

## Exhibit B

Date : December 9, 2014

Probing further: the untormented "white body"



Protesters gather at the Vaults Gallery during a rally that led to Exhibit B by South African artist Brett Bailey being cancelled. Photograph: Thabo Jaiyesimi/Demotix/Corbis

How does one review an exhibition that has been banned from public view? The censorship of Exhibit B earlier this year in London constitutes yet another interesting visual and performative episode in Brett Bailey's controversial saga currently touring Europe, as his 'tableaux vivants' or living displays of black performers in various scenes (supposedly) representative of slavery and colonialism gave rise to impassioned protest and resulted in its closure.

What this controversy reveals for critique, more than it has censored for content, is the problematic format of performance in today's art scene. While many critics have voiced their concern that the show manifests a "perpetuation of the objectification of the black body", as sociologist Kehinde

Andrews (2014) decries, I wonder instead, whether the problem with Exhibit B in fact lies in the untormented “white body” implicit in the intended spectatorship of the show, whose look is disturbed but whose body remains (uncontroversially it seems), in perfect composure, whose representational integrity rests unchallenged. What would, I ask, Exhibit B have ‘looked’ like if instead of living black performers as tableaux vivants, it staged a re-enactment for their *audience* to perform?



Brett Bailey with a performer from Exhibit B © Pascal Gely

Exhibit B aims to confront complicated subject-positions while it reifies Western pursuits of knowledge: what we learn, from Exhibit B, is yet more about ourselves. What protesters opposed, is a reiteration of institutionalized modes of display that disturb, yet do not succeed to displace, ensconced positions of spectatorship that do not simply replicate a Western artistic legacy, but uncannily echo an essentialized white, dominant, colonial gaze. Exhibit B is problematic by its paradoxical lack and excess of impact: it shakes more than it incises; it shocks more than it destabilizes. Its visual excess – the artist’s presumed aesthetic boldness – discredits its political

saliency for a city that has seen, has been. Exhibit B can be granted the short-lived merit of having started a visual conversation, yet one which soon found itself muted by its own innovative shortcomings: the “too-much/not-enough” quality of a “performative”, but rather static, exhibit that disturbs more than it deranges, and thereby fails to critically interrogate, interrupt, and ultimately intervene.

Black bodies in chains alongside stuffed animals, bare breasts in cages and glass displays: Exhibit B hurls to an awe-struck, taken-aback audience its pop-shock, guilt-feeding bombshell, whereby one is compelled, as most newspapers and reviewers were, to qualify the show as both “unbearable and essential” (Gardner 2014, *The Guardian*), “terrible and magnificent” (Makereel 2012, *Le Soir*). One does not learn anything new with Exhibit B: one *feels* something new, an uneasiness triggered by an unfamiliar mode of visual apprehension – something which strongly echoes the recent film *12 years a slave* (2013) aesthetic ethos, in which similar ‘easy visuals’ of shock and unbearable crudity are prompted. This affective excess has the dangerous tendency of preventing critique – so crammed it is with its own well-meaning culpability. The exception: London. And Brett Bailey to express, consternated, his disbelief as the “global capital of democracy” banishes his exhibit of “love, respect and outrage” (Bailey 2014). The show may not prove guilty of historical unawareness, but of a lack of pre-emptive vision for a public too accustomed to the superficial effect of provocative displays. Perhaps what has differentiated London from other places in Europe in which Exhibit B has been shown, therefore, is its ability to readily digest the initial “terror” and “magnificence” of living displays: London has seen, London has been. Don’t light a fire you can’t fuel in the Big Smoke, or as Brett Bailey painfully experienced, she will set you ablaze.



Exhibit B: Origin of the Species.

Thus, the controversy around Exhibit B lies not so much in the tension between the ‘objects’/subjects (the objectified subjects) of the show, but in the resurgence of a legitimized performative discourse of spectatorship around it – the compliant participation of visitors in this historical re-enactment, based upon a very specific understanding of the pedagogical relationship between the ‘subjects’ of exhibition and its ‘viewers’. Beyond the painful histories and legacies associated with colonialism, the controversy around Exhibit B seems to probe a deeper malaise within Western conventions of spectatorship, articulated around the genre of performative display and its affective, political, pedagogical and cultural implications.

When I first heard about the show, it immediately brought back some memories about a school activity I took part in as a child in Belgium – some vague images of having to experience the Holocaust as a didactic exercise. A search on the internet quickly disproved such a dramatic, yet not completely irrelevant, recollection: “Passages”, as it is called, is a “simulation game” intended for 7-year-old children, an “awareness game confronting the plight of refugees and asylum-seekers”, organized by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR 1995). The game’s ‘effectiveness’ is dependent upon the affective response it elicits from its participants – their ability to live through, to embody the “psychological anguish caused by separation and flight”, testing the capacity of lived performance to “live and feel a remote situation” and, I would argue, a

culturally-remote Other.

The game begins with an initial ‘mise en scène’ in which family situations are recreated and participants are endowed with their imaginary refugee identity. They proceed through different ‘game modules’ or life phases in their reenacted journey as an asylum seeker. These include their forced escape from the country of origin (with a simulated situation of bombardment), and their imminent separation from relatives and friends. The refugee-players go through different temporary shelters, in which they experience fatigue, overcrowding, isolation. They are made to reflect on their ‘decision’ to leave their homeland and their expectations and prospects. They are introduced to the physical challenges of forced migration. For instance, if repatriated, they are communicated the following warning: “If you have the misfortune of turning over a mine, you could be handicapped for life or even die. *Be very careful.*” They are also made to experience the emotional and psychological effects of living in refugee camps. Finally, players are confronted to the legal difficulties of migration through a staged encounter with the state authorities and bureaucracy in the host country – in which, from my memories, the arbitrary decisions of those adult representatives which categorized us into groups set for ‘repatriation’ or ‘temporary refugee status’ strangely echoed the re-enactment of a fascist regime, aggravating the ethical questioning this ‘game’ provokes – especially in light of this current discussion.

This anecdote reveals that pedagogical and artistic engagements with sensitive issues like colonialism or forced migration are political exercises in the civic and moral imagination, exercises which rely on cultural traditions of representation. Is Britain too ‘serious’ about her educational and artistic curriculum – or is Belgium perhaps intellectually and ethically negligent? These two contrastive ways of apprehending a difficult ‘lived reality’ – be it historical or cultural – reveal different ideological pathways through which knowledge, critical insight and ultimately empathy is passed on and engaged with, and translate into different visions regarding the public implementation of social change.

Where would Exhibit B *be* right now, had it attempted to move beyond re-presentation, towards performative intervention in, for instance, the subversion of the essentialist ‘subjectivities’ it tried to depict? What if the presumed audience of Exhibit B, instead of passively absorbing the returned gaze of black performers, had become the subjects acted upon, the *experiencing*, rather than the voyeuristically or ashamedly observing audience?

Performance is a mechanism of social action, a corporeal technology that demands participatory vision or sensory engagement as a complex repartition of the field of agencies and responsibilities. This is what makes performance an especially powerful medium: its capacity to act upon audiences, to force a reactive (and in this case reactionary) encounter. In a sense, then, the mobilization of protestors against Exhibit B was a formidable testimony to the political and social efficacy of performative exhibitions – yet one which failed to critically appraise the danger with performance: its simultaneous lack and excess, its “too much/not enough” axis along which the obvious, obscene, graphic and somewhat superficial (or visually immediate) sometimes seems to

precede over more nuanced and incisive substitutions.

Performative displays provoke affective, embodied, visceral reactions that challenge the perceived distance between the performers and their viewers. They establish a corporeal proximity between performers and viewers, into a “third space of enunciation”, in which an alternative, reflexive present is realized. This is where a possible basis for a more critical and intervening, rather than simply a controversial and informational Exhibit B, could be imagined.

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