On The Raised-ness of People, Places & Things

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On the Raised-ness of People, Places & Things

by

Miatta Kawinzi

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Hunter College
The City University of New York

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Thesis Sponsor:

May 12, 2016          Constance DeJong
Date                   First Reader

May 12, 2016          Paul Ramirez Jonas
Date                   Second Reader
Dedication -

to uplifting hope in an embattled world.
Acknowledgements

Gratitude as always to my mama for more than can be put into words.

Many thanks to Constance for guidance & knowingness, and to Paul for thoughtfulness.

To Erik, Michael & ray, for the madness & the magic.

To Jamal & Kiyane, for the brightbright glow of your black light.

I am exceedingly grateful to the financial assistance received from Hunter College throughout my time as a student that has facilitated and enriched my studies, including the Scholarship & Welfare Fund Award, the Kossak Travel Grant, and the Cisneros SOMA scholarship. I am also grateful to Greatmore Studios in Cape Town, South Africa and SOMA in Mexico City, Mexico, where I was an artist-in-residence and summer program participant respectively; both of these experiences contributed to the development of this work.

And to soul singers, as ever.
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"…we care about each other so militantly, with such softness…"

- Fred Moten, The Little Edges

Sometimes the socially-inscribed frame is stifling, the given language is chalky, the syllables are stuffy, and it becomes necessary to invent new terminology. Suppose we are in a moment such as this. Suppose we need new language to freshly approach old problems. Suppose we need new vistas to arrive at what we couldn’t see approaching us.

My thesis project is comprised of the pairing of images and writing in Once Upon A Time (Time), as well as by my gallery installation of video, sound, and sculpture. This work is a proposal for the idea of radical fragility, a notion I have invented out of the urgency of the current moment.

Radical fragility evokes tenderness as resistance. It is a refusal to become hardened by the dailiness of violence clouding the United States, yes, still, now. It is the belief in the strength of the delicate. It is a belief in the possibility embedded within the pliable. It is a refusal of fixity; for if nothing is fixed, then it can be changed; rocks softened, weight shifted.

This work is concerned with untangling the space between flatness and dimensionality. It claims multi-dimensionality. It encourages the viewer to encounter it
from multiple vantage points both physical and mental. It asks: what space can be opened when we shift the weight of routine?

Departing from Roland Barthes’s seminal essay *The Grain of the Voice*, and his conceptualization of the voice’s grain as a conveyor of information alongside verbal language, in this work I am pursuing the texture and depth of the grain as it manifests in the voice, in the image, and in sound. I am expanding on the essay’s discussion of the grain as “the materiality of the body speaking its mother tongue,” and on the way in which language can exist and perform beyond functionality (Barthes 182). In my work, language oscillates between legibility and illegibility.

Here song, too, becomes a form of writing. In the physical experience of my thesis installation, the sound contours the space and takes on a form. If to perceive the grain of the voice in a piece compels the listener to reflect on its relationship with their own body in time and space, in the aural experience I am creating, the sound moves from being an external force to becoming internalized and felt.

I am using musicality and experimental vocalization to set the pacing and timing through which the video and audio work in the exhibition unfolds. I am engaging alternative conceptualizations of time through my use of devices such as the loop, the gap, the repeated fragment, and the break. These formal strategies are related to a conceptual strategy in which I am positing the state of being un-whole as a site of possibility rather than lack, and darkness as generative. I am requiring time investment from the viewer.

This body of work has been informed by Ntozake Shange’s critical novel *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, a book that employs a variety of writing styles and
narrative perspectives. This novel privileges the Black female voice in world-making, and validates various forms of knowledge rooted in cultural tradition and lived experience. My work is similarly multi-vocal, and its pace of unfolding is deliberately “slow/like a river/gatherin’/space” (Shange 90). Like the novel, its directionality is non-linear. The title of the video, gatherin’ space, refers back to this excerpt.

Beneath the text there is another text. Beneath the wordless chorus, the affective vibrations of the felt. A call to re-join the heart and mind. Here, in line with the approach of poet Nathaniel Mackey, “I tend to pursue resonance rather than resolution” (Mackey 17).

Much of this is about suspension. Weight and weightlessness. Dislocation. The coordinates of the unknown. Floating. Articulation as buoy.

In my installation also titled gatherin’ space, I have created a landscape out of rocks made of aluminum foil, which is poor wo/man’s silver, or poor wo/man’s bling. This is a material that is widely available and inexpensive. It is also a material that is associated with protection. It has a history of being used as a makeshift insulator and shield from things ranging from cold weather to surveillance technology. In my installation, it operates as a physical object, as a reflector, and as a shadowed silhouette.

The video gatherin’ space is projected through these foil rocks, which creates a plane on which the image exists beyond a singular projection surface. Light from the projector takes on a painterly quality as it moves and flickers across the floor, foil, and wall. The wall doubles as a filmed presence within the video and as a site of projection in the installation itself.
In the video, there is an oscillation between expansion and containment; the body fills the frame, moves around it, curves in its corners. We see the sky, an allusion to expansion, though there are bits of dust and grease also visible in these moments, as it is filmed through a window. The frame shakes. The layers of remove are acknowledged.

Throughout **gatherin’ space**, a variety of hand gestures create a vocabulary of movements that carry different registers; some mysterious, some graceful, some complete, some paused. This, too, is a form of writing in space. A wordless speaking. Many of the gestures unfold slowly. There is an ethereality to this bodily fragmentation. The whole is more than the sum of its parts.

In my thesis installation as well as in *Once Upon A Time (Time)*, I am working with the language of hands. They are an extension of our bodies into space through which we shape, make, touch, feel, sense, probe, praise, and labor. I am working with the connotations of the reach as a gesture that can mean both to pull toward and to sway away from something. Hands extended, raised upwards. Hands, up. Hands, up. Don’t. Shoot.

Up: surrender.

Up: assertion.

The body bends, sinks into the surface, lifts out. Carves a corner in which to exist. Is pushed into a corner, claims it, makes a home out of language, a shelter, tent. Triangulates invisible roofing to keep the wind at bay. Extends beyond its prescribed demarcation, trails light to illuminate that which has been placed below.

In this work, the verb supplants the noun.
What happens when we lift?
I have long been fascinated by the gesture of the reach.

To pull toward.

To sway away from.

To bypass layers, exploding the magnitude of a thing.
I left Kentucky wide-eyed and soft-hearted, one green backpack on my shoulders and two green boots on my feet. “Out West,” as always, reached my tender self towards its shores.

What did I believe?
1. That money was a fiction we could overturn if we loved each other hard enough.

2. That gentleness can still exist in the unknown.

3. That motion was the medicine.

I got picked up by a fellow seeker on the Oregon coast. He made his way into a wood-wrapped hostel and offered his car as sleeping bag. Grateful, I rested, and when my eyes opened it was to a blanket of mist glowing with silver stringing and lifting slightly to reveal the burst of bright green growing things in reaching to the sky.
Damp air & earth & the coastline as a porous boundary. Everything alive.
The myth of California.

A well-founded smoothing of edges.

A person with well-sunned hands offered the bay of his pick-up truck as viewing room for fields of clover.

Long stretch of growth and swirl of sky.

Another, adamant on taking a detour to swing onto skinny roads bordered by elegant trunks steadfast in standing.

“The redwoods grow close together.
They have pancake roots.”

I learned that their latticework is interlaced; in joining, they grow; holding each other up, reaching such vast heights as time churns on around them.

Togetherness as a means to flourish, as staircase, lift.
[ sometimes it is comfortable to not know what is being said, to simply coast the metronome of language ]

I grew up lulled by the syntax of the unknown known.
My father and uncle would joyously speak Kamba and Swahili while sinking into the living room couch, the patterns of speech becoming familiar to me while remaining untranslated, long bursts of rapid speech accented with laughter.

As for me, I learned the Queen’s English as filtered through this soil. Nothing was to prevent me from mastering sleek communication in this land where my being constantly had to be justified.

the qwaan’s inglish

Sometimes the reach does not seek a grasping; the gesture in and of itself is enough.
My mother speaks in many voices. Before I knew the academic terms for the bouncing of syllables and syntax between registers richly textured in difference, I would trace the morphing of easy sentences into buttoned-up ones, map the journeys of inflection across red dust clouds and wide city streets, on bus rides and plane rides, as held, as stretched, as invented.

Like many things, the labeling of this is reductive. They call it code-switching, but this term assumes the navigation of the already-given and ignores the imagination involved, the forging. I know it to be a form of shape-shifting, and this, too, I have inherited.

The one who is reaching decides how far to extend the self.
The one who is reaching decides how far to extend.
It is years later and I am unsure of where exactly “home” is, but the news that reaches me over overseas from the city in which I left my room to a subletter is shaky. Elsewhere I can step outside the pliable shell of metal I wear; the sides of this shell repel the endless din of discord that colors the base fabric of the nation into which I was born. They waited for an earth-colored president, then brought buried blades back to the surface to cloak the days in fear: I have re-traced the Atlantic, but the geographical distance does not disrupt the closeness of these stories nor unchoke the throat.
To breathe is another kind of
reaching.
It reveals how the intangible
sets the mechanism
of living into motion
- or cuts it short.
I think perhaps that the heart has the potential to shuffle on, that a certain amount of armor is necessary to maintain the rhythm of foot to floor in moving forward, that time moves in waves mirroring the ocean and if nothing is fixed, then it can be changed.

But there is urgency in this new kind of reaching, these raised hands everywhere intoning a chorus against the strict burst of ammunition marking the frenzy of now.
I dream of levitation.
References


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Miatta Kawinzi
Installation Images
Hunter College MFA Thesis Exhibition
April 21 - May 7, 2016
205 Hudson St Gallery
New York, NY 10013
TO BREATHE
IS ANOTHER
KIND OF
REACHING
Installation Image List

1. *gatherin’ space*
   2016
   Installation View
   Color Video Projection & Sound on Loop, Aluminum Foil
   Dimensions Variable

2. *gatherin’ space*
   2016
   Installation View
   Color Video Projection & Sound on Loop, Aluminum Foil
   Dimensions Variable

3. *gatherin’ space*
   2016
   Installation Detail
   Color Video Projection & Sound on Loop, Aluminum Foil
   Dimensions Variable

4. *gatherin’ space*
   2016
   Installation Detail
   Color Video Projection & Sound on Loop, Aluminum Foil
   Dimensions Variable

5. *To Breathe: BLM*
   2016
   Acrylic & Oil Pastel on Wood
   10 x 10 in.

6. *To Breathe: Hands*
   2016
   Digital Print for Exhibition Distribution
   4 x 5 in.