

*MAKING A CENTER  
FAR FROM THE CENTER*

Lisa Radon

YU

MAKING A CENTER  
FAR FROM THE CENTER

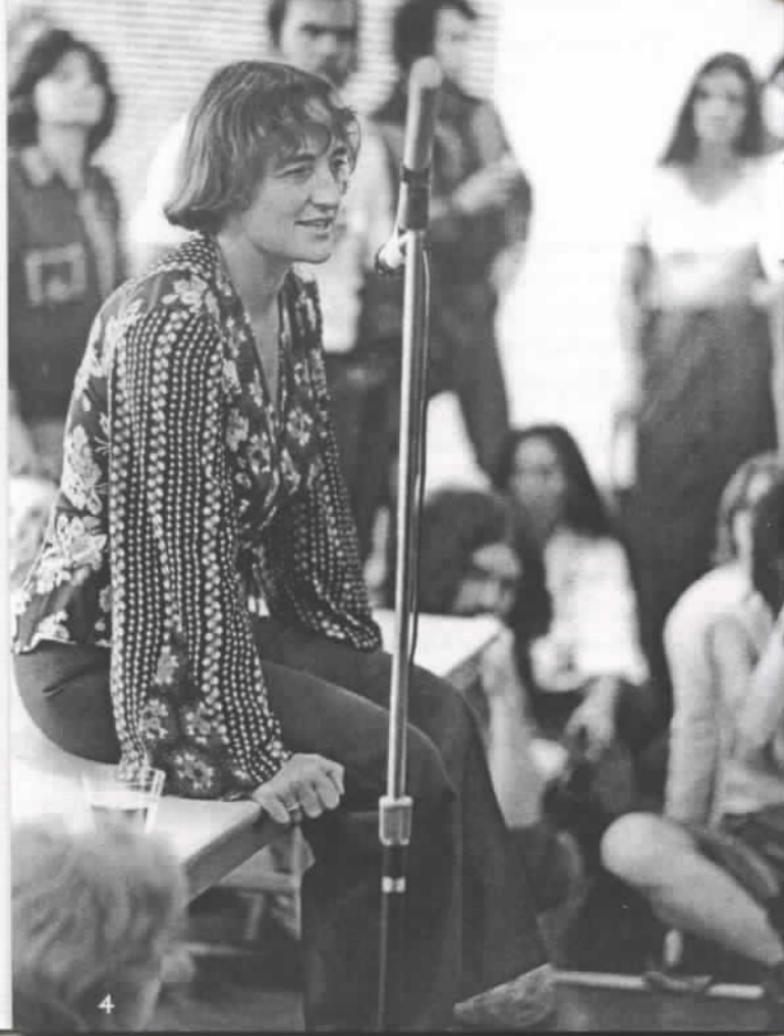
Lisa Radon

"If you can't go to the mountain, then you have to  
make your own mountain."

-Mel Katz

- 1 Cage's neologism "Muoyce" is a synthesis of "music" and "Joyce." A writing-through, or dismantling and reassembling of James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, the piece begins: "rufthandlingconsummation tinyRuddyNew- permienting hi himself then pass/ahs c."
- 2 Michael Bowley of Northwest Artists Workshop crashed the lecture.
- 3 "The motivation in this trance dance is to experience the process of the Journey from the self to the many and back to the self again. To move in with collective energies and to flow with it and discover where it will take us... not knowing at all before it happens." Notes on "Trance Dance," San Francisco Dancers' Workshop. Portland Art Museum; Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive.

FIG. 1 Lucy Lippard lecture, September 26, 1976; *In Touch: Nature, Ritual, and Sensuous Art from the Northwest*; photograph by Maryanne Caruthers-Akin



Though it was just about as far from the center of the art world as one could get in the continental United States, they all came: Bruce Nauman, Nam June Paik, Alice Neel, Robert Morris, Joan Jonas, Robert Rauschenberg, Daniel Buren, Ed Ruscha. Frank Stella came twice. So did Robert Irwin and Vito Acconci. From 1972 to 1987, a robust cross-section of what we now know as titans of postwar art came to exhibit at the Portland Center for the Visual Arts (PCVA) in Portland, Oregon.

For his installation *144 Blocks & Stones* (1973), Carl Andre collected rocks along Oregon's Clackamas River. Irwin gave a talk that lasted four hours on "Art and the Extended State of Consciousness." Richard Serra made two trips to make his film, *Railroad Turnbridge* (1976). Donald Judd went white-water rafting on the Rogue River after one of his early room-wrapping plywood pieces was built in the Center. Yvonne Rainer danced on a mattress. John Cage performed "Muoyce" (1984).<sup>1</sup> Lucy Lippard gave a lecture for women only.<sup>2</sup> Chris Burden built a replica of his own room and lived in it for a week. And Anna Halprin had audience members running in a big circle in their stocking feet for her "Trance Dance."<sup>3</sup>



Agnes Martin declined to come to her opening because she wanted the viewer to focus on the work, not the artist. But the rest? They delivered slide lectures, drank with artists at the Temple Lounge at Hung Far Low across the parking lot from PCVA,<sup>4</sup> and talked with starry-eyed young artists sitting on the floor of collector Ed Cauduro's Skyline home. For a room at the Benson Hotel, travel expenses, a very modest stipend, and a crack at 5,000 sq. ft. of unobstructed space, they came.

Portland in 1972 was a city of about 380,000<sup>5</sup> with three galleries that exhibited contemporary art by regional artists.<sup>6</sup> By all accounts, Portland had a single major collector of contemporary art, Ed Cauduro.<sup>7</sup> An exhibition of contemporary art at the Portland Art Museum was a rarity, with the exception of *Pop and Op Graphics* in 1967. When the Museum did show contemporary work, it was likely to be prints by European artists or work by regional artists or students. None of the artists listed above, for example, were shown at the Museum in the years before PCVA opened. In other words, the only way to see contemporary art in Portland in 1972 was to go to New York or Los Angeles or be satisfied with color reproductions in the art magazines.

What Portland did have was a handful of active college and university art departments.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A letter from Mary Beebe to Ivan Karp, 1975, reads:

Did you go to Hung Far Low's—our favorite Chinese restaurant which is directly across the parking lot? The bar is called the Temple Lounge. It is truly tacky; but fabulous food. I can't resist suggesting that if you really open a Chinese restaurant in Soho you call it Hung Far Low East. I like that kind of instant East-West communication. Besides that might get you to Portland faster than you had intended.

Portland Art Museum; Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive.

<sup>5</sup> As of the 2010 census, Portland's population was 583,776.

<sup>6</sup> Arlene Schnitzer's Fountain Gallery, the Sally Judd Gallery, and Jack and Barbara McClarty's Image Gallery, which also showed native arts of Mexico and Alaska.

<sup>7</sup> Although Cauduro was a founding member of PCVA's board, for its first exhibition, PCVA borrowed contemporary works from Seattle collectors including Virginia Wright. Artist and critic Paul Sutinen recalls driving a rental truck to pick up the work with then-director Robert Bell, who sported cowboy boots and a beard.

<sup>8</sup> The Museum Art School (now the Pacific Northwest College of Art), Portland State University, Reed College, and Lewis & Clark College.

<sup>9</sup> One of the drafts of the original proposal for the Portland Center for the Visual Arts reads:

If regional artists are to remain creatively productive, be more fully encouraged to attain excellence and thus to enrich their communities within the state, it is necessary to augment the function of existing museums and galleries. A public facility devoted primarily to the exhibition of art by exemplary living artists and to contemporary art forms in particular is badly needed. The Portland Center for the Visual Arts would offer, on a continual basis, opportunities to view recent art from centers throughout the nation and the work of regional artists as well.

Portland Art Museum; Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive.

<sup>10</sup> Letters of support were written by Senators Bob Packwood and Mark O. Hatfield, Governor Tom McCall, and City Commissioner Neil Goldschmidt. Portland Art Museum; Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive.

<sup>11</sup> "Dear Frank Stella, Enjoyed talking to you the other day and I'm very pleased about the possibility of your work being shown at the Center. I would like to begin our coming season with your exhibition sometime mid-September through October." Letter from Mel Katz to Frank Stella, 1973. Portland Art Museum; Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive.

In 1971, three artists and professors, Jay Backstrand, Mel Katz, and Michele (Mike) Russo were grousing about the lack of interest at the Museum in showing contemporary work while tooling down the Willamette River with a bottle of bad wine in Russo's outboard motorboat. Katz was from New York; he knew what artists needed to thrive. Backstrand had recently returned from London where he'd been at the Slade School of Fine Art on a Fulbright Fellowship and was inspired by the Whitechapel Gallery, a non-collecting contemporary art space in London's East End. And Russo was an instigator, a rabble-rouser. That day they decided to do it themselves, to make an artist-run, artist-programmed space for contemporary art by nationally recognized artists.<sup>9</sup> With artists Louis Bunce and Lucinda Parker, they hatched a plan.

It so happened that adjacent to Katz's studio in Portland's Old Town, there was a vacant third-floor warehouse. Katz talked Robert Davis, an executive at electronics giant Tektronix, into donating the space for one year. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), at the prodding of some politically-connected Portland advocates,<sup>10</sup> and at a time when the NEA was looking to seed cultural projects in the provinces, took a leap of faith and awarded a \$10,000 Chairman's Grant to the fledgling Center. Milton Fischman, a St.

Louis collector and friend of Oregon Supreme Court Justice Gus J. Solomon and his wife Libby, wrote a matching check, and PCVA was off. An exhibition committee made up exclusively of artists drew up a dream list of artists they'd like to see and began making phone calls and writing letters."

Behind a black door at 117 NW Fifth Avenue, up three flights of stairs carpeted in turquoise, in PCVA's expansive space illuminated by the natural light of a massive skylight and a brick wall of arched windows, visitors saw, in that first year alone, talks and/or work by Allan Kaprow, Lynda Benglis, Sol LeWitt, Trisha Brown, Duane Hanson, Dan Flavin, Eleanor Antin, Keith Sonnier, and many more.

Portland figured early in the 1970s wave of artist-run spaces across the United States. In New York, 112 Greene Street (later White Columns) was founded in 1970, and P.S.1 began as the itinerant Institute for Art and Urban Resources in 1971. Other seminal spaces such as San Francisco's 80 Langton Street, Chicago's Randolph Street Gallery, Seattle's and/or, and Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) soon followed. And as the movement gained momentum, letters in the PCVA archive show alternative spaces around the country turning to PCVA as a model.



FIG. 2 Morton Subotnick in performance, 1978; photograph by Maryanne Caruthers-Akin

FIG. 3 PCVA office, 1986; photograph by Brian Foulkes



<sup>12</sup> Over the years, PCVA's annual budget ranged from around \$100,000 to \$200,000.

<sup>13</sup> An early proposal draft reads:

Art students will be employed as exhibition staff, receiving credits for assisting the Center's professional staff in arranging for installing shows. Jobs offering broad gallery experience will include: exhibition programming, shipping and insurance, receiving and preparation of work, design and preparation, installation, exhibition publicity, and community information.

Portland Art Museum; Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive.

FIG. 4 Bob Gardiner lecture, January 16, 1978; photograph by Maryanne Caruthers-Akin

One would never know, from the documentation of stellar installations by James Turrell, Dennis Oppenheim, and an earthwork by Michelle Stuart, that the whole operation was run on a shoestring budget<sup>12</sup> by a hard-working skeleton-crew staff supplemented by an army of volunteers<sup>13</sup> who hauled rocks for Stuart, guided cranes to load in Ed Kienholz's show, hand-knotted lengths of sisal for Brenda Miller's wall pieces, and crawled around inside the Judd piece, screwing it together from the inside. Portland artists today look back on PCVA as an education in contemporary art and as a finishing school in professional practices for the artist-volunteers who did the work of preparator and curator, who did development, events planning, and press and public relations.

If the door was open wide to artist-volunteers (many of whom made the Center a hangout<sup>14</sup>), it was also open to the full-spectrum of contemporary art, including dance by Lucinda Childs and Trisha Brown; performance art by Rachel Rosenthal, Guy de Cointet, and Charlemagne Palestine; spoken word pieces by David Antin and Spalding Gray; jazz by Archie Shepp and Dexter Gordon; and experimental music by Terry Riley, Philip Glass, and Morton Subotnik. And the concerts happened among the artworks. Riley performed in Robert Morris' installation that featured massive wood

crossbeams laid out on the floor in a diamond shape connecting four giant mirrors.

PCVA was about opportunity for the visiting artists as well as the Portland community. *Stone Alignments/Solstice Cairns* (1979) stands out as one of Stuart's most ambitious works and was her first permanent commission. In his work for the 1975 group show *Via Los Angeles*, Michael Asher's concept, in a departure from his previous works addressing physical exhibition spaces, was to broadcast un-edited activities in the master control room of Portland television station KGW for a thirty-minute spot on Super Bowl Sunday.<sup>15</sup> And Allan Kaprow's "Routine" (1973), a series of explorations of repetition and boredom to be enacted by pairs of volunteers, was part of a shift in the artist's work from his large-scale "happenings" of the 1960s to more intimately scaled "activities" based on personal contact. For Portland artist Tad Savinar, PCVA enabled him to create his first performance work with Eric Bogosian, "Talk Radio" (1985), that would go on to a long run in New York and an incarnation as a film directed by Oliver Stone.

PCVA also provided opportunities for regional artists. Notably the *12 Northwest Artists* (1977)<sup>16</sup> exhibition curated by William Hoppe provided a rallying moment for Portland artists in the wake of the devastating fire at the



- <sup>14</sup> Musician Michael Stirling recalls a weekend ritual of going out to breakfast then stopping by PCVA to see who was around. Paul Sutinen says artists would just drop by to chat with whomever was sitting in the gallery or working in the office.
- <sup>15</sup> Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, ed., *Michael Asher Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and The Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, 1983: 112-117.

FIG. 5 Rachel Rosenthal, "Gaia, Mon Amour," November 28-29, 1983; photograph unknown

<sup>16</sup> The catalog for this show is simply titled *Portland Center for the Visual Arts* and it is referred to in a master list of exhibitions as *Northwest group show curated by artist Bill Hoppe*.

<sup>17</sup> Lippard was driven through the backcountry by Bruce Guenther, who is currently Chief Curator of the Portland Art Museum.

<sup>18</sup> I think both the artists and I harbored certain preconceptions by the time I arrived in Portland. On my side, my notes on the slides indicated that I had favored the 'funky' and personal over the minimal and international styles.... On the artists' side, I suspect my taste was supposed to be more like that reflected in my first book of collected essays, most of which were written in 1966-68; it is titled 'Changing,' and that is what in fact has been going on in my mind and eye ever since, partly due to politicization and feminism. In addition, New York artists and critics moving out from their magnetic center do not tend to go for 'New York art' made elsewhere, no matter how honestly undertaken, genuinely felt, and skillfully executed.... In any case, visitors from the art marketplaces tend to be attracted to art which appears refreshing and 'innocent' of the competitively innovative pall surrounding international styles.

Lucy Lippard, *In Touch: Nature, Ritual, and Sensuous Art in the Northwest*; Portland: Portland Center for the Visual Arts, 1976.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Lippard, "Northwest Passage," *Art in America*, July/August, 1976: 59-63.

Fountain Gallery that had destroyed the city's most important contemporary art gallery and scores of uninsured works. Perhaps the exhibition that generated the most buzz among artists was *In Touch: Nature, Ritual, and Sensuous Art in the Northwest* (1976), curated by prominent art critic Lucy Lippard. Anticipation mounted as Lippard did studio visits across Oregon and throughout Washington.<sup>17</sup> She narrowed a list of 500 artists who submitted slides to an open call to 75 for studio visits, eventually curating work by 35 artists into the exhibition.<sup>18</sup> Lippard later wrote about the experience for *Art in America*.<sup>19</sup>

At PCVA's inaugural exhibition, a retrospective of work by Jack Youngerman, more than 600 people turned up at the opening to hear the artist speak. Not every artist had a standing room only crowd, but similarly sizable audiences packed the space on folding chairs and foam pads on the floor for presentations by artists like Chuck Close and Portland filmmaker Bob Gardiner. Thousands visited the Center each season, including school groups, civic groups, and the Museum's Contemporary Art Council.<sup>20</sup> By today's standards, when the daily newspaper has no dedicated staff art writer and features only one visual arts review per week, the comprehensive media coverage of exhibitions and performances at PCVA seems extravagant. The city's two dailies

at the time, *The Oregonian* and *The Oregon Journal*, and the *Willamette Week* regularly devoted half of a tabloid-size page (or more) to critical reviews of every PCVA exhibition.<sup>21</sup>

The 1980s were cruel to arts organizations and alternative spaces in general, and to PCVA in particular. The Reagan-era recession and cuts in NEA funding meant the Center scrambled for money more than ever.<sup>22</sup> And at the same time, rising prices for contemporary art meant dealers took their artists (and their earning potential) more firmly in hand. No longer could an artist in Portland ring up an artist in New York and arrange an exhibition or issue the invitation to do an installation for a \$200 stipend plus materials. In the early '80s, dealers began to demand that color catalogs be produced if the artists' works were to be shown at PCVA. The departure of PCVA's longtime Director, Mary Beebe, for UC San Diego's Stuart Collection didn't help. In 1987, one of PCVA's final shows featured the sculptural works of artist co-founder Jay Backstrand. The next year, PCVA merged with the Portland Art Museum. The party was over.

To this day, with Portland's thriving arts ecosystem of galleries and non-profit and artist-run spaces,<sup>23</sup> its newly ambitious art college, the Pacific Northwest College of Art, and the annual Time-Based Art Festival (TBA) of the Portland



FIGS. 6-7 David Antin, "Talk Piece," March 2, 1977; photograph by Maryanne Caruthers-Akin



<sup>20</sup> The first meeting of the Contemporary Art Council of the Portland Art Museum was held at PCVA. "A Few Notes from the Director, 10/29/79." Portland Art Museum; Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive.

<sup>21</sup> Other local papers that covered PCVA were *The Portland Scribe*, *The Clinton St. Quarterly*, *The Downtowner*, and *The Oregonian's Northwest Magazine*. In the national press, PCVA exhibitions were featured in *Artweek*, *Art in America*, and *Artforum*.

FIG. 8 Mary Beebe with Robert Rauschenberg signing posters to raise funds for PCVA, April 2, 1979; photographer unknown

Institute for Contemporary Art, PCVA's legacy continues to shape the city.

For twenty-two years, photographs, correspondence, NEA grant reports, exhibition catalogs, hand-drawn annual reports, performance programs, and other ephemera have been stored in the Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive in the Crumpacker Family Library at the Portland Art Museum. There are postcards from John Baldessari and Nauman's sketches for his installation. There is a layout plan of every mineral sample and block from Andre's *144 Blocks & Stones*, punctuated with red dots indicating which had been purchased, as the work was sold off piece by piece, at \$50 per block, to raise money for PCVA.

The time is right, as Portland moves into its new century as a regional creative hub with big ambitions, to take a moment to dig back into the PCVA archive for inspiration as we reimagine possibility.

## COLOPHON

*Building a Center Far From the Center* was written by Lisa Radon and published by YU in an edition of 2500 to accompany the exhibition *Selections From the PCVA Archive*, on view May 7 through July 30, 2011 at YU in Portland, OR. The text was edited by Hope Svenson, copy edited by Tim DuRoche, and offset printed by Gary Robbins. The cover was letterpressed by Emily Johnson.

The exhibition and this publication are made possible by the support of YU Founding Members. YU thanks the Portland Art Museum for generously lending objects to the exhibition from the Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive at the Crumpacker Family Library. Special thanks to Bruce Guenther, Chief Curator, and Debra Royer, Library Director, for their time and assistance. Great thanks to other lenders to the exhibition: Joseph Erecg, Randal Davis, Brian Foulkes and Fernanda D'Agostino, William Hoppe, Christopher Rauschenberg, Michael Stirling, Paul Sutinen, and Seth Tane, and Stephanie Snyder, Curator, Cooley Gallery, Reed College. The author wishes to thank Debra Royer, Library Director, Portland Art Museum; Crumpacker Family Library.

YU honors PCVA artist co-founders Jay Backstrand, Mel Katz, Michele Russo (1909-2004), and Director Mary Beebe for their contribution to Portland's cultural legacy.

22 "Reagan's first NEA appropriation totaled just under \$143 million. Merely to keep pace with inflation, his final allotment eight years later would have had to reach a minimum of \$194 million... It didn't. The actual sum was \$171 million—a 12% slide in spending power during Reagan's two terms in office. Since then, the NEA budget has continued to slump." Christopher Knight, "Remembering Ronald Reagan and the NEA," *Los Angeles Times*, February 6, 2011. Accessed on: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/02/ronald-reagan-birthday-nea.html>

23 There are eleven members of the Portland Art Dealers' Alliance (PADA) and dozens more galleries concentrated in Portland's Pearl District, the Alberta Arts District, and Lower East Burnside. There are a handful of artist-run and non-profit spaces in Southeast and Northeast Portland showing regional, national, and international artists.

Fig. 1, 2, 4, 6, 7 Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum, Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive; © Maryanne Caruthers-Akin  
Fig. 3 Courtesy Brian Foulkes; © Brian Foulkes  
Fig. 5, 8 Courtesy of the Portland Art Museum, Crumpacker Family Library, Portland Center for the Visual Arts Archive; © Portland Art Museum

© Copyright 2011 YU

YU is a contemporary art center that aims to empower artistic imagination and cultural life by engaging artists in experimental ways, supporting the production of challenging work, and presenting provocative output. YU strives to catalyze new dialogues with audiences and form a community of ideas in the Northwest and internationally.



800 SE 10TH AVE  
PORTLAND, OR 97214 USA  
[WWW.YUCONTEMPORARY.ORG](http://WWW.YUCONTEMPORARY.ORG)

**YU** 