CONTEMPORARY STREET ARTS IN EUROPE

AESTHETICS AND POLITICS

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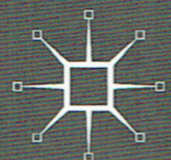
determine who belongs and who does not (2000: 36–59). In addition, with the emphasis on the anti-social behaviour of the Squames, the 'reading' encouraged in the intervention suggests that *citizenship*, and of course its opposing category of *foreignness*, is increasingly defined in terms of normative behaviour. That definition opens the door for the distance between citizen and foreigner to be framed in moral terms of right and wrong or good and evil. The participatory form of *Les Squames* arouses a powerful affective response to this disturbing Other, and that somatic reaction to the faux-exhibition is physically felt, whether the viewer thinks the Outsider is real or not. While one's response can be intellectually analysed at a later time, the on-site reaction is powerfully immediate as it compels the spectator to confront his or her 'feelings' about Otherness.

The intense visceral reaction of such an experience grows out of what I have chosen to call *metaphoric memory*. Street interventions that perform the Other often develop a *memory* in the mind of the spectator. This memory is not just of the show, but rather of the spectator's affective experience of Otherness. While that experience occurs within the frame of a performance event, it is actually felt in the spectator's body, both physically and psychologically, during the show and is recollected by the body later. 'What is remembered by the body is well remembered', writes Elaine Scarry on pain and physical violence (1985: 152). In addition, it is experienced in a familiar public space that the passer-by associates with everyday activities. Thus what is experienced in the aesthetic space thus acquires an uncanny reality making metaphoric memory possible.[3]

Pascal Laurent, *Melgut* and *VitupErrance*

Pascal Laurent, one of the directors of Friches Théâtre Urbain in Paris, France, has developed two solo characters that rely on anti-social behaviour to push passers-by into a position of choosing to reject him. In the late 1980s, he created an exotic character who appeared in urban centres unannounced and often unwelcome.[4] Melgut, a hunched character on one-meter stilts, dressed head-to-toe in flowing red robes, seems to come out of nowhere and tries to blend in with unsuspecting pedestrians who suddenly find a foreigner – disoriented and scared – in their midst. He tries to be as invisible as the normal inhabitants of the town, but his physical difference clearly sets him apart. Although the spectators force him to engage with them, Melgut is always the outsider. He has entered the public's space, and his precisely enacted awareness of

that intrusion firmly places the crowds that surround him in the role of insiders who easily become intolerant of his difference as his behaviour in response to their attention becomes more erratic and aggressive.

While some spectators try to connect with Melgut by, for example, offering a cigarette, he gets the audience to laugh at his surprise and over-reaction to the gift and thus turns the act of kindness into a way to mock the Other as someone who does not know the behavioural codes. Some moments of connection with the *insiders* happen as Melgut touches someone's head, leans on someone's shoulder, or allows people to hold his hand, but that connection makes him feel cornered, so he frightens the crowd as he rushes into their midst in an attempt to get away. Sometimes, he pushes the connection too far and so turns the crowd against him. In one show, an unannounced performance intervention in June 2002 near Saint-Germain-des-Prés in Paris, a crowd of children surround him, pulling at his robes and grabbing his hands. Suddenly, he lifts one child up and swings her around three or four times. The others are stunned; some want a turn, others back away, but Melgut takes off across the street, stopping traffic. (See Colour Plate 11.) His actions dramatically convey the image of being hemmed in and terrified, and his escape that leaves him trapped among the cars encourages the crowd to follow, to *chase* him. While Melgut brings the outsider's feelings of isolation, fear, anger and longing into sharper focus as he highlights the impossibility of assimilation for some newcomers, he also forces the audience to experience how easy it is to discriminate against someone who looks and acts different since his actions do not really allow 'us' to accept the outsider: he harangues us too fiercely, he invades our space too aggressively; his mercurial temperament is too frightening. Melgut offers a hyperbolic characterization of Otherness, and while that characterization is offensive as it embodies and reinforces negative stereotypes, it also exploits extreme exaggeration to dispel any possibility of being construed as an accurate portrayal and thus shifts the focus from the content of the piece to the experience of the spectators reacting to this encounter with the Other. Melgut balances precariously on the line between being so outrageous that he is just entertaining and being the source of biting social critique.

In *VitupErrance*,[5] first performed in 2011, Laurent abandons the visual signals of the outsider so evident in Melgut's red robes and stilts and blends more easily into the crowd at least at first. Like Melgut, this new character just appears in urban centres unannounced and often unwelcome. In this piece, Laurent says he seeks the fine line between intervention and scandal as his character tests the boundaries between

real life and performance. Everyday life is at the heart of the intervention, but the quotidian provides the lens through which to view larger social and political issues. In *VitupErrance*, Laurent explores the point where people stop being tolerant toward someone whose behaviour is different or erratic and experiments with what kind of actions cause fear, anger or disgust. But he also plays with the moment that invisible theatre becomes visible as he measures how much he needs to exaggerate his movements, his words or his reactions before an unsuspecting audience realizes they are watching a show.

Laurent begins the performance intervention dressed quite well in a suit and leather shoes, pulling a small black suitcase. The start of the show is unannounced and invisible, and the people with whom he interacts for the first few hours as he walks around the central town square think that he is an older man, perhaps a little distracted or disoriented, but someone looking for something – from his sunglasses to an inexpensive place to stay for the night. Laurent asks people where he can find the Centre Départemental d'Hébergement that can help him find a hotel, but this Centre is fictitious. People tend to be helpful as they try to search for it on their iPhones or take him to the nearest bar to ask the owner, but, of course, no one knows the place since it does not exist. As they search, Laurent's character begins to tell them little anecdotes about himself, how he has lost his job, how he has no place to live. It seems strange since he is well-dressed, but some people sympathize. He wanders around this public space asking for help and telling tiny stories for about three hours so that he becomes a familiar figure in the square. The character's autobiographical anecdotes are punctuated with complaints about human pettiness and selfishness or about elusive social services. While he begins gently, his criticisms against today's world from the railroads and industrial growth to American superheroes and profit motives become more caustic. He begins working with groups of two or three and then tries to gather larger groups of ten to twenty to participate in tiny ten-minute *shows* that many may not recognize as a performance intervention. Some people listen, some argue, others walk away, and still others ask him to leave. In one bar, customers threatened to call social services, so he thanked them for their time and help and left.

Rather than clearly establishing his Otherness from his first appearance as he did with Melgut, in *VitupErrance*, Laurent gradually alters his behaviour and his costume as he shifts from ordinary activities to obvious performance.[6]

The more obvious *show* begins as Laurent starts to command the space with his life stories punctuated by harangues. He begins this

Figure 16   Pascal Laurent, *VitupErrance* (Paris, France, September 2011) Photograph by Juliette Dieudonné (Courtesy of Friches Théâtre Urbain)

section mimicking the iconic panhandler on the Paris metro whose pitch begins by thanking the crowd for their time, patience and generosity and moves to telling them his life story. Laurent's character starts with expressions of appreciation that logically lead to why he is asking for help. He reveals personal details of jobs he lost because of changes in the industry and the economic crisis and moves into a critique of contemporary capitalist society that devalues the human being in favour of commerce. Each part of the meandering narrative reveals a personal anecdote accompanied by mimed actions, and as his narrative becomes more heated, he begins to take off the nice suit jacket, tie and shirt. He plays with the tie as a noose. He pulls an Australian greatcoat and a rumpled bowler hat out of his bag. In his new persona, he makes direct and often biting or cynical comments about the state of the world and accuses the people who just stand there and listen of shirking their responsibility. And just as suddenly as he started, he abruptly leaves.

His character could be a former successful businessman now down on his luck, but his behaviour identifies him as an unpleasant, and potentially dangerous, Other – an old man exhausted by life and powerless

against society's forces, but furious at civic injustices and frightened by the steady descent into barbarism in today's social world. His Otherness, visually quite subtle in *VitupErrance*, is located in his attitudes and his tirades that become more frightening though his accusatory finger-pointing, the highly expressive emotions shown on his face, and his exaggerated glee, surprise, deep confusion or anger. The public's experience as they helped, ignored or mocked this old man before he appeared as a character is vividly remembered in the spectator's body, and Laurent echoes the gestures of kindness and those of hostility in his tirades. Like Melgut, this character arouses a visceral response in the spectators as they encounter Otherness. The invisibility of the beginning of the performance makes the initial audience reactions to an *actual* Outsider who then reveals himself as a *performed* Outsider, and this ambiguity and deception walk a fine line between acceptability and scandal, but the character effectively creates a metaphoric memory of Otherness in the spectator.

Osmosis Compagnie, *Transit* and *Alhambra Container*

The massive eighteen-wheel truck (or articulated lorry) with its two trailers (one with open sides, the other completely enclosed) dominates the square in front of the Hotel de Ville in Chalon-sur-Saône (2005) all through the day. The performance, *Transit*, begins only when the sun sets. In the dark, images appear on the sides of the closed trailer – rural roads, urban streets, a beach, the mountains, abandoned lots, open fields. Sometimes still photographs, sometimes video footage, the images can linger or switch very quickly to create a dizzying sense of speed or urgency. A lone figure appears in the open trailer. Ali Salmi dances the voyage of a refugee on his clandestine journey from Afghanistan to the port of Calais and on to England. Created in 2004, *Transit* is one of several choreographies developed by Salmi and Osmosis Compagnie, based in Forbach, France, as an homage to his familial memories of their migration from Algeria.[7] Each one is based on actual experiences and stories, recounted and imagined.

Inspired by the photography of Ad van Denderen's *Go No Go*, *Transit*[8] narrates the hazards of the exile's voyage through movement both of the dancer's body and the images projected on the sides of the trailer. The dancer uses the floor of the trailer, but also its walls as he tries to run up them only to be thrown back down, its ceiling as he dangles upside down, and its roof. (See Colour Plate 12.) The dance acts as a metaphoric discourse on the movement of migration. Sometimes the