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Regarding the Pain of Others (Part 2 of 2): Brett Bailey's Exhibit B

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Regarding the Pain of Others (Part Two): Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*

*No "we" should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain.*
—Susan Sontag

My title for this two-part essay echoes Susan Sontag's final book, published in 2003 the year before the death of the cultural critic, novelist, and playwright. Written in the beginning stages of our endless war on terror, Sontag was interested in what it means to view photographs of horrific atrocities from the distance of time and/or geography. Perhaps because the invention of photography shares roughly the same historical moment as when theatre managers first started to darken the auditorium and first began to profess an earnest belief in the fourth wall, spectatorship in one medium resembles spectatorship in the other.

The security experienced sitting in an armchair, newspaper in hand, eyeing the framed photograph of whatever horror unfolding "over there" is not so far removed from the security of the plush theatre seat, the proscenium arch opening upon whatever domestic tragedy is happening "over there," on the other side of that seemingly unbridgeable divide. The lights dim and we disappear so that they—those fleeting figures crossing the stage—might appear. They suffer and we feel, more often than not, resigned to that suffering. Intervention is impossible, which is sad, but also perversely reassuring.

This July's edition of the Avignon International Theatre Festival brought the distant close to home, and forced us out of removed observation in ways both new and troubling. Each year since 2004, the Festival has invited an artist or pair of artists to act as "associated artists," presenting their own work and providing a curatorial dimension to the larger program. For the first time in the sixty-seven years of the festival, one of the associated artists hailed from Africa. Author, director, and actor Dieudonné Niangouna brought fellow artists from his homeland, the Republic of Congo, as well as work from the larger African continent. These pieces, often taking up conflicts where blood still runs fresh on the street, provoked a wide-ranging conversation among a European audience that is still coming to terms (or preferring not to do so) with a colonial past and its contemporary consequences.
My last post spoke about Italian director Romeo Castellucci's performance *Schwanengesang D744* and how it turned its gaze back on the spectator in the most formal of manners—cutting to the marrow of the theatrical contract. Today I want to talk about a work that the South African director Brett Bailey and his company Third World Bunfight brought to this year's festival, an installation-performance that disturbed my expectations about what it means to watch another in a way quite unlike anything I have ever experienced in almost twenty years of theatrical viewing.

**Exhibit B**

The audience gathers in a makeshift holding pen in groups of twenty every twenty minutes, waiting in silence for our personal number to be called. We will enter the space one at a time every two minutes, but are told that we may remain as long as we would like. The only rule we must obey: no talking. When my number is called, I enter the Eglise des Celestins, a fifteenth-century church that was gutted of its sumptuous interior during the French Revolution and has lived many lives since as hospital and as prison; it now stands a hollowed out cavity of white stone.

It is a church without an altar, just the skeleton of faith, but as soon as I enter, the space resounds with a haunting refrain in *a cappella*, some distant cousin to medieval chant, and a reminder that the spirits of the past are still present. I cannot quite place what is off about the melody—not yet—for there, in the long aisle leading up to the transept, stand the exhibitions I have come to see.

A small panel before the first of these exhibitions announces its title "*Origin of the Species*." It continues:

*Trophies brought to Europe from German South West Africa.*
Mixed media: various trophies (antelope heads, 2 Namas, cultural artefacts, snake, etc.), vitrines, anthropological paraphernalia, spectator/s.

As in most museum exhibitions, the panel recounts the materials involved in the installation. There it all stands arranged before my eyes: a carefully constructed diorama of mounted animal trophies, maps, and skulls straight out of a nineteenth century fantasia of the "dark continent." And there, in the middle of the tableau vivant, stand the two Namas, indigenous people of South Africa and Namibia, stripped nearly naked and tagged around wrist and ankle like two more artifacts catalogued in the imperialist archive. They are stock still before me, stock still except for their active gaze. For in a singular gesture that breaks the theatrical game open, Bailey has directed the performers to return the look of whoever approaches the display. They will look and they will not look away.

Bailey has drawn inspiration from the exhibitions of African subjects that were major attractions in Europe and the United States from the nineteenth century and well into the mid-twentieth century. Here the analytical fascination that saw the invention of the photograph, and sent the first journalists far afield to document the "exotic" for the folks back home, took a far more sinister cast in the colonial context. Not only were the remains of natives transported to exhibition halls, museums, and zoos of the modern era, but live subjects, too, were put on display in an utterly dehumanizing fashion.
As he writes in an accompanying text, Bailey created *Exhibit B* for “European audiences, to confront them with a history that they have hidden and forgotten” (*Exhibit A* was created in 2010 for German and Austrian audiences and focused on German Colonialism in South Africa; *Exhibit B*, revised for France and Belgium, was expanded to include the activities of these two empires. An *Exhibit C* is forthcoming.) The subsequent *tableaux* (ten or twelve in total) detail some of the more heinous atrocities committed by European authorities on the peoples of Africa as part of the colonial project. Each begins with a plaque describing a historic event and looks out onto a series of tableaux, always featuring one or two African performers. Some depict a scene with painstaking historical accuracy, while others work through a more associative or poetic register. Interspersed throughout the galleries of the church are three "Found Objects": asylum seekers and refugees from present-day conflicts. Dressed in contemporary clothes and standing against a list of personal facts (height, weight, country of origin, etc.), the line between the collation of human beings as ethnographical data, as artifacts in a museum of civilization, and the discipline that authorizes who gets to belong at the table in Europe all fall into a dizzying blur.

These contemporary installations forcefully connect past injustices to the present-day debates over how Africans are treated in the EU. These are not characters, but the actual people themselves—living now in Avignon and its environs—that Bailey has sought out as participants.
Those that have preceded me into the space are already gathered about each installation, milling about or staring intently. Nothing they do seems authentic or appropriate: they are either too engaged—pouring over the details on display, even pouring over the bodies with a clinical eye—or not involved enough—studiously avoiding the fact that another person is present before them, or carrying an air of nonchalance as if to say that they are above the performance's attempts at provocation. Or perhaps they stare meaningfully at the performer, experiencing some moving cathartic recognition, while hoping that they can avoid the mise-en-scéne that surrounds them. This, too, seems off, inappropriate.

You see what I am doing here, of course, and it is immediately apparent as I feel the eyes of others lingering on my own reactions: I am putting the other spectators onstage and I am feeling myself put onstage. (Note that the list of materials for each installation concludes with "spectator/s" to explicitly acknowledge our inclusion in the piece; not only that we are responsible for its arrangement and that it is there because of us, but also that we, too, are also on show.)

This is the brilliance and the vertiginous terror of Bailey's piece. I find it impossible to turn away and yet absolutely pressing that I do so. It is a Catch-22 situation. For while I must acknowledge the performers as human beings dressed up in the costume of history, I also feel no right to presume their attention. I soon realize that the performers will not break eye contact with me. I soon realize that the performers will not break eye contact with me, that if they have one instruction apart from stillness it is this: to seek out and hold fast the eye contact of everyone that passes.
And so when I find myself weeping before this person opposite me, find us both weeping together in an inescapable present, it offers only the most fleeting sense of community. Instead, I wonder if I am *acting out* a moment of catharsis for myself and for the other spectators around me. I am, perhaps inadvertently, playing some imitation of an understanding. Here is Sontag again: "So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent—if not an inappropriate—response." My feeling moved feels deeply manipulative.

We come to the theatre wanting to be moved, to experiment with our sense of empathy and community. We come to the gallery wanting to be transported (spiritually and physically), our bodies disappearing so that we might become a floating eye that surveys a world contained before us. In the church, all suffering carries with it an added significance. We think of Christ's passion, his pain and sacrifice as a transfiguration.

All these bodies in *Exhibit B* set within the emptied niches of the church appear like so many saints perpetually suffering their martyrdom in the many chapels spanning the length of the church's flanks. There is a caustic irony to this juxtaposition: the martyr sacrifices his or her body to a higher power and the occasion of their greatest pain also touches upon a transcendent arrival—their recognition of God, their apotheosis. These sacrosanct tones are quite literally inverted in *Exhibit B*. Recall the chant I thought I heard, echoing through this ancient time-ravaged chamber of faith? I finally arrive at the
church's nave and encounter its source: another installation where the altar would have been, but in its place stand four white plinths with the heads of four Namibian singers seemingly mounted atop, each painted a luminous black. They look off beyond the members of the audience gathering here, singing their achingly beautiful harmonies marked occasionally by their language's distinct click of the tongue.

The plaque here tells us that the three portraits of African heads that line the wall behind and these decapitated figures refer to the experiments on Africans by a Doctor Fischer, one of the architects of the Holocaust, as well as the countless array of natives' skulls that still remain in ethnological institutions around the world. There are chairs set up where there once were pews and many of us sit and listen for some time, perhaps as much to gather ourselves in a place where we do not need to see or be seen. I am reminded of Samuel Beckett's *Play*, with its three heads peeking out of three urns in the purgatory of remembrance, each character forced to repeat their recollection of a doomed love triangle into eternity. This, too, is a cycle of the past that continues to resonate endlessly.

*Exhibit B* forces us to come face to face with the history not only of specific events and genocides, but of spaces and institutions, traditions of representations. By presenting the piece in a church, Bailey prompts an elegiac response while at the same time requiring our recognition of the fact that the imposition of a Western system of belief is inevitably intertwined with the crimes committed against these people in that distant colony. It also brings forth the religious undertones that guide all our experiences of the gallery, the museum, and the theater. The theater, where we—like some god spectating from the
darkness of his or her anonymous cloud—set out to analyze the actions of other people as they perform for us, entertain us, but, in the end, do not involve us.

There is much more to say on all this, on how I am regarding the pain of others—those that implore me to look away (as in Castellucci’s piece), those that set up a more ambivalent requirement such that I cannot look away (as in Exhibit B), and also those that do not know I am watching: the audience. And, of course, I am here, too, showing my own painful recognition of the fact that after all these years of blindly watching the suffering of others from afar, I have also been onstage and I, too, must find a way to act ethically. There is no easy political action to take after leaving Exhibit B, nothing that will make this "okay."

In the silence of the final chamber of the church, I read the performers’ reflections on their involvement in Exhibit B posted on one wall, and discover a table covered with countless sheets of blank paper. We are invited to respond in writing and to leave these letters at the door as we pass out into the bright Provençal midday sun.

I sit down and begin to write.

- See more at: http://howlround.com/regarding-the-pain-of-others-part-two-brett-baileys-exhibit-b#sthash.Hj8XpLsP.dpuf