

November 18, 2015

▼ Art

Serious Headspace

Multidisciplinary artist Ralph Lemon's 'Scaffold Room' is a profound construct **BY JENNIFER KRASINSKI**

Ralph Lemon: 'Scaffold Room'
The Kitchen
512 West 19th Street
212-255-5793, thekitchen.org
Through December 5



Photo: Court

During a talk Ralph Lemon gave at the Kitchen during the opening week of his latest project, "Scaffold Room," the artist avowed his interest in "the slippery nature of authorship." It's not unusual for remarks like that to instantly deflate an audience's expectations. Contemporary art has been in borrow/thieve/consume mode for so long, all in a supposedly superior pursuit of dissolving authorship. What typically follows is the risk-free refrain that there are no new ideas, and then, just like that, we find ourselves an audience for art that proudly undermines the pursuit of itself.

Yet Lemon, who began his career in the mid-1970s as a dancer and choreographer, is anything but a typical artist. In fact, he belongs in the rarefied sphere of the necessary artist—one whose presence and work are not merely important but imperative. "Scaffold Room" is grand proof of his prowess, a far-reaching, bracing, and beautiful work that is at once performance, exhibition, installation, and curation. Its many moving parts may be appreciated separately, yet the dynamic their interconnection spawns is what generates the full force of Lemon's ideas. "Scaffold Room" is not just the title of the work, nor the name of the particular architecture Lemon constructed for the performance. (It is as

The first week of Ralph Lemon's "Scaffold Room" brought a performance component courtesy of April Matthis (pictured above) and Okwui Okpokwasili. The exhibition includes *Untitled* (2015), doll-size African idols decked out like Beyoncé and Jay Z.

advertised: a two-story room built of scaffolding.) It also refers to a space carved out for thinking about race, sexuality, gender, pop culture, and the very American histories that have shaped them.

For the first week or so of "Scaffold Room," the Kitchen gave itself over completely to Lemon. (The exhibition remains on view until December 5.) You could move between an installation upstairs in the gallery space and the performance that took place in the theater downstairs. The videos, sculptures, drawings, and found objects and photographs upstairs extended or refracted the stories presented onstage, and vice versa. "Partly a lecture, partly a musical" is how Lemon described the performance, which starred Okwui Okpokwasili and April Matthis, each magnetic, magnificent stand-ins for Lemon, presenting a tale of a long-lost lover. The text, entwined with meditations on the shiftiness of representation, likewise entwines Lemon's own writing with that of other authors.



Jason Mardella

Quoting Lady Gaga, Okpokwasili says, "We are nothing without our image"—which is a way of saying that "we" are, in fact, everything and anything we project ourselves to be. At one point the viewer is asked to consider "white girls with black voices" (in this case Janis Joplin and Amy Winehouse). Can a voice be black or white? The question hovers, though we understand too well that race can determine a singer's presence on the world's stage. As singers go, Beyoncé is, according to Lemon, "the pope with an ass to truly worship[...]. She's a machine[...]. Hip-hop technology," the platinum achievement of total pop perfection. Yet her persona is not

without complication.

Untitled (2015) presents us with wooden African idols the size of dolls, wearing handmade replicas of outfits Beyoncé and Jay Z have worn. The gesture is funny, oddball, yet its underlying ambivalence is inescapable. Why is it humorous to see these "black bodies" clothed? The humor is perhaps clearer when it comes to a piece such as *Black Light Neon* (2015), a violet neon sign about the size of a chessboard that lies on the floor and radiates three simple words: FUCK BRUCE NAUMAN. It's a tip of the hat to Jayson Musson, whose art-world alter ego Hennessy Youngman once infamously explained in an episode of his series *Art Thoughtz* why, after Nauman, no artist can use neon. "Bruce Nauman, he own neon," Youngman cracks. "He fucked neon so far up the ass that his dick came out neon's mouth."

Other pieces are quieter, more ethereal. Standing before *The Giraffe Dog House* (2015), we watch a moving image of a giraffe, rotoscoped from an unidentified source and projected onto the walls of a wooden doghouse, walking, disappearing and reappearing. Nearby, a video called *Giraffe Boys* (2013) presents kids posing in an oversize giraffe mask, the height of which nearly doubles the child in size; another video, *The Killer Space Dogs* (2013), captures a dog owner dressing his pup in a silver spacesuit. The juxtapositions brought to mind a line from the performance piece: "Yes, be deliberate with what costume one puts on...and make sure it fits."

As for the question of authorship, Lemon isn't concerned with theft. He's talking about inheritance, the invocation of "collaborators" who came before him—the artists and writers who shaped and guided him—as well as those whose hands and heads helped bring into existence the works on view here. As part of the exhibition, Lemon created the Graphic Reading Room, a small, spare space, painted all white and illuminated so brightly from above that anyone who enters appears hyper-vibrant, intensely present, as though somehow in sharper focus. For the first week, he invited groundbreaking voices to speak groundbreaking texts. Dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer read the Marquis de Sade; poet Fred Moten, Iceberg Slim; artist Gary Indiana, Mary McCarthy.

On one afternoon, choreographer Miguel Gutierrez sat on the floor inside, reading passages aloud from David Wojnarowicz's radioactive *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, a collection of essays that begins with the author thanking a long list of friends and muses both living and dead. For Wojnarowicz in 1991 as for Lemon now, that forceful gravity of absence can bend the mind: "I walked for hours through the streets after he died," Gutierrez spoke. "Notions of time were retracting and extending and somewhere in the midst of this I had to take a piss." (A useful lesson in the ways of the world: Time will pass, people will disappear, but the need to piss will always be with us.) This too is Lemon's "Scaffold Room": a model home where memory comes alive.