

all our days are full of breath: a record of momentum

by Coman Poon

presence implicates that

absence is channelling

the ephemeral

all our days are full of breath: a record of momentum was an exhibition of performance-installations at the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery curated by Jenn Goodwin in collaboration with artists Jessica Karuhanga and Brandy Leary. Pairing a visual and dance artist, the evolving exhibition hosted and unseated the temporary togetherness of the performing and witnessing bodies through a refracting query of what is traced/traceable in the tasks of living and processing embodiment. Tapping into the etymological origins of curating (*curatus* Latin, “caring for” or “curing”), Goodwin chose to work with artists whose sculptural/choreographic art practices varyingly position the body as a site for creating knowledge and surfacing history from the place of being a living, breathing trans-temporal archive. In doing so, the exhibition importantly reified discourse about the marginalized “object” of dance-performance and the “othered” body as a critical site for the transmission of knowledge through form, movement, presence and gesture.

Skipping the shorter performances at the opening reception, I arrived on March 25 to bear witness to the first of a rotating series of three-hour simultaneous live activations in each of Karuhanga and Leary’s porously sonic and sculptural spaces.

Mafa Makhubalo, a Toronto-based South African photographer and dance artist Leary previously spotlighted at the launch of *Contemporaneity* (“a multidisciplinary series Leary curates that seeks to re-centre understandings of the contemporary away from European or white American assumptions”) sat, paced, gumboot-danced and spoke in his native tongue from within an installation composed of 578 metal bells imported from Kerala, Gujarat and Rajasthan provinces in India. Suspended in mid-air, and intoning sounds reminiscent of the vibration of “Om,” the installation sculpturally dimensioned positive and negative space, sonically and visually presencing the architecture of an imaginary temple. A ghostly score by Nick Storrington, incorporating a subtle soundscape remixing recordings of all five solos that are part of Leary’s *Ephemeral Artifacts*, added a seemingly randomized delay effect to the gumboot stomping. In this context, as I witnessed opaquely evident embodied investigations, I came into an awareness of my own thinking: of the presenting cage of the body as “layered artifact” (of not only human cultural and historical output but scientific investigation); of the loud performative Black body as an object for display/containment and the English/ unilingual-centric boredom and impatience with things it can’t understand. In midst of this, Mafa suddenly made eye contact with someone who has just entered. His warm greeting and humourous verbal engagement (in English) opened my mental gaze from passive viewer into that of a welcomed guest.

Curious about the sense of the liveness in the solos of *Ephemeral Artifacts*, I returned a few days later for the activations of Travis Knights, a charismatic tap dancer who engaged in a speaking practice (while vacillating between tap dancing and standing), that included reminiscing and entertaining us about his embarrassing and redeeming teenage encounter with American tap idol Gregory Hines on a film set. Surmising that he had arrived at a point of active stillness and de-theatricalization, I passed him my iPhone and watched him privately enjoy the video of dance clips from TV series *Will and Grace* (including cameos by an older Gregory Hines). Witnessing bodies waited behind lines of private curiosity. An intimate (but public) disclosure transpires between Travis and I after I speak of the death of a dear friend’s sister who passed that morning, someone who had fought and lived with cancer and who I openly honoured for choosing the path of doctor-assisted dying. In return, Travis spoke about the love for his mother who continues to battle illness. It is an unexpected moment for both of us – shared and momentary intimacy between strangers. I am grateful for the connection and for the porous structure that managed to hold these unplanned but linking threads of interaction. In hindsight, this social experience also left me yearning for the space between the artifact and the container for artifacts such as a

gallery or Hindu temple, a place where the arts, economy and community can intermingle and where the secular and the sacred do not have a dividing line.

Recentring power and community within the ethos of artistic collaboration, healing and collective embodiment forms bridges between Leary's *Ephemeral Artifacts* and Karuhanga's *through a brass channel*.

Jessica Karuhanga's live art practice synthesized and aestheticized the performative image as a repositioning of tender vulnerability and resilience as acts of time-folding spiritual resistance. She and her collaborators sculpted time and space through the induction of simple rituals and slowly moving bodies.

In reference to the West African Griots that recall and recount a family's history through song, poetry and storytelling (serving as a living archive of a people's history), *through a brass channel*'s performance rituals and shifting multivalent installation employed contemporary form to house contemporary content. The "sculpted breathing space," performances and installations evoked both a marked symbolic sensibility as well as a zigzagging geo-logic of millennial Afro-Diasporic alterity.

"...perceiving directly acts upon the present, but with one foot firmly planted in the future. Experience, on the other hand, does the contrary: you are in the present, but with one foot in the past" – Eduardo Chillida

Referencing Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* and the installation "*Untitled (Night Train)*" by David Hammons, a rope and coal installation visibly linked to the main installation: a projected cluster of self-affirming YouTube videos of diverse Afro-Diasporic women projected onto hanging cloth "sails," evocative of cloth brought as goods to West Africa in trade for slaves. The installation created a techno-portal "black hole," ritually contained by a ring of salt, in the centre of the East Gallery.

In tandem with a sound installation that documented diverse Black voices speaking to yearning for escape through memory or fantasy, I read this as a spatialized inference to the construction of virtual identity, arguably prefigured upon a "master/slave" relationship, as a contemporary form of the Middle Passage.

Taking a page from Martine Syms' *Afrofuturist Manifesto*, Karuhanga cumulatively proposed time- travel as separable from nostalgia. In one spellbinding evening, she jointly improvised with Caribbean- Canadian writer-activist M. NourbeSe Phillip to presence the transgenerational colonial archive. Through an amplifying, echoing and embodying of words from Phillip's book *Zong!*, they uncovered the fluidity of what Katherine McKittrick names as the "past/ present, archives/fiction, theory/everyday" as a way of corporeally accessing Black resilience.

Examining how live performance predicates both presence and absence of the body, Goodwin alludes to a quickening conversation with Francisco-Fernando Granados by citing "how performance comes off the body." By setting the performing and palimpsestic body as a respective filter for questions of mundane perception and intellection, both Leary and Karuhanga propose that in tracing the ephemeral, choreographing the time-body is as important as performative liveness, maybe even more important. Like breath, the transmuting body is dense and rarified with knowing and unknowing. Experiencing time is not what is left of the work, it's the work itself.

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Abstract

This is a review of “all our days are full of breath: a record of momentum” which was an exhibition of performance-installations curated by Jenn Goodwin in collaboration with artists Jessica Karuhanga and Brandy Leary. The exhibition took place at Justina M. Barnicke Gallery in Toronto, and ran from March 24 to April 8, 2017.

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