



A WALK INTO THE NIGHT



INTRODUCING A WALK INTO THE NIGHT

Borrowing its title from the acclaimed novel by Capetonian author Alex La Guma, *A Walk Into the Night* is an innovative project inspired by the history of the Cape Town Carnival. It is centered around a one hour-long procession with new work by visual artist Marlon Griffith, music composed by Garth Erasmus and curated by Claire Tancons. Inspired by the traditions of the Cape Town and Trinidad carnivals and West African shadow puppets it was conceived by Marlon Griffith as an “invisible masquerade”. *A Walk Into the Night* is a processional shadow play, with various elements worn or carried by a multitude of a hundred participants, casting shadows onto horizontal and vertical planes along the itinerary of the procession, from hand-held

white screens, to buildings, the sidewalk and the ground, participants and audience members.

MEET CLAIRE TANCONS

A native of Guadeloupe, French West Indies, Claire currently lives and works in New Orleans as a curator, writer and scholar. Claire has showed a sustained interest in the work of performance artists and artists crossing the boundaries between the visual and performing arts. She has been the recipient of various curatorial and research grants from the American Center Foundation, the Andy Warhol Foundation, the Foundation for Arts Initiatives and the Prince Claus Fund.

For the last five years, Claire has been pursuing both historical research and curatorial experimentation with Carnival. She has written for Nka, Third Text and Small Axe as well as for a host of exhibition catalogues. She has lectured regularly at conferences worldwide about her work on Carnival.

As a curator for the 7th Gwangju Biennale, South

Korea (2008) she organized a 90-min. procession inspired by political demonstrations and carnival processions, hailed as one of the biennale's highlights. Tancons was the Associate Curator for Prospect.1 New Orleans for which she organized an exhibition of Mardi Gras Indian Victor Harris, as well as for Contemporary Arts Center New Orleans (2007-2009) where she curated various exhibitions.

Claire is currently traveling and researching for a large-scale project on contemporary carnival and processional arts for CAC New Orleans and other venues.



WHAT WAS THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS PROJECT?

Over the last five years, I have researched Creole carnivals in the New World, from Port of Spain, Trinidad, and Nassau, The Bahamas, to Salvador de Bahia and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. In 2005, I had the privilege of discovering Cape Town's own carnival during my first trip to the city within the framework of Sessions eKapa

2005 at the invitation of Julian Jonker of CAPE. At the time Julian was the co-ordinator of this forum, a scholar of the Cape Town carnival and a sound artist, he was instrumental in the conceptualization and initial organization of the project.

Our discussion about the Cape Town Carnival began when I came to the city in December 2005 and continued the following year, in 2006 in New York. Our initial discussion progressed from our common interest in the history of the carnival to our desire to use it as a vehicle for contemporary artistic creation. Julian had already organized several non-traditional carnivals and I had plans of doing the same, which I finally realized in the Summer 2008 in South Korea for the 7th Gwangju Biennale with a performance called Spring, a 90-minute long procession with works by artists from Brazil, Haiti, Trinidad, the United States, France, and South Korea. Up until then, Julian was the only other art producer with whom I shared this vision, which had not been well received and understood by my fellow visual art curators. Over time, my interest in Carnival came to encompass

the wider spectrum of parades and processions as well, from New Orleans Jazz Funerals to political demonstrations the world over. So, my inspiration for the project is twofold: On the one hand, I am interested in investigating the relationship between the Cape Town Carnival, the coloured community and the District 6 neighborhood out of which it emanated, particularly during the troubled period of the forced removals. At the time of the community's uprooting from its traditional neighborhood, the carnival became an even more potent vehicle of the identity of this community, and a symbol of the ongoing process of migration, external and internal, from the original diasporic experience to contemporary dislocations. On the other hand, I am interested in processions as an alternative curatorial format for the presentation of performance art works and have been invigorated in this pursuit following the success of Spring.

Marlon Griffith, a visual artist and carnival designer from Trinidad has provided a more immediate inspiration for the current iteration of the project, which has been three years in the making and

undergone several variations. He is creating a moving shadow play, "an invisible masquerade", in his words, based on the novel of Alex La Guma, A Walk in the Night, whose title we have borrowed for the project. Marlon, whose work I have showed in Trinidad, the United States and South Korea as part of Spring, is an artist with a rare talent stemming from his ability to bridge the divide between carnival and contemporary art, which few other artists, with the exception of a couple of his peers in America, Trinidad, The Bahamas and Brazil, have been able to achieve, and even fewer, in my sense, with as acute an understanding of the possibility of this artistic medium, the art of the procession. In this way, Marlon is an heir to the tradition of Mas' (short for masquerade) in Trinidad, the art of the Carnival procession, in the lineage of such luminaries as carnival designer and artist Peter Minshall.

Mas' is a fundamental inspiration to A Walk into the Night and to my work in general.



COULD YOU DESCRIBE WHAT AUDIENCES CAN EXPECT FROM THE PRODUCTION?

The idea of the artistic contract, which I developed while working on *Spring*, entails that a procession can only occur if a contract is passed between the artist and the participants. Without participants, there can be no procession. Without the artistic contract there can be no artwork. The artwork designed by the artist for the procession only finds form and function when it is worn, carried and interacted with by participants who become a part of the procession.

Post-modernism has championed the idea of the viewer completing the artwork. In *Carnival*, this idea is at once more basic and more fundamental, as the work physically, rather than conceptually, depends on human participation to be completed. I expect that for *A Walk Into the Night*, the audience/participants of the procession engage in an artistic experience that involves aesthetics, politics and social context simultaneously in a fundamentally civil way-

'civil' being understood here as that which defines a community as part of but also independent from any type of governance that it has not chosen itself.



WHAT WERE SOME OF THE ENLIGHTENING DISCOVERIES YOU MADE ABOUT CAPE TOWN'S CARNIVAL CULTURE?

I understood the Creole nature of Cape Town culture through its carnival. Until I learned more about the history of the settlement of Cape Town and subsequent development as a cultural crucible, I couldn't reconcile the idea of Cape Town and Carnival. The discovery of the existence of a carnival in Cape Town was enlightening. Then the discovery of its rather marginalized existence pre- and continuing, post-apartheid, was something else that shed light for me on South African society. Within the Cape Town Carnival itself, the legacy of blackface minstrelsy (also found throughout a number of popular manifestations in the Caribbean, from the Trinidad

Carnival to Cuba's Teatro Buffo) was revealing in the pervasiveness of racial constructs shared across the Atlantic world.



**HOW DOES THIS PROCESSION DIFFER FROM
THE OTHER NON-TRADITIONAL CARNIVAL
PROCESSIONS THAT HAVE HAPPENED
IN THE CITY?**

Inspired as it is by Carnival in general and by the tradition of the Cape Town carnival in particular, A Walk Into the Night is not a carnival procession. It is a curated art procession. Because I have been trained as a visual arts curator, I tend to think of the procession as a curatorial medium along the line of exhibition practice and of Carnival as providing only but some of the many possible contexts and content for the procession.

But many approaches are possible, spanning the wide spectrum of artistic creation from the visual to the performing arts. There are many possible variations in between and models to follow or depart from

including of course from within the various carnival and processional traditions worldwide.

One would hope that the processional format would provide the site where the ongoing and increasingly sterile distinction between artistic disciplines might come to an end.



WHAT IN YOUR VIEW WOULD BE THE LASTING IMPACT OF THIS PROCESSION?

Flashes of memories, recollections from the past and projections into the future. A procession is an ephemeral time and space-based medium. Marlon's invisible masquerade, aiming at directing the attention of the viewer away from the participants and onto the projected motifs of the shadows will create a fleeting impression on the audience.

So will Garth Erasmus' musical composition for string and bones, reminiscent of whispers and inarticulate sounds, enabling the sharing of secrets, unlike loud and bold music that exhausts the imagination and saturates the senses.

THE MUSICAL SCORE IS A FUNDAMENTAL COMPONENT OF THIS WORK AND INCLUDES MANY ELEMENTS, COULD YOU ELABORATE ON THIS?

I am indebted to Julian Jonker for the conceptualization of the musical component of *A Walk Into the Night* and to Garth Erasmus for the composition of the music and leadership of the musical band. The whispering sound of the strings and bones orchestra and the history of these instruments, harking back to indigenous Khoi and San music, seem to me particularly apt at conveying Marlon's subtle invocations of memories through shadows and at furthering the investigation of the theme of dislocation.

Within the wider spectrum of experimentations with processions as an alternative artistic and curatorial format, music plays as important a role as the visual and performing arts do. The processional format, with its specific musical demands, is an equally challenging experimental field for a conductor, a composer or a

musician as it is for a visual artist, a carnival artist, a dancer etc.



WHAT WERE SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES WHEN CURATING THIS WORK?

The challenges of organizing processions are many, not least because it is still a rather un-charted territory that has yet to find and define itself through practice. Securing the participation of people to the artist-led workshops, in which the work for the procession is produced, and to the procession itself is one of these challenges. It is a very good and necessary one that constantly tests the limits and limitations of the idea of the artistic contract.

Getting permission for the use of public spaces is another one, which tests the social contract, particularly in a country like South Africa with a strong tradition and long history of public protest and civil disobedience. In short, the great challenge of organizing a procession lies in its contractual

nature vis-à-vis audience/participants and location/
space, and of course, always, history.



WHAT IS YOUR MOST MEMORABLE CARNIVAL EXPERIENCE?

It would be my first experience of the Trinidad carnival in Port of Spain in 2004. It was not so much captured by the visual nature of the various parades, however exuberant- or aberrant by traditional artistic standards- as I was by the symphonic sound of the steel pan in the makeshift downtown pan-yard of legendary Laventille steel band Desperadoes. I was taught to cusp my ears in an attempt to bring the rich harmonies of the steel drums together and as I watched the musical feats and athletic acrobatics of the players, I experienced an aesthetic emotion that has since only been paralleled a couple months ago by the pure spectacle of the Parade of the Champions of Rio's Samba Schools in the Sambódromo.

Another vivid, if mediated, carnival experience is of

the carnival celebration in Guinea Bissau featured in Chris Marker's 1983 chef d'oeuvre *Sans Soleil*. In the film, the Guinea Bissau carnival, along with similar festivals from other cultural traditions, epitomizes the role played by popular manifestations in both the dramatization of the everyday and the resistance to the spectacularization of daily life.



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