

‘MIND THE GAP’: *performative-symposium*. Preliminary Remarks’

-Marina Barys

Part 1[Sound of water dripping. Lights dimmed in the auditorium. Light coming from a small lamp in the podium where I read the following text.]

Good afternoon and welcome to our ‘MIND THE GAP’: *performative-symposium*. We are very pleased to have you all here. This project could not have been brought to fruition without the collaboration of ESCALA (Essex Collection of Art from Latin America) and the Centre for Curatorial Studies of the School of Philosophy and Art History of the University of Essex. It has also received the support of the University of Essex’s Centre for Latin American and Caribbean Studies and the Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies, as well as the support of ISLAA (Institute for Studies on Latin American Art), firstsite contemporary visual arts centre as host of this project here in Colchester (UK), and the Puerto Rico Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC) as our host also today in San Juan.

I would like to start by thanking Dr. Joanne Harwood and Dr. Sarah Demelo of ESCALA, and Dr. Rebecca Breen from the Centre for Curatorial Studies of the University of Essex for your constant support throughout the process; Aravind Adyanthaya for being with us today; Luzmar Soneira for the extraordinary help with the management of the activity in Puerto Rico; graphic designer Sonia Andreou for your disposition under all circumstances; and Daniel Leyton for the everyday inspiration.

My thanks also to Andrew Canessa, Director of the Centre for Latin American and Caribbean Studies; Barbara Pierson and Steve Goatman from the Lakeside Theatre; Marián Ramírez, Executive Director from the Puerto Rico Museum of Contemporary Art, firstsite’s Duty Manager and staff; Gordon Mac for being our technical support today; Marién Vélez and Carla Cavina for the technical support and filming in Puerto Rico; and to all the people who have inspired and helped in the conception and realisation of ‘MIND THE GAP’.

I would especially like to thank all the participants: Aravind Adyanthaya, Dr. Rebecca Breen, Awilda Sterling-Duprey, Prof. Osita Okagbue, Deborah Hunt and, Dr. Mischa Twitchin, for sharing with us today their outstanding performance.

During the performative symposium here a synchronized event will be happening in Puerto Rico in the Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC). The performance of artist, Awilda Sterling

Duprey will come to us via Skype, and will be performed live for the public in the Puerto Rico Museum of Contemporary Art. After the performance, the activity at the MAC will consist in a discussion panel on current issues on Puerto Rican performance art with the participation of curator of MAC Lilliana Ramos Collado; Head of the Interdisciplinary Studies Program in the University of Puerto Rico and theatre and performance critic, Lowell Fiet; novelist and performer, Rey Emmanuel Andújar; musician, actor and performer, Eduardo Alegría; dancer, researcher and performer, José (Pepe) Álvarez; and visual artist, costume designer and performer Freddie Mercado. This discussion panel will be filmed and available in the future both in the MAC's archive and in ESCALA's archive as a donation. I also thank all these participants for their engagement and input.

Part 2 [Lights are turned on. Water-dripping sound is turned off.]

MIND THE GAP: *performative-symposium* was conceived as a result of my research on performance tendencies in the Puerto Rican performance scene of the last decade. The three artists we will see today have been important key figures on the development of the performative arts in Puerto Rico, and have influenced and mentored the younger generations of emerging artists. Working since the 1990s on theatre, street theatre, dance, choreography, and the visual arts, they have turned at one point or another to performance art for further exploration on an existential territory.

Tendencies in Puerto Rican performance art gather broader approaches in performance art or live art encountered outside the country, such as African Diaspora Performance and its mythical approach, 'post-dramatic' theatres (Antonin Artaud, Tadeusz Kantor, and Jerzy Grotowski), puppet and political theatre, (Jacques Lecoq, Peter Schumann's Bread & Puppet, and Odin Teatret), as well as others. The presentation of the speakers in this symposium will serve as a contextualization of the nature of such influences by opening a dialogue with the performance pieces, creating a fertile ground from which to explore.

By assembling the speech of the speakers with the performance act, 'MIND THE GAP' seeks to question the ontological narrative of the performance act itself in regards to the performance's inscription into history through the action of its writing.

The performance act is defined by its ephemerae. The action subjected to a time frame has a self-destructive nature. It is at once created in time and destroyed by it. Performance is an

active experience; visceral, palpable, aggressive in its proximity and in its creation of a multi-temporal ‘habitat’.

It happens at several times, the ‘real’, conventional time, and its own. The conventional time expires as well as the own time created by the live work. This handling of time, its eventuality, happens in an apparent arrhythmic manner. Several temporalities are part of the construction of the work itself. None of these temporalities persist, nor transmute into any kind of afterward trace or residue. Scholars such as Rebecca Schneider (2001) have argued that the performance ‘vanishes’ or ‘disappears’.¹ Once finished, the live-performance act starts to be presence in the memories of a person, or a place. In that way, the performance also opens the possibility of being recorded, repeated, and remembered beyond the co-presence of the public.

Performance is dramaturgically open (physically and mentally); thus the performer implements a ‘program’ and not a narrative, as described by Eleonora Fabião (2012).² She explains “Performance art’s openness suggests that there will never be just one fact to be experienced and narrated by many”.³ The various experiences, felt by the various subjectivities constituting the public, carry a multiplicity of historiographies which can be born from a discursive description of the performance. No object/ification can gather this multiplicity.

Today, we as public will engage with three performances in different formats. Firstly, we will witness the choreographer Awilda Sterling Duprey elaborate a performance presentation through her virtual presence via Skype. The gaps brought by this format may reveal to us several differences between here and Puerto Rico, such as: the difference in time zone, spatial conception, sensorial detachment, cultural ethnocentrism, alienation, scepticism of ‘the real’, amongst others. The artist’s actions will count on both a live and a virtual public. Her performance will discuss the popular figure of the *vejigante*, a typical character in folkloric festivals rooted in the syncretic development of African tradition with Catholicism. These carnivalesque festivities celebrated mainly, but not exclusively, in Loíza town are embedded with mythical-religious symbolism. African heritage is particularly evident in Loíza town through rhythm, dance, costumes, traditions and religious practices (such as *Santería* and

¹ Rebecca Schneider R. Performance Remains. In Jones A & Heathfield A, editors. Perform, repeat, record: live art in history. Bristol: Intellect; 2012, p.138.

² Eleonora Fabião E. History and Precariousness: In Search of a Performative Historiography. In Jones A & Heathfield A, editors. Perform, repeat, record: live art in history. Bristol: Intellect; 2012, p.123.

³ *Ibid.*

Espiritismo). However, these are not exclusive of this town and form an essential part of Puerto Rican popular culture.

Our second performatic encounter will be a video-recording of a performance made by maskmaker and puppeteer, Deborah Hunt, who has been working in Puerto Rico since 1990 and has greatly influenced the art of mask-making in the country. The performance we will witness was performed originally for a public of New York University drama students a few months ago in the theatre-studio of the company 'Y no había luz' in San Juan, Puerto Rico. The past public, then, their bodily reactions recorded along with the performance, will be counterpoised by the present public, today.

In Deborah Hunt's work, subjects' identities are built from the embodied object; the mask is lifeless without its wearer's body, but this body does not have the power to give life to the mask if it is not possessed by it. Martin Heidegger recalls the etymology of *persona* as the actor's mask, and he adds: 'since man is the percipient who perceives what is, we can think of him as the *persona*, the mask, of being'⁴.

The 'presence in absentia' of the first two performances will be contrasted by the pure presence of a fleshly existence; the live performance of artist Aravind Adyanthaya.⁵ Adyanthaya's technique of the 'Writing Act', an on-stage display of theatrical poetics, underpins the notion of the contradiction, complement and gap found in the translation from the spoken word to the written word, from the written to the spoken, and from the action of writing to the action of speech. The private act involving the action of writing is performed publicly by speech as a production of the speaking body. The artist examines the relationship between the writer and the written, the medium and the message, and the spectators' and the written perceptions'; as well as exploring the hybridization of language braided onto cultural values and contexts.

In performance art, the public makes possible the transformation of the act from the ephemeral to the transcendental. The performance act can be performed without being witnessed, but created for a potential 'other' through its objectification by recorded media.

⁴ Heidegger cited in Levin 1999: 282. Original found in one of his lectures collected in the series published as *What is Called Thinking?*

⁵ Reference to Amelia Jones. See Amelia Jones. *Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*. *Art Journal*. 1997; (56)4: 11-18.

In the technological era, this 'other': known usually as public, spectator, audience, social mass, witness, etc. has been also subjected to a virtual co-presence.

Thank you all again for your presence and energy.

I hope you enjoy.