

White Out (2004)

The starting point for this project began the day after I went to see *Bitches Brew* the 2003 creation of Rosas at the Kaaaitheater in Brussels. I had been turning my mind over and over about the implications of a multicultural society which has recently become one of the cultural ideals of economic globalization. While I worked in the same environment and respected the vast majority of work by Rosas, I was very critical of *Bitches Brew*. Set mostly to the album of Miles Davis by the same name, the piece drew most of its material from 'black' dance forms including hip-hop, African dance, soul, funk, jazz, and breakdancing. Without any sense of contextual or historical connection, the movements from these dance genres were appropriated and mixed as a sort of DJ-ing of black movement. I was initially offended by the piece for the sort of use of cultural generalization which I think is potentially dangerous, but also for the very evident decontextualized attitude it suggested towards cultural forms. Secondly, though, I was more interested in *why* I was offended by it. What sort of sacred ideals did I have for cultural forms, especially those connected to the culture which I identify myself with. I was immediately aware that the implications of multiculturalism were intertwined with the decontextualization of 'roots'. For me, *Bitches Brew* represented the digital age of cultural politics where cultural forms too become information which can be cut and pasted, de- and recontextualized at will, without moral but rather aesthetic obligations.

I wondered, rather than moralizing and distancing myself from the piece judgementally, that I should instead try to use a similar approach to 'black' movement material, keeping in mind what it was that I had been critical of, to make a piece myself. I set out to make a black dance. I had no clue what that would mean in terms of trying to present something unified from so many different places, histories etc. I wondered what were the images, stereotypes, found and so called natural knowledges of black that I could produce. I took hip hop classes (my first, but maybe not my last), I watched and tried to imitate African dance videos (this was, ironically enough quite similar to the process of the creation of *Bitches Brew*). I was interested in how vast the singular, 'black,' was supposed to signify, and how in order to perform a black body, that my body would too have to be vast, ahistorical, contextually schizophrenic. The method of mixing became significant to allowing the reading of discontinuities to be possible. I tried doing dances with African steps and hip hop arms, transforming the shape of an African dance step into the outline of a dead body on the floor, allowing that dead body to transform into a breakdancer doing a break-handstand. Ultimately, however, I found the figure of the stereotypical black male as basketball player to present the clearest singularity from which to derive the other transformations.

I liked basketball because it is a game where the player is perpetually in a state of offense or defense. So many of the images I researched had to do with blacks as either aggressors or victims, pursuing with physical prowess, or fleeing with tricksteresque grace. I found that already in the basketball game were signifiers that related to other dramas we associate with contemporary black folklore. The sign for defense in basketball (hands over head) became the sign for surrender in *Cops* or one of the many American docu-dramas which help to promote the image of the black criminal. The player, always looking over his back or trying to elude his opponents could also be transformed into the criminal on the lookout for his pursuers. The object of the choreography therefore became how to invest the right physicality so that running could mean at one moment, beating opponents and scoring in one context; and being on the chase in another; or even entertaining in a minstrel-like performance in another context, or running the course of a relay race in another. How could I change physicalities to produce a channel-changing effect, so that the presence could shift from the role of champion to that of a controlled body to that of a servant. What physical signifiers

carried these meanings and how close could they be in terms of physical intention and yet different in terms of what they could then be read as in terms of their meaning?

I was interested in the idea of oversignifying blackness, and how in turn this oversignification, as in the case of *Bitches Brew*, also always writes a sort of erasure-of meanings, histories, realities beyond the images via which we consume these bodies in media. I used the white board, white Nikes and training pants, so that occasionally I would disappear in the course of the game, behind the board. What cannot be seen then is any racial identity, so that there is a sort of negotiation which is always at play on this invisible court without boundaries or set parameters, between performing race and hiding it or erasing it. The eraser became an important prop to have with the whiteboard. It is the tool that originates as a found object (the ape discovers the marker at the board/tree but it can only become an instrument to produce sound-rhythm because he is a stereotypical African-Ape body, unable to *write* himself, but able to produce his innate ability of sound. Upon trying to use the eraser as a second drum he finds that it has another use, it erases what is written on the flipside of the board [unclear on the video] the conjugation 'I be, you be, he she or it bees, wees be, yous bees, theys bees.' The erasure excites him until, like the ape who discovers the instrumentality of the bone in *2001: A Space Odyssey* and later tosses the bone-that-becomes-spaceship into the air, the ape transforms via the use of the eraser into another stereotypical figure of the cleaning person.) This object of erasure is also, in the moment of the prisoner holding his identification block for police archive, a sort of erased identity. As well when I later become a relay runner, the eraser/baton becomes a sort of tradition of erased identity which is passed on, body to body, and eventually becomes a trophy, an object of achievement, having undergone the transformation of its non meaning into an object which signifies success. I wanted the celebratory role of the black athlete to always be a little bit undermined, unstable and put into question; to criticize this role as the example of black 'overcoming.'

I wanted to find how I could twist significations to also reveal something of the absurdity of these positions and roles. How much we culturally celebrate the figure of the basketball star; but is he a champion or a performer or a servant for those he entertains, is he encaptured by this role, his contract, the demands that his body is expected to produce, and the fall from grace and favor which he will certainly suffer if his body does not produce them. Furthermore, how much American drama creates and is satisfied with these tragedies-Kobe Bryant, Mike Tyson, 50 Cent. The aggression of these figures which we enjoy consuming in one context (sports, entertainment), reaches a limit of reality effect, whereby we enjoy and consume their alleged aggressions in another way (CNN news story of Kobe Bryant's arrest, did 50 Cent sexually harass the alleged victim or not).

So then what is the kind of shaking and hustling, 'stealing' and 'offending' which we enjoy and which are the kinds which are we afraid of? Didn't *Bitches Brew*, even if inadvertently, produce something which is also true, which is specifically the uncontainability of a singular culture's forms, its histories, its identities. What then are the implications of the individual body in the midst of cultural associations. Is the individual to take on all these roles, all of these dynamics in the assumption of a cultural identity? To choose which are desirable to associate with and which not? To simply distance oneself from the stigma of cultural identity and to assume then that culture exists only as 'free' information, as a matter of taste, desire, and means to attain, rather than geneologies?

While I don't think of *White Out* as a polemic or teleological piece, I would like that it can be read to suggest a certain kind of ethics in regards to cultural politics and the complexity of reading and producing cultural identities. If the hope of the structural age in cultural studies being anthropological, ethnographic, and even post-colonial, was to somehow reveal the 'truth' of cultural relativity, to dislodge the sovereignty of Western Culture within Western academic practices, mainly by debunking certain assumptions as stereotypical, ill

founded, and racist, I wonder rather, what does the ugly, fantastical, or stereotypical image itself have to offer. What is implicit in the image of the stereotype which is also true, in the way that it has produced and reproduced truths for us to consume and perpetuate. How might the figure of the black man always looking over his back, not simply be dislodged as stereotype, but taken up to offer more truth than the anthropological investigation of 'his' customs and practices. Performance provides the context to assume other bodies, to lend our body, and perhaps to reveal that the physical modes, images, intentions, and possibilities of what we see in the images of these bodies are far more complex than the truths we might wish to discover.

More recently, the project of liberatory and politically correct politics has been to generalize the academic notions of 'cultural relativity' and to censure completely the use of stereotypes and cultural assumptions. I would say that there is some hope in fact in reappropriating the use of these images, neither allowing them to be just the product of a racist but banished and bygone authority, nor to assume that we do not take part in their continuation. To do so only empowers these images as dangerous and distances us from having the possibility of a direct involvement in their meanings and the ways in which they are utilized. I feel quite strongly that the problematic of now has to do very much with missing the clear context that many racial and other social stereotypes, assumptions, images provided in an earlier era. I'm not nostalgic for the false security of racist images and the 'place' which they helped put individuals in. But I do hope to propose in this piece that not only in terms of race, but in all areas of sociality and identity, that rather than say, 'we are everything and everything is permissible' -the slogans of liberatory politics which has lead only to assist the depoliticization of our age- that we seek to define as clearly as possible our own identities- through the complexities, past and present, which they entail- and to see these complexities not as the problematized 'mistakes' of history, but as parts of our identity which can never resist reinterpretation.

Written by Andros Zins-Browne, April, 2004