In Memory of Nancy Shaw
1962–2007

How to write an obituary for a writer, thinker, and friend whose captivating adeptness with language was a distinguishing quality? A writer who could put together words like “tizzy” and “toxologic” with such ease and precision? Such is my sorrowful task, as I pay heartfelt homage to poet, scholar, art critic, and curator Dr. Nancy Shaw. Nancy’s recent death sent ripples through the Canadian poetry, arts, dance, new-music, and academic communities to which she actively contributed for over 20 years. She passed away at home in Vancouver on April 16, 2007, at the tender age of 44. Nancy stoically battled cancer for eight years, during which time her astonishing productivity never slowed. She received her doctorate from McGill University in 2000, did a post-doctoral fellowship at New York University, and she taught courses at McGill, Rutgers, Wilfrid Laurier, and Simon Fraser Universities as well as at Capilano College. Her later writing gained a detectable urgency and heightened perceptiveness to the world around her meaning gained through her illness, and remains most interesting when she combined poetry, art criticism, cultural theory and academic scholarship.

Noted by friends and colleagues for her dexterous, interdisciplinary mind, for her incisive wit and earth-moving laughter as well as for her distinctive attention to language and ideas, Nancy moved deftly and comfortably between disciplines, discourses, and lexicons. During the 1980s in Vancouver, she was at the centre of collaborations between writers and artists as a writer, artist, curator, and critic, a vibrant period that spawned artist- and writer-driven initiatives in Vancouver such as the Or Gallery, the Kootenay School of Writing, and Artspeak Gallery, to which she contributed in formative ways. The fruit of such collaborations was the lived and practised commitment to illuminating constructions of language, discourses, and tyrannies. A central goal of collaborations was to “question notions

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of authorship and originality” (Shaw, 1991, p. 85), as she wrote in her contribution to *Vancouver Anthology: The Institutional Politics of Art*. As an art curator, she frequently worked collaboratively, and as a writer, she used the epistolary form, which made evident the conversational, dialogic process that she so valued and with which she was so engaged.

In her recent essay in *Social Text*, “Cloning Scapegoats: Martha Stewart Does Insider Trading,” Nancy coins the term “citizen-survivor” to draw attention to the post-9/11, frugal and obedient citizen: “They are the whistle-blowers who attend to every detail of the law and are committed to reporting anyone who does not” (Shaw, 2003, p. 60). Nancy was in New York City on the morning of 9/11, on one of the last trains to leave the World Trade Center station, embarking on her weekly trip out to Rutgers, where she was then teaching. When many of us finally got in touch with her that day, knowing how close she was to ground zero (in her faculty apartment sublet in NYU’s I.M. Pei building, with colleague Jeff Derksen), she told the story of how as the train resurfaced in New Jersey, leaving Manhattan in the distance, a fellow passenger began shouting that the WTC was on fire, a seemingly ludicrous claim met with dismissals of madness, until the gravity of the catastrophe became known. She would later process this lived experience, transforming it into the discursive backdrop of her “citizen-survivor.”

3rd PERIOD

‘And I’d like to say we’ve got no lesson’

—René Lévesque

A step back, underling, we are through. What remains are our energies and our impatience. As for your headlong impecuniosity pretext, we are far from permissive. Now dubious, now rocketing, just watch, just you watch me shaft the mines of ownership. As if capable of any absorption, we will dupe the private preserve, and never again will we be pitched, or checked.

—from “Just Watch Me,” in *Busted* (with Catriona Strang, 2001)

Nancy’s PhD thesis was entitled *Modern Art, Media Pedagogy, Cultural Citizenship: The Museum of Modern Art’s Television Project, 1952-1955* (2001). She authored *Affordable Tedium* (1991) and *Scopocratic* (1992), and collaborated on several books with Catriona Strang, including *Busted* (2001) and most recently *Cold Trip* (2006). She was much sought after for her many, many art catalogue essays. We are mercifully left with this rich body of work that her luminous intellect produced, but will miss her laughter and sharp mind, and will remember her with full hearts.
Works cited

Online resources
About Nancy Shaw
Vidaver, Aaron. (up to 2000) A Nancy Shaw bibliography for Kootenay School of Writing. URL: http://kswnet.org/fire/announcementtargetpage.cfm?showannouncement=NancyShaw_bibliography.htm&announceID=110.

By Nancy Shaw

To Nancy Shaw

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