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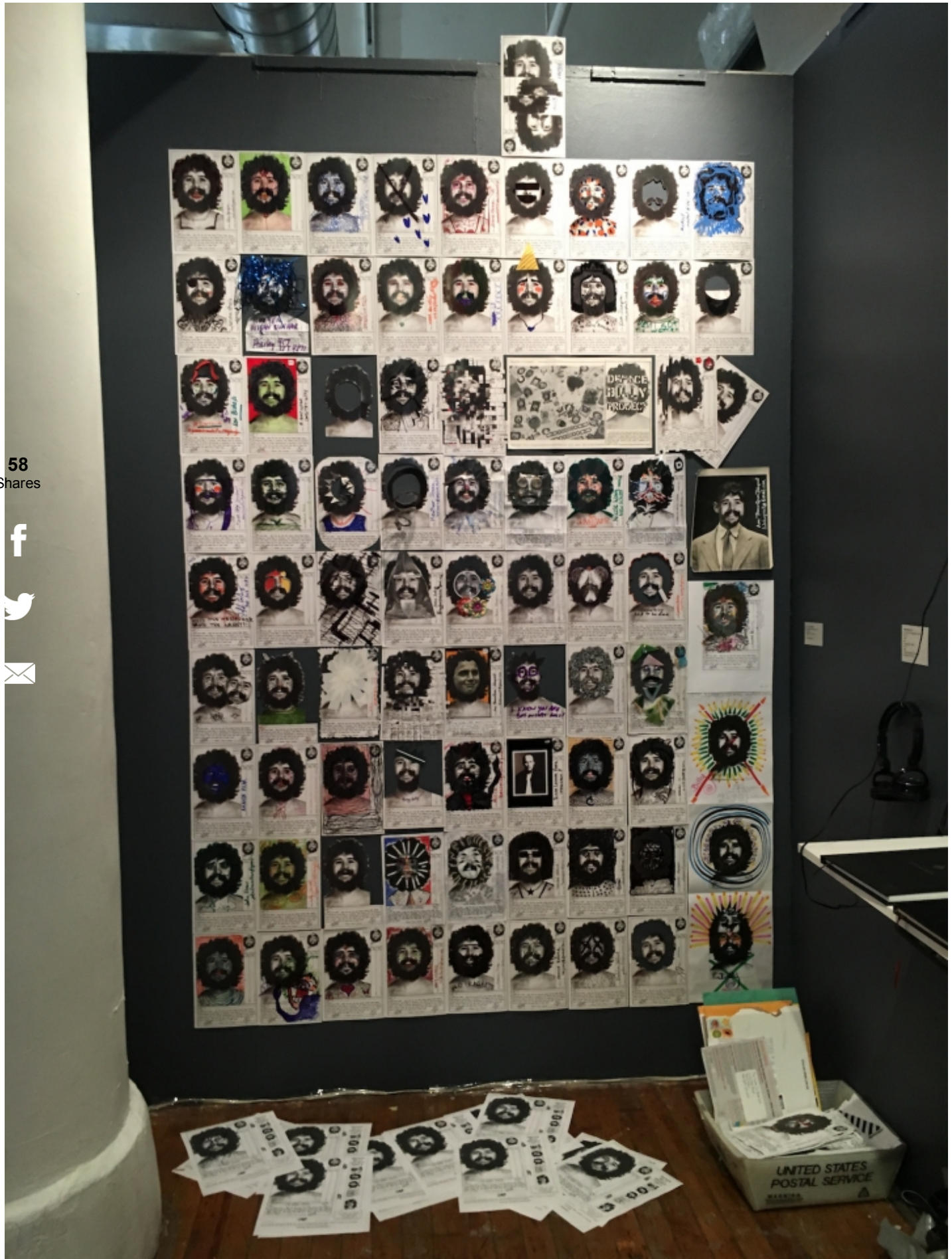
## The Documents Left Behind from Live Performances

An exhibition explores how the remains of performance art memorialize the past and re-perform for new audiences.

Megan N. Liberty | 2 days ago

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Billy X. Curmano's "Defacement Billy Project" in *Enacting the Text: Performing with Words* at the Center for Book Arts, New York (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

*Enacting the Text: Performing with Words*, currently on view at the Center for Book Arts, uses performance art's detritus as its starting point. Curated by Nicolás Dumit Estévez Rafal, the exhibition explores the ways these remains memorialize the past and re-perform for new audiences who may never have seen the original performance. The exhibition space is small and intimate, squeezed between workshop areas; the glass cases of materials create rows down the center of the single room, while larger posters and prints line the outer walls. The sheer time required to read all the invitations, notes, sketches, and scripts, flip open the books (yes, you can touch the books!), and watch all the video documentation, is vast. The viewer re-performs the texts, imagining the scenarios and activating the yellowing letters, while also participating in the very performance of art viewing, as people queue up behind lengthier texts and watch others read.



Installatio view, *Enacting the Text: Performing with Words* at the Center for Book Arts

Beatrice Glow's artist book *Taparaco Myth* (2009), displayed here, details her trip through Peru, following the Chinese migrant labor movement there. For a series of artist talks accompanying the exhibition, she traced the use of the word "Chino/a" and the people it's used to describe throughout Latin America. Glow's journey is both a physical and linguistic one, exploring the racial politics of naming colors, places, and people. Beginning with the racialized coloring naming system of Pantone, she flipped through images on a projector at varying speeds, switching between languages — English and Spanish — as she guided the audience through her voyage. Showing existing photographs, maps, color swatches, birds, and various signage across Latin America featuring the word "Chino," her sarcastic and humorous presentation became a satire about racism and migration.

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Beatrice Glow's installation for the *Taparaco Myth* (2009)

The most animated performance perhaps came from [Martha Wilson](#), who, dressed in a suit and a bright orange wig, performed speeches, shouting and singing as “Donald Thump,” complete with hail salutes scattered throughout. Towards the middle of the performance, she broke character, putting on glasses to discuss her experience performing as various political figures and to outline what she saw as the relationship between art and politics, particularly during the culture wars, where government funding attempted to censor artwork that served as a voice for minorities.

The scripts for Wilson’s “Just say No to Arms Control” (1987) and “Nancy Regen Beats Cancer” (1985), along with the lists of props used, document her performances of these speeches. The artist’s typewritten pages, covered in handwritten notes and edits are lined up in another case. Another script presented behind glass is [Linda Mary Montano](#)’s *Mitchell’s Death*, handwritten with notes, along with a video of its performance, allowing the viewer to experience both the documentation and a version of the intended viewing. The majority of the texts and videos on view are more documents than vestiges of past events, with the exception of a few items that were part of the performance, such as a scattering of Lesley Dill’s flyers and brochures, which are both recordings and parts of her performances. The brochure *Tongues on Fire: Visions & Ecstasy* (2000–2001), pinned open in a case, collects the stories of people’s dreams recounted to Dill.

But, as the scripts begin to suggest, there is no clear line between documenting object, prop, and art object. Further evidence of this lies in a section of one wall, covered with defaced images of artist Billy X. Curmano, as part of the “Deface Billy Project.” These flyers, which look like coloring book pages with the artist’s face, were distributed with instructions to be colored on. Thus these objects are both documentation, prop, and performance art objects. But performance art is not precious. Leaving few remains, save the type of objects I’ve noted, the pieces that endure are more archive than art, as far as these distinctions are useful.

Nancy Reagan Beats Cancer

Kansas City Artists' Coalition  
September 11, 1985  
Folladium NYC October 16, 85

*Cancer = all. A (D) on cancer  
Cancer = chemical weapons against humanity*  
Cancer Cancer It's the new disease Crime Against the drug for ~~all~~  
Cancer Cancer without it where'd we be? ~~Oh it's a wicked therapy~~  
It hits on you It hits on him It hits on them It hits on ME ~~Goodish to~~  
Everyone's in ~~the~~ in the Cancer Society ~~with~~ with ~~some~~ some ~~long~~ long ~~fact~~  
Everyone is free in the Cancer Society  
*Grand Opening, I'm Nancy Reagan, Full Lady, M.M.I. I'd just tell you how*  
How can I say this? Cancer set me free! Remember when artists were

thin and romantically tubercular in the 19th century? They coughed  
(cough) and held starring roles in novels and operas all over Europe. ~~Now~~  
as Susan Sontag explains in "Illness as Metaphor," (you see, I've read  
Sontag too), tuberculosis was romanticized because medical science  
didn't understand its causes or cures yet. In the 20th century,  
cancer has been moralized for the same reasons. If you get cancer

cancer 6

Your inspection  
ETOS it's the  
ETOS it's a  
ETOS Just have  
ETOS Be blind  
Enter the dis

→ The moral of  
fade. Take  
not to go to  
to see  
of-seeing p  
the mirror?  
Well, I (E)

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cancer 2

people think you're corrupt ~~or~~ or you brought it <sup>upon</sup> ~~on~~ yourself. Or  
they think you're as good as dead. Well, let me tell you, nothing  
could be further from the truth. The real killer seems to be overdose  
of the appetite suppressant called AIDS. Why, just recently all the  
rock stars got together to supply lots of AIDS to Ethiopia, although  
~~I can't imagine why.~~ I've seen pictures of the Ethiopians on TV  
and they hardly weigh anything. And our friend Bob Hudson's weight  
problem seems to be completely cleared up too. <sup>with control</sup> I personally have  
consumed about a ton of AIDS over the years without any ill effects.  
But back to our subject, cancer in contemporary American society.  
Time was, every family and every person knew at least one other  
person who had been touched by cancer. Nowadays, I think it's safe

cancer 7

care where  
Let's see  
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Tit for  
Politics  
You give  
And we'll  
Public  
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To me  
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stren

cancer 3

to say that everyone will get some form of cancer or other. In  
other words, cancer is now a sign of normal adjust<sub>ment</sub> to our  
environment, and the social pressures that surround us. Far from  
being a dread disease, cancer is a welcome friend who whispered in  
my ear I'd been out in the sun too long, and who told Rosalie to  
take care of his sweet ass.

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Detail of one of Martha Wilson's scripts



*Enacting the Text* is not the first exhibition to challenge the distinction between art and archive, but it smartly uses performance art ephemera to further question these boundaries, specifically with regard to the role of the document. Sketches and notes that precede a painting, for instance, are more easily categorized as “archive,” since the “art” is the finished painting; but when no completed work is left, the role of documents becomes more slippery. Though our reading of Glow’s artist book or Wilson’s scripts does not recreate the original performances, by reading the text we are given the agency of the artist, to interpret and enact the artwork ourselves. Rather than a static fixed history, the document is a living, malleable, continual performance, at once an archive and artwork.

[Enacting the Text: Performing with Words](#) *continues at the Center for Book Arts (28 W 37th St #3, Chelsea, Manhattan) through December 17.*

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