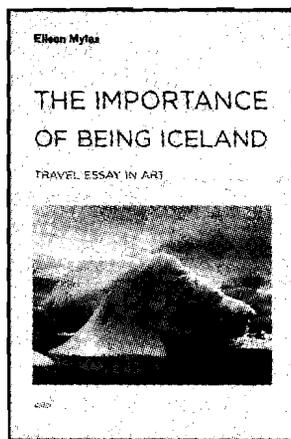


**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING ICELAND**  
**TRAVEL ESSAYS IN ART**  
*Eileen Myles*  
 Semiotext(e) (\$17.95)



ciative. There's that dinner party element again: you feel in reading these essays that Myles listens respectfully to the artworks or artists she engages with, though she might not ultimately agree with them. Occasionally the conversation becomes choppy the way a spurt of ideas becomes choppy, or the way discussion can seem telegraphic when you are not an insider among friends. At those points when I felt myself an insider (during, say, Myles's description of the distinct reading styles of poets Alice Notley and Ann Lauterbach), the experience was delicious. At some other points, especially in discussions of paintings and painters, a little more contextual and descriptive material would have helped me get oriented.

by Elizabeth Robinson

**T**here's a perfect analogy for the experience of reading Eileen Myles's new book of essays, *The Importance of Being Iceland*: it's like being at a large and lively dinner party with several of your favorite friends. The food is good, the room is comfortable, and the conversation is witty, feisty, perceptive, even tender. There are moments of digression, moments when the conversation becomes a little choppy, and there's also the fact that all of your dinner companions are variants of Eileen Myles. All of this conspires to create a complete dining experience. The overall effect of this book is to leave the reader with a full belly and a refreshed sensibility.

In *The Importance of Being Iceland*, Myles has collected over 350 pages of critical writing. Her topics range from travel in Iceland and Russia to feminism and lesbian life to poetry and art. Often her foci converge, so, for example, Myles will be talking about Russia and homosexuality and art at the same time. These recurrent concerns knit the book together, and helpfully demonstrate the ways in which geography, artistic practices, gender, and sexuality are mutually influencing.

Myles has a tendency to interpolate qualifiers like, "I mean," "I think," "I guess" into her discussions. Initially this seems like a conversational tic, but ultimately it can be read as a way of framing her commentary. The author here is willing to claim her personal involvement with the subjects she is addressing. The qualifiers underline Myles's insights and foibles as part of the subject and thereby convey her commitments openly.

This frankness is invigorating and daring, as, for example, when Myles skewers affluent Marxists ("The biggest Marxists cheerfully explained that this or that had happened to them because of somebody they had known at *Harvard*. You would think *Harvard* was where they had a spiritual awakening they were so proud of it"). Or consider her right-on excoriation of Andrew Sullivan, who claimed in a *New York Times Magazine* article that he needed to celebrate testosterone at the end of what he called a "feminist century." Myles's rejoinder? "Reading that, I feel I've missed something. I didn't know that the 20th century was the feminist century. . . . I would have acted differently if I'd known it was my century." Apparently, she notes, she missed all the mass-market articles on estrogen, progesterone, and "yes, even female testosterone, because we do have a bit, and when we get angry we have more."

Even though Myles's outrage does surface from time to time, indignation is not the driving force of these essays. The larger energy is of an alert inquiry that moves eagerly towards participation in all sorts of ideas, places, and arts. The dynamism of true curiosity keeps these essays essentially humble. Myles doesn't show off, she is simply interested and very often appreciative.

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That's a small quibble in relation to the pleasures these essays provide. Myles's conversational tone captures exactly the way she reads and talks. That casual diction can be extremely funny (see "Everyday Barf"), but it may mask Myles's acuteness as a cultural critic. Once the reader absorbs the textures of the Mylesian voice, the originality of her mind stands out. A loving discussion of James Schuyler's poetry also functions as a startling and convincing recasting of what "nature" is, its "strange flow" that transgresses boundaries to achieve both interiority and exteriority: "The inside and the outside of the poem are not so separate." Writing on Robert Smithson, Myles comes at this inside/outside contrast from the perspective of center and periphery. Here, "the dialectic between the art in the mind and the art in the world [is] the work drawing the viewer along a path of creation and destruction and calm." This is a useful way to understand Myles's own status as at once an insider and an outsider on the cultural scene, and it nurtures conversation at exactly that boundary.

Intriguingly, bits of Catholicism stick on Myles's sleeve like burrs; in the nooks and crannies of these essays, ethics and spirituality sneak in. Myles does seek for something larger, not a conventional transcendence, but the affirmation that "The motive for collecting, for writing, I think, is to show the entire approach." She insists that, in the necessary attraction to your craft, "You can teach love." Perhaps the most telling moment, however, comes when Myles describes a father who is baffled by his son's experimental artwork. The father becomes animated: "He decided that his son was a con, like Erwin was selling the Brooklyn Bridge to those fools." Just when the reader is enjoying the idea of art as a practice of pulling one over on the reader/viewer, Myles pulls back and reminds us that what the father didn't get was "that art is a willing transfer of belief." If that's not metaphysical, I don't know what is. That's not to say that our dinner party will turn Eucharistic on us, but Myles has it right when she says, "Even magic is subject to communal reasoning and the glory of the poetry we're looking at is that it has been made for this purpose too. To be the last piece of awe, to be ritually unpacked, feared or enjoyed, and returned to its pattern again." ♦