. It was intense and exciting. At Studio 303, we intentionally created a political cabaret as an act of resistance under the Harper government, it felt necessary and artists rose to the occasion. Alexis O'Hara, who is at performance Mix tomorrow night, performed as Harper himself and when he finally lost the election, she offered up the papier maché head she had made as a pinata! A phenomenon in Montreal and probably the rest of Canada is that First Nations artists are more visible, less marginalized – there's a critical mass of feminist indigenous experimental performance makers who are making strong, complex work and this is super exciting. And this is in consonance somehow with the Idle No More protest movement (since 2012), the releasing of the Truth and Reconciliation commission report (2014), and the movement to launch an inquiry into Canada's Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

*Are you ready for the impending influx of American artists moving north in the event of Trumpageddon?*

We'll see! You poor things! I can't even imagine.

- EDGY NYC: 7pm Featuring works by Karen Bernard, Susana Cook, T.L. Cowan & Jasmine Rault, Jess Dobkin, and Rebecca Patek Abrons/Experimental Theater Tickets: \$20
- EDGY MTL: 8pm Sound art, physical theater, and dark humor by three festival muses Nathalie Claude, Dayna McLeod, Alexis O'Hara, and WIVES. Abrons/Underground Theater Free admission
- Thursday, June 9, 10:30am–12:30pm Breakfast Mix: An Edgy Long Table Abrons/Gallery Free event  
Reservations required: [newdancealliance@gmail.com](mailto:newdancealliance@gmail.com)



WIVES courtesy of the artist