

Joe Annie Street

Johannes Birringer

*And I built a home
For you
For me*

*Until it disappeared
From me
From you
And now, it's time to leave and turn to dust*

(Cinematic Orchestra, "To build a home")

1. Critical Observation

Street performance was never really a genre I engaged, though I remember that in theatre schools (those with an interest in historical materialism) one had at one point to grapple with Brecht's conception of an epic theatre, and thus with his model of the "street scene." The purpose of epic theatre was to make the familiar unfamiliar, as an incentive to rationally think about that which only seems natural, turning the spectator into a consciously critical observer. The model makes use of a simple, "natural" incident, such as could be seen on any street corner: An eyewitness demonstrating to other people how a traffic accident took place. "The bystanders may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may 'see things a different way'; the point is that the demonstrator acts the behaviour of driver or victim both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the incident."¹

The scene that I have opinions about is from the street where I have lived for a number of years, and where we had recently opened an actor studio in the small, seventy-year old duplex building at 1110 Joe Annie. [fig.1] This street is a tiny street that links West Clay and West Dallas streets, in Houston's Montrose district which is, or rather has been, a lively abode for the gay community, artists, small businesses, cafés, bookstores, museums and theatres, quite centrally located near the mid-town area, with the silver downtown skyscrapers beckoning from a short distance further east, refracting the sun in their dizzying glass panels. The main artery that runs through the neighbourhood heart is Westheimer Avenue, a slightly shabby street lined with small restaurants, tattoo and laundry parlours, antique furniture and vintage clothes stores, reflecting many traces of the funk era of the 70s when Westheimer was the favourite weekend evening hang-out, the younger folks driving their Mustangs or low rider cars up and down the sunset strip.

¹ Cf. Bertolt Brecht, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett, London: Methuen, 1964, pp. 121–129.



Fig. 1 Absolute Actor Studio, 1110 Joe Annie Street, April 2013 © Birringer

The first apartment I moved into, during the 80s, was in walking distance to Westheimer; the last time I walked there was with many thousands of others, during the annual Gay Pride Parade, which fills the entire neighbourhood with a jubilant and festive atmosphere that is also a mark of its historical boom town energy, now translated into spirited affirmation and self-display of a liberal, free-flowing cultural diversity most likely unique in the context of Texas with its other track records of cattle ranches and cowboys, oil money aristocracies, and redneck republican conservatism. Houston has a massive Latino presence and is practically bi-lingual (English/Spanish), and over the past decades has been a magnet for immigrants from all over the world, with Asian communities now scattered all across the suburbs that are connected via massive freeways and looping ring roads (reminding me of Beijing), while low cost housing areas and the Latino barrios are largely on the East Side. The historical third and fourth wards, where African Americans once lived in so-called shot-gun houses, have been disaggregated or dissolved; one street of these houses (Project Row Houses) in the Third Ward was preserved as an art project. Artists are invited, during residencies at these houses, to demonstrate something about their history in such a way that the visitors are able to form an opinion about the incidents that led to their demise.

One would now have to delve into urban lore or economic history, performing a critical analysis of the inevitable processes of gentrification, urban development and real-estate speculation, to grasp the changes that the city and its streets have undergone, to look at the contradictions between migratory influx, redistribution of wealth and the labour market, oil crash and financial crises, suburban expansion and reinvestments, new industries, venture capital, and innumerable building projects (new apartments, luxury homes, refurbished houses from the 50s, new supermarkets and chains, the booming restaurant business and construction often undergirded by cheap labour from illegal migrant workers, etc). But that is hardly a unique history in need to be parsed and translated here (even though there are of course differences between Houston and Detroit, Berlin, London or Singapore). On a personal level, I wanted to look at emergencies of a kind that affect private emotions and illusions, and thus influence one's

thinking about political crises with which we are confronted daily, on an unprecedented global scale.

2. Ni más, ni menos

What, then, is a state of emergency? As I write this, we hear of racial confrontation in the town of Ferguson, Missouri, where the police issued a curfew after protesters rose up following the shooting of a young black man; then the Governor reframed the chain of command, brought in Missouri Highway Patrol captain Ron Johnson and the National Guard. Johnson addressed the protesters, encouraging them to take to the streets but, citing what he called a “dangerous dynamic in the night,” requested that protests take place during the daylight hours, so that officers could effectively isolate any troublemakers. News media around the world (I was in Germany at the time) picked up on this curious notion that a captain would solicit protesters to walk, and not stand, on the streets—the streets that were filled with smoke from tear gas fired at the protesting citizens on an almost daily basis during the time of the unrest. [fig. 2] The images resembled, in some ways, all the other images of conflict that were published in August 2014. Of the other images, some were a lot worse, and some were unspeakable (Gaza, Ukraine, Northern Iraq, Syria).



Fig. 2 Protester running from tear gas, Ferguson, Missouri, August 2014 © News archive

The images of protest, for example during the Occupy movement or the revolutionary wave of the Arab Spring, did capture our imagination: street performances were tactical and strategic, both in scenes of civic protest and militant conflict. Yet it is not easy nor comfortable to look at many of today’s asymmetric conflicts, to compare the bombardment of the Palestinians in Gaza or the Hamas rockets shot at Israel with, say, the city police confronting the protesters at Gezi Park in Istanbul. I remember a Turkish friend showing me videos both of police kettling operations and of the silent protest of the Standing Man at Taksim Square, as well as of a dancer in Gezi Park, dressed in a large flowing costume, wearing a gas mask and dancing the traditional Sufi dance of the dervishes (www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4ihMkhIjXQ). The drivers and the victims commingle in the accident. In the case of the kettling, experts on public order policing consider the tactic of encircling the enemy a military tactic (derived from the

German word “*Kessel*” or the verb “*einkesseln*”). The cases of standing still or dancing, I observe, were street performances, remarkable demonstrations of civil disobedience, serious play, *détournement*, creative adaptation of cultural and spiritual expression. Since they also were instantly mediated, they invite reflections on the Situationists’s demand to seize the means of conditioning, in regard to the late capitalist society of spectacle and control, to seize the moment to becoming a subject of history, “existing as *consciousness of his [i.e. the subject’s] game* (Debord 1967: Article 74). Similar to Walter Benjamin’s political philosophy of phantasmagoric images, which I came across when I pondered Brecht’s street scene, the Situationist theory of the scenography of power implies a critical understanding of how societal relations among people (the spectacle and the collective games) are mediated by images, and how the drivers and the driven use the images for their purposes.

3. *The Game of Capitalist Accumulation*

The notion of the game, of course, is problematic, if it also evokes the legacy of anarchism or collective ecstasies of destruction, which Benjamin had intimated in his writings on the “destructive character” who “must surround himself with people, with witnesses to his efficacy” (Benjamin 1999: 254), and the strand of nihilism, not unfamiliar to post-Nietzschean modern philosophy, has been mostly associated with destructive anarchism, right-wing or left-wing extremism. But it can also be imagined a liberating force of thought seeking a home, as an active negation of the experience of a world of phantasmatic, transcendental homelessness. But what home does negation build? What can diverse critical perspectives on homelessness or unemployable negativity create that has not already been created by the avant-garde demolition experts? What do the images of the *ñeros*² affect? With an almost grotesque sense of irony, Stanislas Guigui photographs negativity as a model for fashion, the *ñeros* as marginalized beggar kings on their streets, proudly parading the lumpenproletariat. Here we recall Benjamin’s idea of a *Bildraum* or “image-space” (delineated in his 1929 essay on Surrealism) which, perhaps perversely and shockingly, stages an immediate presentation of collective political action without formal political representation (whether party politics or representative democracy). It is, however, an image-space of extreme asymmetry—the *ñeros* do not perform political action but consider themselves urban pirates and are considered criminals by the state—and as such I cannot connect it truthfully to my sense of expropriation experienced on Joe Annie Street. I simply lost my place, and had to evacuate myself.

Feeling this sense of evacuation made me sense and relieve the psychic strains of kettling. As a protester, all I ever experienced, in times of war and in times of peace, was a certain excruciating helplessness: shouting, marching, singing, dancing, occupying public space, running from the tear gas—these actions seemed theatrical illusions, fundamentally flawed gestures, *ni más, ni menos*, not more, nor less or not enough, too close to the performative rituals and parades in privileged western cultures, self-affirming yet powerless, thus ultimately redundant. Yet the kettle is no longer a public space in the privileged western culture. I also remember occupied

² In Colombia, the term *ñeros* was chosen by those thousands of displaced persons who sought refuge in the district of Cartucho, Bogotá, to create a community of city pirates marked by their clothing, their social rules and a fierce sense of freedom. The photographer Stanislas Guigui published a series of portraits of the *ñeros* titled *Atras del Muro* in *Lettre International* 105 (summer 2014). See: <http://www.parisphoto.com/agenda/stanislas-guigui>

buildings and squats, in times of transition and precariousness (in Berlin after the fall of the Wall; in Ljubljana after the short war in 1991; in Dresden in 1993 when artists reclaimed the former Hellerau theatre; more recently, in Athens in 2011, when an artist collective and local residents occupied the derelict Embros Theatre and hosted cultural events until police padlocked the building in September 2013). Symptomatically, the squatters at Embros claimed the theatre as a major bulwark against the gentrification of the area, yet property ownership was reclaimed by a state privatization agency which kicked out the protesters. The streets themselves, after the violent protests on Syntagma Square, were patrolled by police and military forces. Times of precariousness do not really help the virtuosity of the unemployed and marginalized.³

The street, from my early childhood memory, was the place of home, where we lived, to which we returned, a verb so to speak, a transitional space for movement, to move and to be free to move. Free cultural space, including spaces for performance, of course does not really exist.

The self-affirmation becomes interestingly complex when you face the facts of your peripheral, tenuous or transient state, when you realize you own nothing or are subject to eviction, deportation, the loss of citizenship or residency, termination of job, cancellation of your project.



Fig. 3 Absolute Actor Studio, 1110 Joe Annie Street, May 2014 © Birringer

Our actor studio on Joe Annie Street was terminated in March 2014 when the landlord told us to leave as the building had been sold to an investor, to be demolished and replaced by a luxury condominium. It was a simple procedure, and there was no recourse to the law. So in the spring of 2014 I started to walk around my street in Houston, noting the two old houses at the corner, which seemed abandoned but belonged to the original owners, Joe and Annie, who had built them in the 1940s and seemed to have been the name-givers of our little street. I have never met Joe and Annie, and perhaps they have died or moved to a home for assisted living. Their

³ See, Paolo Virno, "Virtuosity and Revolution" (2003), available at: <http://www.makeworlds.org/node/view/34> [accessed 20 August, 2014]. See also: <http://transform.eicpc.net/correspondence/1159437958#redir> [accessed 20 August, 2014]. The "Transform" platform also provides a link to the multilingual eicpc-webjournal on "precariat" [<http://eicpc.net/transversal/0704>], where I found Paolo Virno's essay on "Un movimento performativo" [A performative movement] which extends his analysis of contemporary forms life and affective labor.

houses are now the last original buildings on the street, all other properties had recently been “re-developed,” turned to fashionable expensive town homes which meant the old houses were razed, and new ones built within a few months. Our home was demolished quickly and efficiently, by the time you read this, new town houses will stand there and of course have become unaffordable. [fig. 3]

The destructive character of our economic system is all too apparent, and we are the witnesses to its efficacy. Our actor studio on the second floor was a simple studio, with good light and a wooden floor, ready for the kind of exercises that we taught, inspired by butoh, Qigong, Min Tanaka’s *Body Weather*, Ann Bogart’s *Viewpoints*, Eugenio Barba’s concepts of action and presence (derived from his *The Paper Canoe*), and a mix of our own techniques. Against the economic realities of destructive containment, we did not have the proper performance techniques at our disposal. When I watched the demolition, carried out with heavy technological machinery, I was surprised to note that the neighbours living on the street did not even seem to mind the noise.

Perhaps they are merely relieved that the old house is gone. Somewhere in *The Paper Canoe*, Barba writes that it is not our houses which are important, it is the stories we live in. So when I told my story to a friend who had just returned from a pro-Palestinian demonstration, he told me one from the West Bank. Houses of Palestinians (new houses, houses that are too close to the wall), get the demolition order. Then the owners are entitled to tear it down themselves within a few days, or the Israeli military will demolish it and the owners must pay the costs for the demolition. There are houses that have been demolished and rebuilt again several times.

A friend in New York City, who was also forced out of his building, sent me a text to soothe me.

The New Home was waiting. The Old Home was dark and the lights in the Old Home were dark and the electric was on and was dark. In the New Home magnetism and electricity were at ninety degrees and entangled; in the Old Home, electricity was lonely and would not come out to make the Brilliant World. In the Old Home the faucets made the sound of rushing air and in the New Home there were many facets of the Flowing World. The Flowing World was bright and brilliant and the Brilliant World was bright and flowing. The Old Home was everywhere I would be and the New Home would become a Flowing Memory. Outside the wind blows and branches rattle against the house. The New Home is not secure and is vulnerable and the people are sad there because the Old Home has no wind and no energy or force or momentum and the Old Home has no Flowing Calculus. We are going to the Old Home and that is the Song of the Brilliant Swan but we are now among the New Home and that is a home of Flowing Delight.

Then I did realize that my genre is that of the retardation of reality, image upon image, video upon image, all forms of recording, from every place, making the place a home, in a way that almost guarantees me a sense of mourning, loss, at the end of the day, every day a sweeping into the relay of night. As if I were born homeless, or into a play of home which falls apart, the ground seeps away beneath me...(Sondheim 2014).

What is remarkable of course is that our stories encircle us too, they trap us in our melancholic performance neighbourhoods, in the real and the symbolic-medial dimensions of what we may want to demonstrate, about all the incidents, without knowing the way out of an ever increasing disorganized pessimism. Paolo Virno's proposals to current social movements—exit and disobedience—do not even seem to be based on a belief in a public political sphere any more, and if performance production (the post-Fordist factory) under capitalist accumulation has been diffused everywhere, how can the multitudes, or how can I, exit it? Where do you flee, and how do you flee, when negation and resistance are no longer perceived to be possible choices? How do you modify the grammar of your performance techniques, when the joke is on you—the joke which Virno thinks of as a diagram for innovative action, a song of Sad and Flowing Delight? The scenes on the streets, thus, can be virtuosic, and they will perfectly fit the global capitalist economy and its art market, demolition crews and shock troupes.

REFERENCES

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Destructive Character." 1921. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*. Eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999.
- Brecht, Bertolt. "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre". *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. Ed. and Trans. John Willett. London: Methuen, 1964. 121–129.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. 1967. Trans. Fredy Perlman and Jon Supak. New York: Black & Red, 1977. (<http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/>)
- Sondheim, Alan. "My New Home", 2014. <http://www.alansondheim.org/mynewhome.mp4> .