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Eileen Myles, Still Cool for You: *The Importance of Being Iceland*

Violate some categories! A downtown poet-performer collects 25 years of art writing.

By Alan Gilbert

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If any poet deserves a reality-TV show, it's Eileen Myles. A celebrity in a poetry world that has had difficulty producing real celebrities after Allen Ginsberg, she's a jet-setter without the jet. In fact, part of Myles's fame results from the time she spent riding in the back of a van during a Sister Spit spoken-word tour. Had reality TV been as pervasive during Myles's quixotic yet serious 1992 presidential campaign, some cable or online channel probably would have followed it.

For many poets, the mundane world is either too intrusive or not intrusive enough. I like to imagine that for Myles, even a trip to the store to buy a roll of toilet paper has the potential to become a mini-adventure. She once talked about how, at a certain point in her East Village existence, walking her dog could take hours because of the various friends and characters she bumped into along the way.

Media conglomerates love reality TV because it's cheap to produce and has the potential to generate enormous profits—plus there are fewer pesky unions (writers, actors) to deal with. Myles likes poetry because it's an inexpensive art. Most of Myles's readers know her background: Working-class girl from Boston moves to New York in the early '70s, immerses herself in the downtown cultural scene, identifies as a lesbian, drinks a lot, sobers up, watches friends with AIDS pass away, and emerges in the '90s as an influential poet, fiction writer, and performer.

Turns out she's been writing valuable art criticism all along, too. I recently met with Myles at P.S.1

in Long Island City to talk about her new book, *The Importance of Being Iceland: Travel Essays in Art* (MIT Press, 368 pp., \$17.95), which presents 25 years of her writings on art, poetry, film, people, and travel. In her typically frenetic style, Myles greets me in front of P.S.1 an hour after returning to New York from a two-month sojourn that took her to Seattle, San Francisco, Portland, El Paso, Maine, Nova Scotia, Boston, Provincetown, and the MacDowell Colony. We begin wandering through the museum accompanied by the thump-thump-thump of P.S.1's popular Warm Up courtyard dance party.

For me, one of the surprises of our conversation is discovering that Myles developed her prose chops writing art criticism. Her short stories and novels—books such as *Chelsea Girls* and *Cool for You*—are literary underground faves, but in the early '80s, as she describes it, "Art magazine editors showed me how to craft sentences and sustain momentum in a piece of writing." Myles is the rare critic who writes like she talks and talks like she writes: fast and sharp with lots of jump cuts and a blurring of art and life—closer to, say, René Ricard and Lester Bangs than Peter Schjeldahl or Jed Perl.

Ricard and Schjeldahl nurtured and encouraged Myles when she was beginning to write criticism: "One of my first art reviews was of a Ricard performance at the Guggenheim in 1981," she tells me. But it was a benefit art auction during her tenure as director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in the mid-'80s that "opened up more doors to the art world." "The East Village in the '80s was an ideal time to write about art," she comments as we enter P.S.1's Kenneth Anger exhibition, which features a blood-red-lined gallery where his mind- and gender-bending films are projected and play on monitors.

Anger's *Fireworks* (1947) is among the first explicitly homosexual experimental films. Myles explains that she's "skeptical about the idea that identity politics doesn't apply anymore," while feeling "compelled to violate categories at all times." This might explain why *The Importance of Being Iceland* contains a memorable piece on flossing, a profile of Taylor Meade's apartment, a Björk concert review, and a comparison of a self-revving car to menopause, alongside discussions of artists such as Sadie Benning, Robert Smithson, Peggy Ahwesh, William Pope.L, and Nicole Eisenman.

Myles's piece on Eisenman moves the artist away from aestheticized and formal readings of her work, and instead embeds its emergence within a third-wave feminist community. Similarly, Myles remarks, "I try to use my writing to focus on underrepresented topics and artists." She's also on the lookout for misogyny in contemporary art—"It's the text that doesn't get read," she interjects as we both recoil from Jonathan Horowitz's photocollage matching Katie Couric's head and torso with a Britney Spears pantyless crotch shot. Only two rooms earlier, Myles and I had stood mesmerized in front of Horowitz's *Rainbow American Flag on Pink Field of Jasper in the Style of Artist's Boyfriend* (2007), a luscious queering of the Stars & Stripes.

Travel is another major concern in Myles's book. There's a section with essays detailing various trips she has taken, and the volume opens with an extended, rapid-fire description of two visits to Iceland. Myles mentions that some of her favorite books as a kid were sci-fi novels, and it makes sense that, when she was younger, they fostered dreams of realities other than her immediate one: "I was haunted for years by the lonely figure on the underground beach in Jules Verne's *Journey*

to the Center of the Earth." But more than simply an escape, travel—whether physical or mental—is a form of power. "It's always so good on the boat," Myles explains in *The Importance of Being Iceland*, even when—as in another piece entitled "Everyday Barf"—everyone on the boat is throwing up around you while you try to write a political poem to read at a protest during the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York.

In a certain way, every piece in the book is about traveling. After all, at its best, art confirms community while providing an escape from its confines; it renews perception by scraping away embedded clichés. "I like doing the wrong thing in the right place, and vice versa," Myles asserts as we stand on the sidewalk outside P.S.1 after our few hours there. Myles's unique writings on art and culture manage to stay right on target while simultaneously misbehaving. Come to think of it, that's not so far from the spirit of Oscar Wilde summoned by her book's title.

Eileen Myles reads from *The Importance of Being Iceland* at Artbook @ X in Chelsea on September 10 and at Spoonbill & Sugartown in Williamsburg on September 15