

December 9, 2015

# “I’M KIND OF FUCKED SHARING THIS”

## Ralph Lemon’s *Scaffold Room*

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THE KITCHEN | OCTOBER 30 – DECEMBER 5, 2015

Remember choose-your-own-adventure books? As a child, I felt overwhelmed knowing that there was always another version—it somehow made the story seem less sturdy, lent the imagination a transparent quality. I was in the story but also aware of my hands and the flat, gray surface of the page. And yet, there was something to be said for sliding into a soft ending rather than an irreversible one. Oh, and one more thing: there was no right answer.

Ralph Lemon makes the kind of work you can get lost in. He builds a hall of mirrors, designs a labyrinth, spins a web, draws a  $\infty$ . Although operating in the ever-shifting realm of parafiction, and dipping into science fiction and fantasy, Lemon creates composite characters and historical narratives that, in pressing against fixed boundaries, yield incredibly sharp and specific portraits.



April Matthis in *Scaffold Room*. Photo: Paula Court.

The capaciousness of Lemon’s work has to do with its accretive nature, its layers, refractions, multiplications and simultaneity. The structure of *Scaffold Room* (of this incarnation, the New York City premiere) encompasses a performance—which occurs at the traditional 8 p.m. time-slot and requires a ticket—but also two artist talks, several readings by guest luminaries, and an installation, on display until December 5th. All events other than the “performance” are free. I was able to attend both of the artist talks, two readings, and check out the gallery. I realized quickly that the “performance” was inseparable from all that circulated around it.

The exhibit, upstairs on the third floor, also spills into the first floor and the stairwells. (There is a list of titles and materials in a binder, but the works aren’t for sale.) Normally an all-white gallery, the space is divided into a black viewing room projecting several videos, some taking up a whole wall and others so small you have to lean in close to see. Beyoncé and Jay Z reign as the patron gods, modern(-izing)

<http://www.brooklynrail.org/2015/12/dance/im-kind-of-fucked-sharing-this-ralph-lemons-scaffold-room>

# **BROOKLYN RAIL**

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fetish objects. Costumes are central to this exhibit, serving variously as historic records, talismanic travel aides, and cross-species drag. These works collapse and expand time, suggesting the coexistence of many black worlds, infinite spirals of narrative and subjectivity. A small, separate (reading) room holds a pile of books and found erotic photos. This room practically assaults you with its blinding whiteness, especially after your eyes have gotten accustomed to the dark.

Friday, November 3, 6:00 p.m.:  
(Memory) Refraction #1. Artist Talk

Ralph Lemon stands in a pile of books next to a screen showing footage of Okwui Okpokwasili crying backstage in his piece, *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?* (2010). He tells us that this was never meant to be shown. Nonetheless, we are watching it. Then he shows it to us again, with a soundtrack of Janis Joplin's cover of "Little Girl Blue," which effectively turns the footage into a film. The title of Joplin's album, *I Got Dem Ol' Kozmic Blues Again Mama!*, sets up a primary theme of the performance: the appropriation and instrumentalization of black female singers and entertainers. But let's return to this moment for just a while longer: Lemon reads a letter (reportedly) from Okpokwasili responding to his request to show the clip. She replies with a reserved affirmative, with the understanding that everything is material in light of Lemon's interest in "performing non-performance," ending simply and poignantly with something like: "All I could do was try not to look at the camera." What a profound meditation on working within the realm of the impossible.

Friday, November 6, 4:00 p.m.:  
Ceremonies Out of the Air. Artist Talk

Lemon begins with video footage of his retracing of the 1961 Freedom Rides ("All I could do—there—an art prayer."), an attempt perhaps to draw up history from place through the body. "More documentation was what I wanted," he states, referring to the inadequacy of the sole photograph of the blues musician Charley Patton, which ultimately leads him to Walter Carter, the oldest living man in Yazoo City, Mississippi, who shares his personal history with Lemon, including his witnessing of a lynching. Lemon casts Walter as the star performer in a video project: a space traveler. Lemon says that his talk is not meant to be about Walter's death, but about his life. And yet, this is one of the most moving elegies I have ever encountered—in lieu of burial rites, a garden is planted in a makeshift spaceship, made out of the accumulated debris from Carter's own back yard.

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I have the sense, with Lemon standing alone on the stage surrounded by video documentation of his collaboration with Walter Carter and Carter's community, that he is simultaneously artist and ethnographer, storyteller and witness. The tale, of course, is full of inconsistencies and gaps, stutters and reframings, mythologies and fragments. And Lemon is very aware of



Okwui Okpokwasili in *Scaffold Room*. Photo: Paula Court

the double-edged position he occupies as he stands before his audience. As he shows us footage of juke-joint dancers, he ruminates: "By viewing this, they are being erased. This erasure creates a myth. They were just as surprised to be in this as you are watching it." He continues: "So really I'm kind of fucked sharing this."

8:00 p.m.:

Scaffold Room Performance

Okwui Okpokwasili and April Matthis are the stars of *Scaffold Room*, in all senses of the word—constellations really, universes unto themselves. Each of them channels a wide range of personalities, primarily through monologue. Significantly, they can't be in the room at the same time. At the end of her stint, Okpokwasili wanders out in a confused trance and in staggers Matthis, on high, high red vinyl heels, muttering phrases from Beyoncé's "Drunk in Love." Are they interchangeable? Are they singular?

It's unclear who authors what—the monologues slip constantly between characters. The material might emerge from the performers or from Lemon, may include song lyrics, works of fiction, film dialogue, historical reenactment, diaries. To add to the dispersed nature of authorship, Lemon read these monologues during his artist talk, so I now hear his voice running alongside theirs. A phrase cycles through the performance and the talks, perhaps from a film, or perhaps from a dream of Walter Carter's: "I didn't recognize myself."

This phrase resonates strongly with one theme of the work, where the lack of self-recognition is tied to the historical dearth of credit given to black female artists. White female musicians are put through the wringer by Okpokwasili, who wonders

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whether the “piece of black,” i.e. the legacy of black music and history that Amy Winehouse in particular absorbed, was the cause of her death—too much pain for her body to carry. More heavy material, always laced with humor, follows, involving Lady Gaga and also zombies. Then, Okpokwasili delivers a great impression of a presumably white male artist (unaffected by the burdens of representation) who tosses off the phrase, “I do what I do, I feel modern” with self-satisfied aplomb. She also embodies a young woman who sings and dances for us with decidedly non-technical and amateurish movements (oh and pants-less, too), after which she mutters, in a very low and deadly serious register, “Thank you very much.”

A different register is struck when Matthis embodies Jackie “Moms” Mabley, a black comedian who performed from the 1920s – 1960s. Matthis’s wide eyes and broken-off speech revivify minstrel traditions, even while Mabley goes against the grain by talking about chasing after young men. Later, after reading Kathy Acker’s very explicit prose, Matthis says, referring to Mabley, “I wish she could just say it—sucking dick, eating pussy,” reminding us of the differential limits of transgression available to the two female artists, and the role that race plays in those limits.

I come back to Lemon’s admission of the “fucked-ness” of his position. It seems to me that more than creating a version of a stable truth or transmitting a single narrative, Lemon’s pastiche of voices and moving images rub up against each other, forming a dialectic that is continually shifting and multiplying. *So really I’m kind of fucked sharing this.* If we as spectators can be open to both what we encounter as well as the personal repertoire of images and emotions that are awakened within us, we might just find that we are kind of fucked, too, in the best way—destabilized, raw, and newly alive.