

The Performative Nature of Built Space

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July 2011

What contemporary performance is – or what may be considered as performative – is much contested these days. As a performance artist, the applicability of the performative nature remains increasingly seductive. The ability to project the ontological subjectivity of performance onto groups of people, inanimate objects or groups of inanimate objects has become loquaciously mindful activity, as they in turn project such quiddities on me. This essay discusses the performative nature of architectural space and its relation to the socio-economic status of a contemporary black experience.

Just as Josef Beuys suggested that every person can be an artist, I suggest that every person is a performer. Through the very nature of ontological perception every person performs. To exist is to perform.

To be in possession of a living body places the human being in a constant state of performance. What I am suggesting is that the cellular and molecular processes that keep us alive are performances themselves and that the very nature of quantum biology speaks to the ineffability of performance.

In his essay, 'Body Issues in Performance Art: Between Theory and Praxis', Andrea Pagnès differentiates the three words used to express the word 'body' in Arabic: *Gesem*, *Gesed* and *Beden*. *Gesem* he describes as the 'body-body', which includes the actual physical body; *Gesed* is the 'mind-body' which are the mental processes (from the brain) that control the *Gesem*; and *Beden* is the 'psyche-body', the psychosomatic, which encompasses the emotions.¹ The function of the *Gesem* and the *Gesed* fall under what we may term the body's biological processes. The *Beden*, which generally can be explained by the endocrine systems in the body, may, however, also include the notion of the soul. Disputable as this may be by both scientists and artists (and artistic scientists and scientific artists), the indefinable nature of the soul may run parallel to the uncertainty principle of quantum mechanics, the former being what we cannot determine in human experience, the latter what we cannot determine in universal experience. But what I do not wish to do is enter into a discussion of metaphysics but, instead, to allude to the body's innate performative quintessence, and to suggest that by one's presence amongst a body of people one proffers this objectivity upon others within one's vicinity. This being the reciprocal performance of intentionality in which subjectivity is tendered upon objectivity.

As a performer, it is important for me to communicate what is, in fact, deemed the ineffable: to talk to an audience about what binds us through this human experience, and to talk in between the space of the definitive to the realm of the organically virtual. Society lies within this virtual realm in the arena of public space in which there is a

convening of the 'in between' and where, in fact, the two oftentimes are synonymous. This is not unlike Homi K. Bhabha's description of the 'beyond':

"The imaginary of spatial distance – to live somehow beyond the border of our times – throws into relief the temporal, social differences that interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity. The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities."ⁱⁱ

Bhabha describes this space as the interstitial between two polarities: black and white; rich and poor. A space of intervention and a space where performativity acts in meta-reality.

The relationship between architecture and performance is something that occurred to me in the summer of 2010 on the island of Curaçao, a former Dutch colonial island. In my own performances in the past, I have endeavoured to enter a state of performativity through ritualistic acts, a process that I encountered whilst studying ancient African rock art in which shamans would enter trance-induced states in order to communicate with spirit worlds and expectant audiences. The ritual that I developed entailed camouflaging my limbs and face to resemble syncretic African fabrics. This ritual spoke to visibility in many ways but one way in particular was recognition. This recognition abetted the ritualistic, repetitious production or creation of tradition, tradition here referring to culture, be it hybrid or 'pure'.

Having grown up in the Netherlands, when I stepped onto this tiny island in the Caribbean, I instantly recognised the traditions of 18th, 19th and 20th century Dutch architecture and, in fact, Dutch ritual toward architectural design. In the same essay, Pagnès continues to state that: "a ritual dynamic can activate and indicate different processes of social relation, provided that it is not invasive or constrictive: it is simply used like an invisible instrument of recognition," and I think this to be true for homogenous societies. However, for anyone who has ever been to the Caribbean, they know that the social environment there is far from homogenous. The Caribbean is, in fact, an amalgamation of human racial society. The majority population on Curaçao are Afro-Curaçaoans and they are also the most disenfranchised. They were brought to the island on Portuguese and Dutch slave ships throughout the 17th and 18th centuries.ⁱⁱⁱ Unfortunately, however, even after the abolition of slavery, Curaçao does not have full autonomy from the Netherlands and still remains closely attached both politically and socially. The social aspect for me was the most intriguing as socio-economic power lies in the hands of the minority white Dutch population. This not being a homogenous society, I decided to look around more closely, as I could feel the depressive nature of the disempowered black population. My gaze led me to the architecture. Returning to

Pagnes the realisation that although this architecture was, in fact, recognisable, it was at the very least 'invasive and constrictive,' it, in fact, sets the tone for current social relations. Just like performance, architecture creates "remembrances, ideas, actions and interventions: when [it] find[s] a common ground to flow together, [it] can give birth to an experience both individual and collective at the same time. An experience that is civil, social..."^{iv} Architecture in fact does not reside amongst the inanimate, the inert: architecture lives amongst the aesthetic that co-habits the social.

I recently saw a monumental piece of public architectural sculpture by Richard Serra. However, I was so terrified that I remained a comfortable five feet away from the piece as I marvelled at both his audacity and brilliance. Brilliance in his ability to affect, and audacity in his ability to affect! Serra's monumental sculpture has a history of affecting urban populations to the tether of controversion. Here I refer explicitly to 'Tilted Arc', whose installation in New York City lasted about eight years and was dismantled amidst complaints from the public and bureaucrats.

I am a performance artist and I work with what I wake up with in the morning. Serra works with provisions to affect what I wake up with in the morning. This occurs to me to be delineation between a white male and black female: I appear to want to soothe through commonalities; Serra appears to want to jolt through commonalities. Is this the difference between contemporary racial narratives?

In his essay 'Social Theory of Space: Architecture and the Production of Self, Culture, and Society', John Archer discusses the phenomena of architecture in social space. He paraphrases poststructuralist Michel Foucault as stating that:

"...specific building types and designs... underscored the instrumentality of material form in the transmission of regimes of power: built space became an apparatus for fashioning ranks and roles of people in society."^v

Archer then continues to discuss another poststructuralist, Pierre Bourdieu who developed the idea of *habitus*: the relations developed by the self and built space. Archer explains *habitus* in two parts:

"...first, spatial form as an apparatus through which people establish identity and articulate social relations; and second, the enduring capacity of buildings to sustain, protect, and perpetuate those identities and social relations."^{vi}

One conclusion from these interpretations is that built space provides an environment that contributes to the formation of identity. In the case of Curaçao, where Dutch architectural designs are the prevalent styles, lower socio-economic status, disempowerment and decreased motivation of the predominantly black population

therefore remains unsurprising. Not only was this population uprooted from communal circumstances through slavery, but they, in fact, strive to find roots in their current spatial environment, which is dominated by foreign aesthetics that uphold a colonial status quo. In describing this disjunction from reality in the black Diaspora, bell hooks says:

“This madness articulates aspects of African-American post-modern identity – the absence of community, alienation from everyday reality, a fragmented individuality, and the loss of organised resistance – struggles that reach masses of black people across class.”^{vii}

hooks also accentuates the necessity of the black Diaspora (here she talks of African-Americans) to have access to means of expression: to perform. Here I include the necessity for the built spaces in which they themselves perform as ‘black’ or indeed soothe towards ‘blackness’. hooks says:

‘When and where institutional structures were not available for individual black folks, we used, and still use, street corners, barbershops, beauty parlours, basketball courts and a host of other locations in order to be in on the live act.’^{viii}

The predominance of Dutch architecture on Curaçao creates an environment that oppresses the potential for relevant postcolonial narrative that may reflect a more productive and positive black narrative. During my time on the island, I frequently heard of the demagoguery of social hierarchy in which people endeavour to marry a lighter skin colour than their own. This being one of the many reasons that led me to create the performance stills and post cards *Untitled Series Curaçao*. These social taboos of Africa’s primitivity fell painfully on my African ears. The view of Africa from this Caribbean island seeks to uphold ethnography. However, I am optimistic and see it not in the recent analysis of negative stereotyping with a gaze upon primitivism but, instead, as a tool to understand and express the polyphonic black experience. hooks quotes critic Jill MacDougall as she clarifies:

“As a displaced person moving between cultures, I am viewing identity as a work-in-progress, a disappearing act, a performance. As a performer, director, linguist, and translator, I am considering ethnography as a negotiation of meanings as open and infinite semiotic chain, an ongoing activity rather than a stable definition.”^{ix}

Here on the African continent, where my research is still young, racial economic striations are less pronounced but exist nonetheless. Having travelled widely around the continent, I have noticed extensive construction. In particular, in Nairobi ‘spaghetti

highways' are being built. How these highways will affect the social relations and psyche of the people is as yet unknown. The destruction of Nairobi's trees and forests to make way for large multi-carriage highways will no doubt affect the ideologies, politics and economy of the people as Nairobi herself becomes a performer. Unfortunately the Chinese architects and contractors think little of the social responsibility toward African populations as the ineffectual African politicians in most countries allow the construction to carry on unchecked. Nevertheless, it is important for us who live amongst this built space to be aware that buildings do not remain inert objects but, in fact, perform within the organic virtual realm that affects populations through social aesthetics and cultural history.

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- ⁱ Pagnes, Andrea. 'Body Issues in Performance Art: Between Theory and Praxis.' *Art & Education*. Art & Education 2011. Web. 25 July 2011 <<http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/body-issues-in-performance-art-between-theory-and-praxis/>>
- ⁱⁱ Bhabha, Homi K. 'Border Lives: The Art of the Present'. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994, pp 1-9. Print.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Janga, Lionel, and Charles do Rego. *Slavery and Resistance in Curaçao: The Rebellion of 1795*. Fundashon Parke Nashonal, 2009. Print.
- ^{iv} Pagnes, Andrea. 'Body Issues in Performance Art: Between Theory and Praxis'. *Art & Education*. Art & Education 2011. Web. 25 July 2011 <<http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/body-issues-in-performance-art-between-theory-and-praxis/>>
- ^v Archer, John. 'Social Theory of Space: Architecture and the Production of Self, Culture, and Society'. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (Dec., 2005), pp. 430-433. Print.
- ^{vi} Ibid.
- ^{vii} hooks, bell. 'Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition'. *Let's Get it On: The Politics of Black Performance*. 210-221. Print.
- ^{viii} Ibid.
- ^{ix} Ibid.