

Ancestry and Spirit:

Site Specific Performance in the Hunts Point Homes Residency

By Taja Lindley | June 2013

On a rainy day in May I'm making my way to the Bronx Academy for Arts and Dance (BAAD!). The walk from the 6 train station at Longwood Avenue is a long one, or rather it feels that way because I'm walking into a place that's tucked away, out of the way, a place where there is minimal foot traffic. The train station hosts a bustle of pedestrians. But as I cross the Bruckner Expressway I am walking alone. Cars and trucks whiz by. And then I take a right onto Barretto Street. Though located right next to the expressway, it is an ironically quiet place with an occasional stream of cars. But people live here. Amidst the barbed wire, concrete, idle cars and seeming desolation, people live here.

I know I am getting closer to BAAD! when I see murals and graffiti art that responds to police violence, affirms women, and suggests safe sex practices. People live here, and art thrives here too. I arrive. And on this rainy day there is something different happening. What is usually a quiet street is now buzzing, a more noticeable hum than what is usually felt and heard. People are standing outside watching a dancer in the street and three dancers in the windows of the second floor of the building we are facing. The culminating performance of the Hunts Points Homes Dance Residency has begun. Hunts Point is the community; BAAD! is the site for this site-specific performance.

Coordinated by Jane Gabriels at Papatian, the residency was a three-day process for five artists: four dancers, artists in residence – Alicia Diaz, Matthew Thornton, Marion Ramirez, and Jung Woong Kim; and collaborating media artist Hatuey Ramos Fermin. The three days included immersion (meeting with cultural workers and community-based organizations and leaders), research and on-site development, and performance. It was through the immersion process that the artists chose BAAD! and it's immediate surroundings – Barretto and Manida Streets – as their site. It was their first stop in their tour of Hunts Point, and it was then that they learned the BAAD! building was formerly a warehouse where immigrants worked to produce garments and where South American currency was made.

Rich with history, BAAD! brings an unusual amount of activity to Barretto Street on this day and everyday. Attracting audiences and artists to enter its mysterious red double doors on the second floor, BAAD! is an undeniable presence in its neighborhood but the local community members are not always frequent patrons. BAAD! staff are engaged with their neighbors but only a few neighbors seem to enter the space. The community knows they are here and take notice of the activity – with its large glass windows, residents and the occasional passerbys can see movement in BAAD! come in and out of view from their homes and from the street. This idea of mystery, what is seen and unseen, the things that come in and out of view over space and time were central themes in the residency performance.

The artists in residence began their performance with a series of poses, movements phrases and contact improvisation through and behind the large glass windows at BAAD!. At times, seeing their performance through unopened windows felt like we were seeing ghosts. The dancers made contact through the window – one hand inside touching another hand outside—as well as contact between the three artists inside with the one who danced in our midst – reaching, watching, looking. There was a sense of longing in the movements. It reminded me of the mural I passed by on my way to BAAD! – the know-your-rights mural in response to heavy policing and police brutality. In a community that is heavily surveilled, how often do residents visit loved ones in jail or prison? Make contact through glass? What is the energetic impact on a community that constantly has its members policed and involuntarily removed from their community? Are their spirits ghost-like? What are the feelings and longing that linger?

While considering these thoughts, the audience was directed to move into the BAAD! space. We get to see inside what we witnessed from Barretto Street. Then each artist made their way to downstairs and out of the building, where we watched from the window as they performed in the street. As we sat on the windowsills watching, an environmental soundscape and video of the Bronx River, created by Hatuey Ramos Fermin, were playing simultaneously.

Through the movement, of audience and performer, the divisions between “stage” and “audience” became blurred, fictionalized, less and less important. The consideration of divisions, separateness and togetherness were major subjects of the residence performance. Through the large glass windows of BAAD! we witnessed two dancers on either side of an alley – one on Barretto Street, the other on Manida Street – moving and dancing simultaneously (sometimes in unison, sometimes not). During this moment I asked myself: What are the things that keep us together? What are the things that keep us separated? How does the asphalt, concrete, gates, barbed wires, walls and buildings that mark this alleyway and the landscape for this performance become symbolically and literally translated for the communities that live here?

This idea of togetherness and separateness was invoked again as all of the artists in residence did a series of walks on Barretto Street. Together and alone. Down the street and back again. Pulled and pushed. Tugged and dragged. Prodded and propelled. Walk and run. Leave and return. To be guided and moved by something other than yourself in an environment seemingly desolate and unconnected. But something lives here – people do, who walk and drive past; and you have to wonder what they're thinking as all of this is going on.

Through this structured improvisation, the timing of the improvising was incredibly important as cars and trucks, whizzing by

from the Bruckner Expressway, made their way down Barretto Street. Dispersion after walking together was not only an aesthetic choice, it was at times necessary for the environment. What does it mean to leave and return – out of choice or necessity? Voluntarily or involuntarily?

These considerations apply not only to the living. On a rainy day, the waterfall was a libation and the performers become conductors of spirit – the ancestors of the location, former workers in the building, all of the spirits that have moved through the community, the dislocated through gentrification and imprisonment, and perhaps even the ancestors of the artists. The movement from inside and outside, and the connections between the performers in multiple environments through sight and movement are reflections of ancestors – who are somewhere, looking in on a place they have been. The ghost-like appearance of the artists in residence behind the windows, the touching through the glass invoked imagery of spirit. And it also represents how BAAD! is positioned in its local community: to be seen mysteriously through its glass windows by residents who are not regular patrons – the activity of the unseen impacting place and people.

And it is in that vein that site-specific performance makes its impact. Through small and concentrated efforts, site-specific work is a gentle and impactful intervention. It is history interpreted through bodies -- performers become a channel, a new lens through which we view a place and ourselves. It engages the metaphysical – dare I say spiritual – dimensions of art making: that intangible, indescribable affect on place and people that can only come through creative practices. It allows audiences and performers to both transform and be transformed by the space they occupy.

As artists are continuing to engage with the Hunts Points area through this residency, I imagine that this site-specific work will continue to make ripples that will echo through the community. The process of the first residency, albeit brief, conjured memory and history in a palpable way. I look forward to the next installment.