

# Vida Simon

## A SENSE OF PLACE

**Vida Simon's performance work** uses drawing and installation as the starting points of her practice. The works emerge from a confluence of materials, intuitive object/remnants, and re/discovered sites. Simon often activates remnants found in the performance site (for example, a blanket, glass jars, shards of dishes, a table) or brings objects such as paper, pencils, charcoal, soap, and clothing to a space. Using movement, elements of sculpture, installation, and drawing, she communicates the relationships of these objects to her body and the architecture of the performance space. She does so as a means of constructing an intuitive, abstracted narrative often suggestive of an imagined or referential history of the place and its inhabitants. The site of the performances is activated by the artist's non-linear approach to time. In a manner similar to the act of drawing, Simon's performances are about the tangible, about "making."

Often we become familiar with performance works through a collective oral history. This is how I first learned about Vida Simon. I heard about her work from another artist who described in detail Simon's impressive performance/installation *A Complicated Escape*, which took place in a hotel room.<sup>1</sup> The hotel room, an unfamiliar site for "staging" performance art, was made somewhat familiar as the artist wore her pyjamas, and

at times rested amongst her drawings on the bed. Over the four-day performance, Simon drew on paper on the floor and walls, and covered the multiple surfaces in the room with paper. As she cycled through a series of actions, her body became integrated with the furniture. The logic of the hotel room broke down as the physical delineations between the artist and the objects in the room became obscured. Visually, she became one with her surroundings.<sup>2</sup>

In performance, as in life, one thing builds upon another;<sup>3</sup> so it is with Simon's work. As a means of tracking the progression of Simon's site-influenced performances, I will examine two of the artist's more recent works, *Cantastoria* and *Pouring*, and will demonstrate how they were influenced by her earlier artistic investigations.

Simon describes the extensive undertaking of *Cantastoria, un opera dessine / a drawn opera* (2010), as the culmination of her previous research in Vilnius, Lithuania on the subject of the *malinas*<sup>4</sup>—underground hiding spaces for Jews constructed during the Second World War. Her interest in this subject was triggered by her discovery of cardboard maquettes of malinas (which were created after the war according to the memory of survivors) in a small house-museum in the city of Vilnius. With the help of an interpreter who led guided tours of Vilnius' Jewish ghetto, Simon was able to talk with elderly survivors of the malinas, asking them to describe childhood memories of their time spent in these hiding spaces. She recalled the intensity of the moment when a few of the men started drawing floor plans of the malinas "with a shaky hand, maybe for the first time." Simon later traced and projected some of these drawings in *Cantastoria*. Audio recordings of these meetings included interviews with the survivors, which were subsequently integrated into a soundscape for *Cantastoria*. The recordings included an elderly survivor playing a piano and Simon's vocal improvisations, drawing sounds, and Lithuanian folk songs. She noted, due to the language barrier, the encounters unfolded "in a place between speaking, writing and drawing," elements which were later reflected in *Cantastoria* through the seamless quality of its multi-media content.<sup>5</sup> Simon described the incredible experience of spending time with the survivors, and witnessing their generosity (despite the fact that she was virtually a stranger) as coming to know "the reason why I was there." She was originally drawn to Lithuania because several of her ancestors, about whom she knew little, came from that region.

In her reflections on the malina maquettes,<sup>6</sup> Simon notes:

"The woodstove is the door. That's right, the woodstove is the way that they would climb through, down, into their hidden rooms (...) The fire is the heart(h). The woodstove was often the entrance to the *malinas*. People were captured and died in the 'ovens.' Fire is a theme in Ingeborg Bachman's novel *Malina*, and in real life she died as a result of fire. The cycle of coincidences kept me up at night as I lay under a nest of blankets listening to wood crackle, singe, tumble."

Written during her stay in a wintery, secluded residency at Centre Boreal

4 Simon described the word "*malina*" as being of Yiddish origin (which she noted could be ironically derived from the Hebrew word for "hotel"), and as used in Lithuania to describe the hiding spaces/bunkers. It is interesting that Simon's work *A Complicated Escape* takes place in an actual hotel room, further conflating the parallels between history and her choice of this contemporary performance site. *Malinas* were made in the Vilnius Ghetto and found in underground piping, chimneys, and attics until September 1943, when the ghetto was annihilated. These hiding places were the only way for some Jews to survive. Often these hiding spaces were temporary.

5 Simon noted that she would have also liked to present the piece in Vilnius but that opportunity never materialized. In Vilnius, she was, however, able to present working drawings of the images relayed to her through the interviews with elderly survivors of the malinas, in an exhibition at the Vilnius Graphic Art Centre (2008).

6 Simon's reflections on the *malinas* were published in the artist book, *Boréal Borscht or the Malina Miniature*, produced at a residency following her research in Vilnius in 2006.

1 *A Complicated Escape* was presented in 2006 at the Visualeyez Festival in Edmonton, Alberta. Visualeyez occurs annually, bringing national and international performance artists to Edmonton to participate in a dialogical and presentation-based festival. Simon performed in the 7th edition of Visualeyez, under the theme "domesticity," curated by Todd Janes.

2 Simon later produced *Excavation Drawings*, another long, durational performance work along the same premise, for VIVA! Art Action 2006, at Hôtel de la Montagne, Montréal (see *Image 1*). One of the most moving photographs from this series involved her drawing arm protruding from beneath a cabinet with bowed "legs." With her body completely hidden from the viewer, she produced a drawing rendered without vision.

3 The author, in conversation with artist Tanya Mars, 2009. Mars is a former instructor during Simon's undergraduate education.

Art/Nature in the Upper Laurentians, Quebec in 2006-07, these notes acknowledge the influences at work, and reveal Simon's interior, creative process, as she gathered together the threads of her past experiences and her research in preparation for the visual images found in *Cantastoria*.

Montréal is a city where Simon has lived for a long time. She wanted to present *Cantastoria*<sup>7</sup> in Montréal as a way to add another personal historic layer to the work. In Montréal, she was able to develop *Cantastoria* over an extended period of time, working with technical assistants and performers that she trusted. Mounting the work in Montréal also allowed her to find an appropriate space to slowly inhabit. She discovered a vacant horse stable beneath the train tracks in Montréal's historic Griffintown. Simon spent time with an assistant scrubbing down the site, becoming intimately aware of its cartography and textural surfaces, and contending with the resistant areas of dirt and pigeon dwellings. These stubborn birds subsequently became a drawing motif that Simon carried with her near the end of the performance in the form of hand drawn paper puppets on sticks. Simon had chosen the site of this work as an attempt to resuscitate and present a space of struggle that collapsed European and North American history, and particularly that of her Jewish heritage. A large number of Italian, Jewish, and French immigrants called the Griffintown neighbourhood home towards the end of the 19th century. Residents in the early half of the 20th century reported persistent flooding, overcrowding, and slum-like dwellings.<sup>8</sup> A former resident describes the lack of basements in Griffintown architecture due to persistent flooding, but that they were designed with "a crawling space so that they could get under."<sup>9</sup> The Irish potato famine of 1845 prompted a rise in population. Many died in hospital sheds erected near the landing places. Many of those who survived went on to live in Griffintown, many in the renovated hospital sheds bought by the Grand Truck Railway for their workers around 1853.<sup>10</sup> Brute labour was provided by the Irish from Griffintown and Mohawk workers from Kahnawake.<sup>11</sup> Simon later noted that viewers had described a connection between the ominous rumbling of the overhead train with the feeling of being hidden away.

### Cantastoria

In the work *Cantastoria*, three distinct performance areas unfolded within the space and functioned as 'rooms within a room' in a manner similar to the winding, progressive diagrams of the *malinas* outlined by the *malina* survivors. Simon worked with this fragmentation of space, in part following the form of the disjointed narrative of *Cantastoria*'s soundscape (as created in collaboration with Christian Richer). Sound and light were used as clues for the audience to follow the action and to guide the viewers through scenes taking place in these three areas. The first scene occurred around a large wooden table, where five women worked with craft-based materials, including chalk and balls of yarn. In the second section of the performance, the viewers followed the artist, who climbed into a



EMAN HARAM

mysterious box that glowed in the back quarter of the dark, expansive room. She created images on the interior of the illuminated, vellum windows of this light box by using previously drawn images on acetate, by manipulating the shadows of objects, and through live writing and drawing. These activities were all orchestrated through the choreography of her own body's shadow. In the third scene, the artist layered overhead projections and drawings on the 30-foot-long wall at the entrance of the space.

### Details of the performance as it unfolded

To begin the performance, Simon walked towards the stable pushing a vintage baby carriage, having just passed through the surrounding neighbourhood, including a homeless community situated at the railway underpass. She had transformed the cradle of the carriage into a minimal, grey wooden box. The box contained a wool coat, a reference to both the presence of the homeless in the area surrounding the performance site and the early memories of the contents of the *malinas*, as relayed to Simon in Vilnius by the elderly survivors.

When she reached the large open wooden doors of the stable, she spread

**VIDA SIMON** *Cantastoria*, a drawn opera, performance-installation in former stable, Montréal, 2010

<sup>7</sup> *Cantastoria* was a major performance by Vida Simon, lasting one hour, and presented on August 27, 28, and 29, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Goodman, *The McGill Daily*, accessed May 30, 2015, [www.mcgilldaily.com/2011/09/from-hardship-to-hip](http://www.mcgilldaily.com/2011/09/from-hardship-to-hip).

<sup>9</sup> Golroo Mofarrah, *Griffintown*, 54, accessed May 30, 2015, [griffintown.org/history/docs/docGriffintownGolrooMoffarahi.pdf](http://griffintown.org/history/docs/docGriffintownGolrooMoffarahi.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

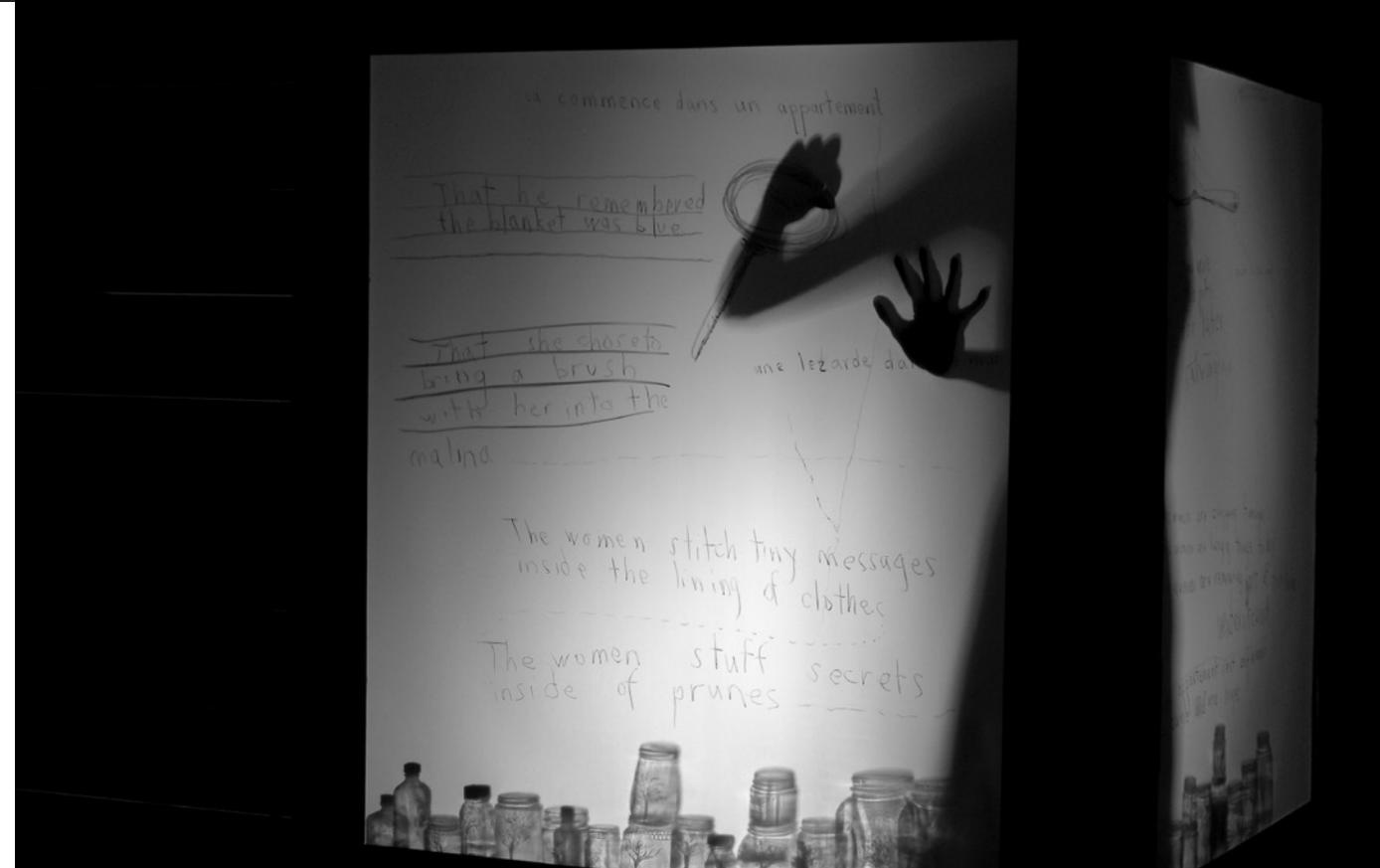
<sup>11</sup> QAHN, *Griffintown and Point St. Charles Heritage Trail*, accessed June 3, 2015, [monrealmosaic.com/attraction/griffintown-and-point-st-charles-heritage-trail](http://monrealmosaic.com/attraction/griffintown-and-point-st-charles-heritage-trail).

the wool coat on the ground, lay down on it, and lifted large, charcoal-drawn paper bird puppets into the air. Later in the performance, she cast their shadows and hers upon the wall.

In the second action, five women gathered around a large wooden table that had been found by the artist in the space and repositioned in the room. Flanked by the brick walls of the stable, their activity heightened the metaphorical imagery of an assembly line. Their “work,” however, was not about factory production or assembling products, but was rather about animating objects and actions through play, ritual, and scent. Simon gave them instructions to move between functional activities such as sewing secret messages into clothing, and alternately, to create spontaneous interactions with each other and the objects. For example, the women rolled a ball of yarn down the table playfully, as well as a small, toy box-cart on wheels. They slowly wrapped and then unravelled wool from around their necks, paused and massaged their necks as if tired, and rubbed nutmeg into the surface of the table. This section of the performance lasted for approximately 20 minutes. The impetus for gathering together this group of women in the performance was a black-and-white 1950s photograph of Nova Scotian women creating a hooked rug. The artist discovered the photograph some years earlier. A transparency of this photograph also later appeared in the overhead projection section of *Cantastoria*.

The third segment of the performance took place inside an 8 ft. x 8 ft. light box, which was situated on top of a wooden structure similar to that of the architectural style of the horse stable. Simon described drawing inside this powerful light box as revealing every detail of the intimacy of the medium. She stated, “If your hand was shaking, you could see that.” Her description of her experience drawing on the interior vellum windows of the light box reminded me of her observations of the elderly *malina* survivors shakily drawing out their memories of the hiding spaces. The stark illumination of Simon’s light box, however, circumvented the conditions of the dark, forced hiding spaces the elderly survivor of the *malinas* endured, and her explicit use of intense lighting, movement, writing, and drawing functioned as an ode to their spirit of resistance. Simon describes the first image that occurred in the light box as “a forest and a city at the same time.” This forest/city was devised by setting glass jars that contained small drawings of trees on the ledges of the windows. Her shadow orchestrated the accumulation of the trees growing from these jars that sparkled like a city under the extreme light. The objects that she drew onto the vellum windows, such as a hairbrush, referred to the stories that the elderly survivors had told her about what they chose to bring with them into the *malinas*. The objects changed with each performance in response to what was happening in the space, or as images from the survivor’s stories or from Simon’s own research resonated with the artist in that moment.

On the night I attended the performance, Simon wrote sentences on the interior walls of the light box, such as “the women stitched tiny messages



KYRA REVENKO

inside the lining of clothes,” and “the women stuffed secrets inside of prunes.” At this point in the performance, the voices of the elderly survivors Simon had interviewed floated in the air, possibly evoking a sensation of what it was like to have lived in a confined space for a prolonged period of time, unable to verbally communicate with loved ones while in hiding. Simon drew upon her research in Lithuania to create metaphors for the objects lost in immigration, the question of who was left behind, and the loss of contact with those that remained. During the Second World War, Judaic names were changed to create distance from associations with Yiddish. This sense of loss was carried into the present, as families lost the ability to identify each other or remain connected. The light box actions in Simon’s performance seemed to function as a conduit for uncovering forgotten words, objects, and associations.

During the third section of the performance, Simon climbed up on top of the light box to project live drawings onto a 30-foot wide screen, using an overhead projector housed within the structure. She created a wall projection which consisted of collaged images, live drawings on acetate, silhouettes of tiny objects, layered drawings, and photocopied transparencies depicting spaces such as doorways, underground dwellings,

**VIDA SIMON** *Cantastoria*, a drawn opera, performance-installation in former stable, Montréal, 2010

Ingeborg Bachmann's study, and the sketches of the *malinas* as described or made by the elderly survivors during their interview sessions with the artist.

In the wall projections, Simon mimicked the site of the performance by merging pre-constructed drawings and photos with live drawings of the stable itself. In this way the historic and the actual became one, embodied in one space. During one evening, a photographic image of a Victorian woman on a horse appeared, and Simon added a "drawn" cart to the back of the horse. The image seemed to be a humorous reference to the amount of physical labour involved in preparing the space for the performance, as well as a reference to the popular idiom, "Don't put the cart before the horse." The addition of the cart and its relationship to this popular idiom seemed to suggest Simon's propensity for confusing the culturally expected, linear quality of time in terms of cause and effect; the artist often references history through its contemporary affect or trace, prior to revealing the action or object's causal relationship within that history.

In another projection image, Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* text functioned as "a wall" upon which a window was added, and within which the drawing of Bachmann's study suddenly materialized. A clock was drawn into this projection, communicating the actual time in the performance. The large wooden table used earlier by the group of five women cast a shadow into the projection, doubling the performance space as both occurring in real time and as historically layered, "situated," as it were, through the continuously appearing, multiple transparencies.

*Cantastoria* culminated with the artist walking towards a claustrophobic, strange triangular corner into which the architecture of the horse stable receded. The action referred back to the text Simon had previously written inside the light box, of a woman who was swallowed by a wall—an image culled from Bachmann's *Malina* novel. As Simon walked slowly towards the corner, she was lit from behind so that her shadow loomed large above her, reaching from the floor to the ceiling. The shadow eventually enveloped her as she walked towards it and disappeared into the darkness. The image reminded me of Francesca Woodman's photographic works, where she integrated her disappearing body into the wallpaper and architecture of rooms. Simon considers this image a reference to the hiding spaces where people were cornered and held, and into which they disappeared.

#### **Newfoundland: Where do you belong to?**

Following *Cantastoria*, a major shift occurred in Simon's work, as the studio from which she worked and taught was lost through the gentrification of her Montréal neighbourhood. She began to spend less time in Montréal, and relocated to Newfoundland. In Newfoundland, Simon experienced an emotional shift. Artistically, this change signalled what Simon felt was an "end point" for her work about her Judaic, ancestral history. She also found she missed her Montréal community of collaborators, friends, and like-minded artists. She had lost her support system, and in a way, her bearings.

I wondered about the difference of the community in Newfoundland in relation to the many unknowns of her familial history. In Newfoundland, origins are traced through your last name, and people are greeted with the question "Where do you belong to?"

In Newfoundland, Simon began to create small watercolours. She produced one performance project (*To Make Ends Meet*, 2013) in Tilting, Fogo Island, which was an installation and a durational performance in an old house. She worked with filmmaker Tim Wilson, who recorded this process. Simon recounts:

The work was completely site responsive. The house was old, frozen in time. It had never had electricity. A cycle of themes emerged from this work, particularly surrounding economics. The work was seven hours long and occurred on one day. Visitors were invited to meander through the rooms of the house. I became interested in working with nothing, and made brushes out of grass and wood. In one room I painted everything red ochre, including the things I had collected in nature, my own drawings, my feet ... At one point I tried to hang some objects on a clothesline, but the wind would take those.

During this period of questioning in Newfoundland, she was invited to Israel to perform at the ZAZ International Festival for Performance Art in Tel Aviv and Haifa (2011). She said she had never wanted to go to Israel, where she felt that the politics were complicated, and especially from her position as an outsider who is Jewish. Yet, after meeting Israeli artists—Efi Ben-David, Tamar Raban, and Beni Kori — at the Deformes Festival in Chile, she felt drawn to visit, and was confronted with the political and social complexity of place.

While working on *To Make Ends Meet* in Newfoundland, Simon found a vintage dress in an abandoned house. She took the dress to Israel, and while in Israel she also found old, discarded photos of someone's life thrown in a dumpster outside of a flea market, which she then sewed onto the old dress. Ironically, months earlier she had made a sketch of a dress covered in photographs. She incorporated the dress into the work *Pouring*, one of three works she produced while in Israel. Simon sat in a reading nook wearing this dress, under a set of stairs, with a bottle of water and a small, hand-written note that stated, "You have one minute to pour sea water into my eyes." In this piece, Simon gave instructions to the viewer, an approach that she had never before used in performance. Responses to the work were varied. Simon described one woman who took on the role of holding her head in a very caring manner so that others could pour the water into her eyes, and she recalled visitors who were worried that her eyes would be hurt by the sting of the salt water. Some people put the salt water on her lips because they considered the request to be too painful. This enclosed space beneath a stairwell had only enough room for two people at a time. Simon had started out seated in a chair upright to receive the water, but she soon turned upside down in the chair so her head was towards the floor, making it easier for people to reach as they poured the



YAACOV SABAN

**VIDA SIMON** *Pouring*, ZAZ Festival for Performance Art, Tveria 15, Haifa, Israel, 2011

**VIDA SIMON** *Excavation Drawings*, performance-installation at Hôtel de la Montagne, VIVA! Art Action, Montréal, 2006

water into her eyes.

At the end of the performance, she unravelled herself from her position in the reading nook, and then walked backwards up the stairwell. The action echoed for her the experience of visiting the Western Wall while in Israel. Simon stated, “The custom is that you must leave the Western Wall walking backwards so as not to turn your back on God. It was the first time I had experienced such an action in a religious setting with a large group of women. I’m not religious, but found this collective ritual action very powerful.” *Pouring* became a ritual of processing the many unknowns in her Judaic family history, and she felt the aesthetic weight of the imagery embedded within her through her cultural heritage. She describes this aesthetic knowing as the “ghosts that return.” Simon described *Pouring* as a ritual to do with both pleasure and pain. Simon characterized the invitation to pour sea water into her eyes, which resulted in clouded vision or temporary blindness, as an alternate kind of “seeing.” This obstructed vision is a recurring element in Simon’s work. She noted that she often draws without looking, even when not in a performance context.

The recurrence of “drawing without vision” appeared in *Facade* during the Deformes International Performance Biennial in Santiago, Chile, on November 15th, 2008. The work took place on the rooftop of the Colectivo Mapocho located in an important historic building in the heart of a vibrant, low-income area. The piece began at dusk and lasted approximately two hours. Using an overhead projector, the artist cast live drawings and silhouettes of objects related to the architecture, and her experiences of Santiago, onto the wall of the historic rooftop building.<sup>12</sup> At times she interacted with the projected images by standing in front of them and casting her shadow within. During one moment in the performance, she used a sheet of crumpled tissue paper, which she held over her face with one hand while she drew over her face with the other, effectively making a “self-portrait rubbing” without vision.

Drawing without vision was also prevalent in Simon’s work during the Carbon Interiorities residency that I curated at Hamilton Artists Inc. in 2009, which featured live performances and video works by Vida Simon and Rachel Echenberg. Simon created an evolving, live installation over a period of ten days. During much of that period of time she was blindfolded. Wearing a sleep mask from her travels, she moved between three “performance stations” of the gallery using the clothesline she had installed to guide her from one area to another. In one area of the room, she moved objects that she had brought or found in the gallery, such as bars of soap or a pencil on a paper grid, in an action reminiscent of the automatism of a surrealist game. Paradoxically, these efforts continuously brought into existence a fluidly indexical matrix—an ephemeral archive of objects in motion activated through the self-imposed darkness. A sense of gentle self-restriction and discomfort was at times communicated in these blindfolded actions, in a manner similar to the invited, shared action of *Pouring*. The actions of reaching with her arms, and the discovery of hidden

<sup>12</sup> Vida Simon, *Facade*, accessed May 30, 2015, [www.vidasimon.net/2008/2008chile1.html](http://www.vidasimon.net/2008/2008chile1.html).

<sup>13</sup> Having recently returned to live in Montréal, it will be exciting to witness the ways in which Simon draws together the influences of the Newfoundland landscape, and makes a new place for her practice in Montréal.



GUY L'HEUREUX



STEPHANIE BELL

**VIDA SIMON** *Acts of Carbon*, performance-installation at Hamilton Artists Inc., Hamilton, 2009

materials and their subsequent identification were repeated in *Carbon Interiorities*. Her actions reimaged static notions of the historical, and embodied what it might have been like to be restrained in an underground space. In the centre area of the performance space, Simon sifted through a pile of ash collected from the gallery administrator's heritage home fireplace. Surprisingly, she discovered and excavated circa 1960 scraps of newspaper from the charcoal dust, presenting these scraps in the palm of her hand, and inviting viewers to read. She later extracted a piece of drawing lead from the ashes while blindfolded—the interior shell of a pencil that had survived the burning process of the fireplace. Once again there is a return to the motifs of furnace, fire, and reclamation that can be found in both *Cantastoria* and *Capture and Salvage*, for example.

*Capture and Salvage* (2009) was presented in English Harbour, Newfoundland to a small audience, and lasted only 20 minutes. In *Capture and Salvage*, Simon's interest in hiding spaces returned, embodied in the concept of "human burrowing." She found a former root cellar, unused and overgrown with soft, long grass in the barren Newfoundland landscape—a place she described as "where the fog is all enveloping and the wind draws one in, internally." She lay curled in this discovered architecture, and recalled that it was "a nice place to take shelter from the wind." In preparation for the performance, Simon had collected old glass bottles she found by a rivulet (what would have been a disposal site before the era of garbage collection), as well as old pieces of china which she placed in the crevices of the root cellar walls during the performance, as a gesture of restoring inhabitation to this piece of abandoned architecture. At the conclusion of the performance, she led the viewers to a point overlooking the coast, where they held their bottles up in the air to capture the different tonal qualities affected by the wind. Simon stated, "Now what feels important to me is the wind, which is perpetual in Newfoundland. I began to walk with bottles to capture the sound of wind. That simple gesture is a precursor of something to come."

Simon's adaptation to this new sense of place in Newfoundland was grounded in her body's new relationship to a "big" landscape, and in the collective experience of this landscape. She also viscerally experienced the differences in scale between her body and this expansive landscape, becoming further attuned to recurring themes in her work such as the relationship between small objects and large projection in architecture as found in *Cantastoria*, for example. While in Newfoundland, she developed workshops which explored the phenomena of "drawing as you walk," and other encounters with landscape, bridging walking the land with perceptual exercises of drawing with non-traditional materials, and using the body as a way of thinking about ideas of distance and proximity. In these new, and yet to be discovered ways, Simon continues to push the limits of drawing, installation, and performance practice.<sup>13</sup>

## WALK A MILE IN HER SHOES

# the art of karen elaine spencer

Possibility and limitation mean about the same thing.

— FLANNERY O'CONNOR

**The photo on the front** of the postcard contains a hand-written message that reads: "où je suis, n'est pas qui je suis" (where I am is not who I am). The words sum up a line of questioning that runs throughout karen elaine spencer's artistic practice—where we find ourselves in life may not reflect who we are, but it does profoundly affect how we are perceived and how we perceive.

Since 2000, spencer has created a body of performance work where she stands in the shoes of the marginalised, the homeless, the powerless, sharing their place and view. Her performances have names like *expect nothing*, *loiterin'*, *ramblin' man*, *metro rider*, *sittin'*, and *dream listener*.

While physically occupying places and observing her surroundings, spencer considers the social, economic, and political undercurrents of our culture.

sometimes the places where we find ourselves seem to define us—informing our identity to such a degree that we think of ourselves in terms of our location. however, certain places have negative implications which