

## **Performing Trauma, Creating Community, Exchanging Sou**

As performance theorists and writer-practioners Bertolt Brecht and Brazilian arts activist Augusto Boal fiercely claim, theater or the use of performative forms, functions as more than entertainment. Boal writes in his *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* that theatre “is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it” (xxxix). Theatre reflects, distorts, reifies, and replicates social structures, sentiments, and challenges. If so, then how can theater be used as a tool to empower the proletariat, or in Boal terms, the “oppressed?” Following a trajectory of rationalizing theatre, or performance usages in social groups, Marx implicates necessity and practicality in socially formulated products. In his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx writes, “All social life is essentially *practical*. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice” (571). The mystery of performance’s quantitative social effect and consumption patterns lurks around questions about why some communities reproduce social struggles through performance. How can theatre, if perceived as public performance practices, including ritualistically driven acts, reveal social processes of power, symbol and history?

In this essay, I use Marx as foundational in underlining philosophies of meaning and purpose in performance practice. In addition, Richard Flores’ exploration of the *Los Pastores* community-centered Christmas plays explicitly situates performance as a socializing process that delineates value and aesthetics through gift-exchange economies. How does a specific performance-driven group perform as actors, agents and subjects in establishing a contextually relevant historical narrative vis-à-vis Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s

theories on the production of history? In what ways does *praxis* manifest as what Lukács terms a “theory of praxis” in proletarian performance practices? To examine the aesthetic value and meaning of performance events, I use as example a community-based art benefit that sought financial and material assistance for survivors of hurricane Katrina that decimated New Orleans last August.

Two weeks after a hurricane Katrina pounced upon and mutilated the city of New Orleans, I was on assignment for the *Austin Chronicle*. My job was to report how various arts organizations, artist communities and venues producing art have donated time, effort, and energy for housing recovery, fundraising and emotional support. After interviewing half a dozen major arts organizations, I was distraught by not seeing lesser-known, self-identified artists helping other *artists* through their loss. In general, efforts fixed upon helping the general “masses” of people who fled their homes and evacuated to neighboring cities for safety. Arts organizations (and their correlative publicity managers) empirically and zealously declared that evacuees stranded in Austin could benefit soulfully from entertainment events. Ideological assumptions permeated as arts having mystical potential power to heal the suffering from trauma. Overarching social themes resided in the belief that performance (as theatre, music, or dance) could serve an aesthetic and spiritual purpose. This ideology influenced producing organizations that held open concerts, generously donated free tickets to shows, bused evacuees to arts venues, or went to the site of temporary displacement, the Austin Convention Center, to perform puppet shows, storytelling, and songs with children and families.

In my dissatisfaction with arts manipulated as a transitory consumptive fix, I hunted for other groups organizing Katrina disaster relief. I located a grassroots

environmental and urban sustainability education organization called the Rhizome Collective. They were hosting a benefit show at Café Mundi coffeehouse, a site with historical ties to social activism through periodic group meetings held by organizations working on social change campaigns. At this benefit show, artists from New Orleans performed in an eclectic variety show. To orient the reader, I offer a “thick description” via Clifford Geertz, of the event albeit skewed by the pervasive domination of personal perspective amid a journalistic flair.

That evening at Cafe Mundi, I entered a dimly lit courtyard to find a cargo van parked inside the playing area with electronic equipment, fabric, Christmas lights dangling from the truck's ceiling, and an array of other odd objects. A tall woman decked out in black platform shoes, body tattoos, and shaved head with exaggerated eyebrows announced the program's lineup into a microphone. Clamp lights with attached color gels followed her movement as impromptu technicians fastened them on upside-down plastic buckets. New Orleans is a street performer's city that encourages the showcasing of outrageous stunts to entertain the tourists, explained Miss Led, the mistress of ceremonies, and many of the performers on the bill made their living through such work.

"Doc" Otis Cross played electric piano flanked by two band members running bows across the edge of handsaws. The trio bent a haunted blues melody out of droning, shaky wails. Later, improvised models strutted to punk rock for a cement floor fashion show. The clothing, reconstructed from donated goods recently acquired through the Red Cross, had slashes, transparent frills, spray paint, or decorative bits and pieces added to the original. Some called the handicraft "hot-rodding," a term usually applied to stock cars.

In explaining the Dadaist nature of the benefit, Melanie Schopper, one of the models and an Austinite, credits Zotz, a New Orleans coffeehouse reminiscent of Cabaret Voltaire, the early 20th-century Zurich café. Over the last five years, Zotz has promoted fringe artists, creating its own flip-side community in the Crescent City. Schopper looks forward to an "arts reprise in Austin," whereby "fabulous freaks" raid Austin's marketed yet now blasé "weirdness" inundating Austin tourism slogans.

The stories told by these displaced artists are like those of others displaced by the storm. Mattvaughn Black, a New Orleans musician, performer, and owner of the Whirling Dervish bar, fled with few of his belongings, assuming he could return promptly. And he knew people stuck in the Superdome and convention center, and others who walked barefoot on Interstate 10. Like many, he anticipates returning, even though his home in the by-water region, a neighborhood for many artists that's near the 9th Ward, most likely was devastated by Katrina. "Me and my wife talk that we're going back," he says. "There's a reason we're there. I want the Mardi Gras Indians back. I want my New Orleans back."

Many people at the benefit thanked the people of Austin again and again for their hospitality and open arms. During the event's close, we widened our ears to Altercation A Capella, a pale, small-framed woman who held the microphone close to her body and in a deep and guttural voice sang African-American spirituals. She told of trudging "knee deep in water full of shit" with "rotting death" all around her a couple of days before. As she moved through the sludge, she heard a song rising behind her. She sang that tune for us in dark rapture, "Wade in the water, wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water."

Soon we all joined voices with her, clapping hands in syrupy sweet rhythm. Purge and rescue, sink or swim, these are survivor songs.

Surviving becomes the unifying force and means of entering this social group, spontaneously formed through a gathering of collective experience. Even though many of us in the crowd were spectators, donors, and indulgent partiers, we shared similar reasons for being where we were. Surviving transforms into a praxis comprised of alternative methods of traumatic recovery with counter-culture performance activity. The outrageousness of a performer playing noise guitar underneath an enormous hood of lights and cloth works against a tamer artistic status quo. This was not singer/songwriter Willie Nelson at the coliseum with fellow artist Patti Griffin and other famous celebrities raising money. At Café Mundi, the performances, aesthetically situated in Dada and trash-art histories, refute art as a commodified, overblown, and commercialized product. Irony and symbolism flood form that indicates interruptions between quality and prescriptive function. Women playing handsaws to a grating tone could be a contestable act for a reserved audience more familiar with Verdi or Mozart. The cultural capital circulates as underground aesthetic judged more by audacity than virtuosity.<sup>i</sup>

Focusing on *barrio* and mission performances of *Los Pastores*, Richard Flores offers a resolution to the varying degrees of performance labor, its social meaning (quality of social value) and reception. Performers in *Los Pastores* complained that to perform at tourist-oriented missions felt “different” than performing inside the communal, sharing, reciprocal exchange environment of a person’s home. At the mission, the “troupe’s labor of performance was not being reciprocated through the labor of gratitude...no amount of money could replace the labor of gratitude that was present in

the *barrio* location” (Flores 155) At the hurricane fundraiser, money collected at the door for entry was pick-your-price donation. The performance functioned as both gift-exchange and commodity-exchange. No clear lines distinguished the differences between the exchanges. Unlike Flores’ work, one obvious reason for this conflation of exchanges is the performance’s stationary location. If these artists had performed in two distinct culturally and economically specific places, the emphasis on gratitude and solidarity for a cause may have shifted.

What if dreadlock-haired female handsaw musicians were to play in an opera house before a crowd of wealthy Republicans? I’d deduce the patrons’ reception of the performance would translate as spectacle and entertainment for tourist appetites, not “high art.” The act becomes similar to performance tricks performed in the (once, not too long ago) tourist-stricken Bourbon Street. The narrative of traumatic recovery, plus any political malaise injected into the mediated chaos of failed immediate post-hurricane rescue efforts, would be overshadowed by empty sympathy, with spectators craving the blow-by-blow dramatic unfolding of when disaster struck. For the social actors/survivors/artists at Café Mundi, the reconstructed Goodwill clothing signifies much more than the ingenuity of the crafty poor and subsequent self-congratulations for the privileged who donated aesthetically repulsive hand-me-downs to the desperate and needy. For the Café Mundi event, the “gifting of performance, therefore, is the reciprocal process of performance and gratitude that engages performers and audience in a cyclical event founded on shared communication, social solidarity, and mutual obligation” (Flores 151).

Lukács elaborates on historical dialectics as powerful and elusive fluxes with regard to artistic *praxis* associated with aesthetic value. He suggests, “We have observed, for instance, how certain works of art are extraordinarily sensitive to the qualitative nature of dialectical changes without their becoming conscious of the antagonisms which they lay bare and to which they give artistic form” (206). Like the fluid river we can only step in once to understand its nature at that moment and time<sup>ii</sup>, performance acts a living marker of events that cannot be reproduced exactly, but when reflected upon through memory or collective narrative recall, traces of form and meaning flash through consciousness. Those artists and friends directly affected by the devastation coordinated and performed for the Katrina fundraiser out of spontaneous necessity. They applied their skills as radical artists to engage in a dialectical relationship against the onslaught of governmental and global relief groups. No words were spoken about FEMA or the Red Cross coming to save them, although some were silently waiting for their FEMA check. These artists exchanged whatever they had worth value, in this case their hastily done art and performance as a kind of reverse catharsis, purging their tragic stories for each other rather than for an Aristotelian passive spectator.

The social group distinguished aesthetic values on their material labor themselves; to contest their judgment would be undeniably crude. That night, art and performance that had once been historically irrelevant or rejected due to its trash-art style or anti-establishment screed, turned into soul-gold. The artists behind the art survived; they are alive. Their lives were and still are at stake. Twisting Weber’s notion of sociological structures of power, the “propertyless” now devoid of their materialist claims to social order, “have nothing concrete to lose but their lives” (Weber, Mills and Gerth 171). They

can perform under a banner peculiar to historically relevant criteria of virtuosity as survivor-artists, thereby reorienting the structures of aesthetic value according to present standards of art exchange-values. The frayed and tasseled skirt stitched together from donated commodities becomes symbol to a larger archive of historical production. In this case, performance traces do have their artifacts.

In contemplation on the artifacts in production, Trouillot anchors us with an awareness of erasure. According to his triad of historical processing, the “agents” of counter-cultural, predominately white, lower-class, artist groups enact their performance as social “actors” on the amorphous stage of New Orleans. Within the sphere of a city undergoing massive reconstruction they become “purposeful subjects aware of their own voices” (Trouillot 24). The problem lies with the reality that “peoples are not always subjects constantly confronting history as some academics would wish, but the capacity upon which they act to become subjects is always part of their condition. This subjective capacity ensures confusion because it makes human beings doubly historical, or more properly, fully historical.” Trouillot proposes to embrace the ambiguousness of the “two sides of historicity” as well as understand that history is dependent upon silencing some narratives while voicing others. The chronicler plays a role in this censorship because in order to establish narrative, boundaries of encompassment must be established. In the instance of a New Orleans evacuee Café Mundi performance event, I have more information on a tape recorder than on these pages. I have chosen to locate the most engaging interviews, while simultaneously forming a narrative about survivor stories influencing artistic aesthetics in time and space. I hope that I have at least been able to

offer an explanation to the production of performance beyond the simplified idealism of “art for art’s sake.”

Performance theorist and theater director Richard Schechner is accordingly doubtful “whether there ever was any ‘art for art’s sake.’

[T]heater is a model of, or an experimentally controlled example of, human interactions... The interactions played out in the theater are those which are problematical in society, interactions of a sexual, violent, or taboo kind concerning hierarchy, territory, or mating... Drama arises where clarity of signal is needed most: where the risk is greatest and the stakes highest, where redundancy of signal is an advantage (213-14).

Performance is both ritual process and community forum. The ritual manifests from grieving, celebration of what was lost, what will become, and how to heal. What was once a denigrated social circle, tightly supported by those in their own communal matrix, branched out into a wider geographical sphere, carrying with them all their narratives of taboo and hierarchy. By exchanging stories through performative acts, people localized apart from the geographical storm can more clearly grasp what will eventually fade into historical timelines of natural disaster. The question now is, how, why and what narratives may endure stability in the annals of history that discriminate according to dominant hegemonies? Will these pages linger and thus influence interpretation through the years? Although naïve and fatalistically idealistic, I’d rather the dramatic fodder of New Orleans evacuees unravel through the exchange of memory and individual experience so that nothing is ever left erased. The object built as performance prop at

that specific performance event signals itself as a fetishistic material acquisition of the specters of the past. It may be the only thing left to cling through the shadows of time.

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## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Pierre Bourdieu's book *Distinction* undertakes a daunting task of determining how cultural groups form their artistic tastes and values. In the Editor's Introduction to *The Field of Cultural Production*, Johnson writes, "Taste of distinction, of which artistic competence and the aesthetic disposition are part, implies freedom from economic necessity, the ability to keep necessity at arm's length, and permits the distant and detached relation to works of art required by a pure aesthetic. The submission to necessity by those less endowed with cultural and economic capital corresponds, on the other hand, to a more functional and pragmatic aesthetic based on the schemes of perception of everyday life and the frequent rejection of the gratuitousness associated, for example, with formal experimentation." Pierre Bourdieu and Randal Johnson, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>ii</sup> Lukacs describes the transformation of things as a process untenable. "The recognition that one cannot step into the same river twice is just an extreme way of highlighting the unbridgeable abyss between concept and reality. It does nothing to increase our concrete knowledge of the river." Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971: 203).