ART PRACTICAL

Endurance Tests

Radical Presence, Absence, A Body Without Politics

By Anna Martine Whitehead | September 29, 2015

"Endurance Tests" is an irregular column on current explorations of representation, the ethereal, and compulsiveness by black artists working in the field of performance. Across profiles and interviews, the column takes seriously the proposition of performance as a repeatable and assimilable text. "Endurance Tests" will examine contemporary performance-makers actively syncretizing the many implications of "blackness": illegality, contagion, maladaptivity, and a privileged relationship to cool.

Perhaps it is fitting that the final program for *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts is Xaviera Simmons' *Continent: Dark Sound Blue* (October 1). The artist is a social practitioner in the truest sense, frequently making work that resists commodification and even documentation, to the extent that it troubles the very notion of what an "art work" is. This is precisely the kind of question one should ask when walking through *Radical Presence*: How can we understand this as art? How can we understand it as work? How can we reckon with these remnants as anything other than traces of blackness after the historical fact of the performance?

There are several vantages from which to consider *Radical Presence*, curated by Contemporary Arts Museum Houston's Valerie Cassel Oliver. One viewpoint is to understand the art world itself as a performance of globalized capitalism with performance art as its undercommons, in which black artists participate in dialogues of resistance.[1] Another is to approach it from within the fugitive place of blackness, a perpetually redefined and transmutable no-place of rugged reinvention and hyper-sociality. From this latter standpoint, the art world is not as interesting a subject of interrogation as the question of how blackness iterates itself through performance practices and radical aesthetics.

The artists in *Radical Presence* represent multiple positions, sometimes disharmoniously. For example, we enter the exhibit to find a montage of Shaun El C. Leonardo performing as the boxer "El Conquistador" fighting the Invisible Man. Recalling imagery from Ralph Ellison's infamous battle royal in *The Invisible Man*, *El Conquistador vs. The Invisible Man* (2004–2007) makes undeniable the performativity of black masculinity and its impotencies. The work is real in both a conceptual, Sylvesterian sense (mighty real) and

in the fact that Leonardo invited audiences to a genuine boxing ring with all the trappings of a match. Walk across the room and we come face to face with Trenton Doyle Hancock's "Mound" from the performance *Off-Colored* (1998)—a fur-lined mythological creature that inhabits Hancock's paintings. The fifty-thousand-year-old human-plant hybrid comes to life to tell stories and sing and eat Jell-O when embodied by Hancock; it is more insect than human, more space-age flora than Earth-based art object. How do these two pieces—the looping lonely boxer video and the fantastical Mound suit—interact with one another? One seems so rooted in the lived physical experience of a black man and the other so uncommitted to being human. What, if anything, can we take them to mean about blackness, or art, or black art?

We leave that gallery and find ourselves with Nucuazia, the tortured star of Kalup Linzy's lo-fi soap opera *Conversations Wit De Churen II: All My Churen* (2003). Linzy plays all of the characters in this dramatic narrative of a young woman affirming herself, mourning her fallen lover, and defending her choices to her family. Linzy's acting is so strong and the narrative so rich that it is easy to forget he is the only actor. The viewers have a choice to either immerse themselves in the story and its human characters, or watch the show from the more removed standpoint erected by gender, class, race, and/or other constructs. This duality, as articulated in Linzy's work, offers an entry point to expand upon and challenge Oliver's curatorial decision to situate black performance in relationship to visual art as opposed to in relationship to blackness.

In her essay for the catalog, Oliver historicizes performance art in the context of endurance work, which in its early years saw white artists like Chris Burden get himself shot and Marina Abramović propose her own death. Oliver highlights the way black performance artists have troubled this type of threat of death in their work, "specifically because the black body has particular meanings and particular history in the Americas."[2] No doubt this is true, but the black body is not only a *sign* of the persistent threat of death: Black people are threatened with corporeal death on a regular basis. If Burden getting shot in a gallery is performance art, what is Michael Brown—or any of the other several hundred black Americans annually—getting shot on the street?[3] We certainly should not reimagine losses like Brown's, devoid as it was of agency or consent, as performance art. It may, however, be prudent to include black proximity to death (and survival and endurance)—the framework of what ethnographer Dwight Conquergood describes as the "lethal theater" in which black life is played and plays out—in our historicization of white artists like Burden.[4]

Linzy's piece challenges viewers to shift from thinking about *Churen* as a work about blackness to understanding it as a black work and then shift back again. *Churen* encourages a conceptual pivot that proves useful in digesting the exhibition in its entirety, as a show about black performance art that is only sometimes a black show about performance art.

How, for example, can viewers grapple with the installation of images from Maren Hassinger and Senga Nengudi, just a wall away from Wayne Hodge's *Negerkuss* (2011)? Hassinger and Nengudi's black-and-white images document dance and movement work; Hodge's piece is a series of white Grecian busts of Cleopatra, which a masked and black-faced Hodge has taken bites from. Hodge's work is a violent and disturbing application of blackness to white antiquity, whereas Hassinger and Nengudi's work is far more interested in form and feminism. While only about a fifth of the exhibition includes women artists—including the powerfully meditative *My Dreams, My Works Must Wait Till After Hell…*(2011) by Girl (Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh)—a feminist lens informs the work of several artists.[5] Carrie Mae Weems' *Hopes and Dreams: Gestures of Demonstration* (2006–07) uses an androgynous mime character to assert sharp critiques around race, power, and U.S. politics. Documentation of Simmons covering her body on a crowded train in Sri Lanka in *Number 14 (When a Group of People Comes Together to Watch Someone Do Something)* (2012)—a spontaneous performance in which several more conservatively dressed riders donate scarves for Simmons to wear—resists a Western read of the train as a site of repression and operates instead

as a moment of empathy between the train riders and both Simmons and by extension the art-viewing audience. Jacolby Satterwhite's *Reifying Desire* (2011–12) creates a utopic digital playground where Satterwhite's body, transformed through elaborate costuming, can intermingle with his mother's drawings, lush tropical landscapes, and geometric forms. Satterwhite, like Hancock in the next gallery over, uses fantasy to create a depoliticized world. In Satterwhite's worlds, political hierarchies, time, perspective, and anthropocentrism all become flattened grounds for play and exploration. In such worlds, the young, black, male body becomes irrelevant, disappeared even, to make room for everything else that is real.

In my estimation, the aforementioned black, feminist-tinged work is the core of *Radical Presence*. In this work, the gendered, raced, aged, and typically politicized body enters a realm in which it ceases to be political, othered, or individuated. Once one takes the politic out of the black body, the positioning of black performance artists in relation to the larger (white) art world becomes less compelling. A question emerges of whether a black performance without a white context ceases to be performance art. Or does it cease to be black?

Radical Performance artist Clifford Owens asks, "How could contemporary performance artists, notoriously stubborn in their refusal to be defined or contained, possibly be anything but 'post-black'? After all, a serious practice of performance art could offer the most promising paradigm for rethinking and reimagining blackness."[6] If *Radical Presence* exists in that pivot between black art and blackness, Owens' *Anthology* is one of its more important pieces. Made between 2011 and 2012, the work began as a request from Owens to twenty-six prominent black artists to send performance scores, which he then enacted over the course of six months. The fact that Owens' body became the avatar of the artists whose scores he received meant that these black ideas born of black minds could jump bodies. In *Anthology*, the black performing subject becomes transgender, trans-generational, trans-ability, and extends beyond the boundaries of the black body (when, for example, Owens made sand paintings in accordance to one score, or kissed strangers for another). *Anthology* is not an attempt to shore up the lineage of black performance artists within the history of contemporary art. Rather, the work anthologizes blackness—and in its failure to do so conclusively (why these artists and not others, why these actions and not others, and so on), *Anthology* shows us that *there is no accounting for blackness*. It is too vast—it is everything—and can look any way it wants to. Or it can not look at all.

Notes

1. My understanding of "the undercommons" and other associated terms in this essay comes from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's critical text by the same name. The undercommons as I am using it here points to the unruly and unrecognizable collective, the "we" who seek to destroy the world (or worlds). See: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, 2013).
2. Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Putting the Body on the Line: Endurance in Black Performance," in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2013), 14.
3. For a statistical breakdown of black death at the hands of police annually, see Jaeah Lee, "Exactly How Often Do Police Shoot Unarmed Black Men?," *Mother Jones*, August 15, 2014. http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/08/police-shootings-michael-brown-ferguson-black-men.
4. Dwight Conquergood, "Lethal Theater: Performance, Punishment, and the Death Penalty," in *Theater Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 3, October 2002, 339–367.
5. Though, strangely, Adrian Piper did not make it to the YBCA iteration of *Radical Presence*. An odd absence, considering Piper's foundational contributions to the field.
6. Clifford Owens, "Notes on the Crisis of Black American Performance Art," in *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*, 38.