

Infiltrating the MoMA Atrium Part 2: Ralph Lemon on the Curation of "Some sweet day"
In Conversation with Marissa Perel

Ralph Lemon further discusses his artistic and curatorial concepts in relationship to race, and the work of Deborah Hay and Sarah Michelson for Some sweet day in MoMA's Marron Atrium, October 15- Nov 4 2012 in conversation with Marissa Perel. Read Part 1 of this interview on the Art21 blog.

Interview Date: November 21, 2012 at the artist's studio in the Park Avenue Armory

Marissa Perel: Tell me more about the role race played in your curatorial concept. How was it communicated to the artists in *Some sweet day* as a prompt?

Ralph Lemon: I feel like I can claim the idea of race as something that I've embodied, and racism as something I've embodied, but also something I can work with as a material in all my art practices, and that feels like a gift. With *Some sweet day*, it felt like something I could share, whether the artists involved were interested in that or not didn't matter because it's part of the air we breathe. So the Easter egg was revealed, not that anyone has actually found it, and maybe in the way I set it up with the artists involved, it's not findable, not really, surely not as some utopist collective find.

Marissa: This Easter egg analogy for the role of race in the curatorial concept of *Some sweet day* is interesting. It calls attention to the dimension of racialization in the art world. Whenever there is a show in which race is considered, the writing has to literally be on the wall, spoon-fed, so to speak, to the viewer. But formal concepts rarely need to be spelled out, they are aesthetically apparent. This makes me question whether your decision not to spell it out was deceptive or actually a conceptual point. Why does that need to be highlighted above other ideas or issues?

Ralph: It's a charged issue, and it can easily become the focal point. If I had publicized it, then all of the work would have just been seen through that lens. Steve Paxton was primarily interested in projecting his *Weight of Sensation* project on the ceiling of the Atrium, but if you look at the promotional image I chose for the series, it's got the black artist Al Loving in the center of Paxton's *Satisfyin' Lover*, from 1970, so I was very deliberate, if evasive. It's a problem with the lexicon of race in our culture. Either Obama is black or he's not. Politically he can't talk about his blackness. He is black, but he can't be black. And I feel like it's also how I live a part of my life, particularly as an artist. It's there, and it's not there, and it's there. So, that's how I considered it in organizing *Some sweet day*.

Marissa: When you say, 'it's there and then it's not there and then it's there,' are you saying that it's part of your awareness, and then it's gone, and then it returns, or are you saying that about how the outside world perceives your work?

Ralph: It's like a river, it flows, and it's ever-present, but there are times when certain things surface or fall away, but it's always there. Sometimes it floods. For me as an artist, there is a certain privilege to being in this flow that there wasn't 50 or 60 years ago, certainly. I think about the difference between a David Hammons and a Bruce Nauman. These are both iconic and important artists, but looking at the differences in how they're culturally represented by the white visual art world is so extreme. No one really, I think, has articulated that commonality and division, so they also flow within this river.

It's hard at this point in time to codify things racially and it's getting harder as time goes on. It feels like a privilege, but then there's also a responsibility to history, to the people that struggled and died and suffered incalculable horrors to be citizens of the United States. There are still outrageously violent racist elements that exist, but I speak as someone who has had more privilege than not.

What is black music? It wasn't until Deborah Hay presented her work that I confessed to it as the third prompt, besides the first prompt of engaging the Atrium and the second prompt of the pairing. The work was all it seemed and nothing of what it seemed. For me, I saw two organisms navigating a space, different evolving spaces within a space, an ecology of bodies, and the audience as a third instant organism and a different space, I didn't see race, not so much. I suppose I made a choice that a binary gaze would be too limiting. That there was potentially more to see.

Not to discard the problems that the piece brought up about race, they are important problems. It's just a reflection of how we are in this country, in this world and for this conversation, how we were at MoMA. The first afternoon of her performance, I was the only black person in the roving audience looking at the work. No one talks about that, no one knew or cared to see that. What's more important? What's happening inside or what's happening outside? If these questions can be brought up – yes, on the façade, they should anger and outrage, and then we get to the more interesting thinking, if we're lucky. Have we not learned anything from the Wooster Group and their brilliantly wrong and seminal racial experiments; *Route 1 & 9*, or *Emperor Jones*?

Marissa: Many of the performers in the group were extremely fraught throughout the process.

Ralph: But they stayed with it as professionals. And Deborah was sincere, even as she was obfuscating, but that obfuscation was very direct.

Marissa: What do you mean?

Ralph: I'm not defending her. Like I said, her obfuscation was very direct.

Marissa: I wonder if this is really about understanding the artist's context within her/his body of work. Michelson's placement of the guards is classic as per her process, which I see as a unique form of institutional critique. Through implicating the employees' participation, she makes the hierarchical structure of the museum visible. Because Hay wasn't direct, it seems like the performers had to interpret potential meanings for the work themselves, which doesn't read easily to the audience. These artists have become known for such respective processes, but when they're put to the task of addressing race, it gets tricky.

RL: The artists weren't put to the task of addressing race. They were addressing the Atrium space primarily, that challenge, on their terms, and in the process they may have stumbled upon my presence, or maybe not.

In a recent e-mail Deborah sent to me she said, "My work has been and continues to be about how we see, not what we are looking at, and that includes the same challenge for audience and performer." Add the element of race to that ungraspable thing, and it makes it even more fraught because when you're only looking at black and white, what else is there? But there was a lot more there. Her genius is in revealing what she's not revealing. The façade happened to be the most apparent reality.

Deborah Hay's piece was seemingly and shockingly explicit, like racial pornography to some viewers. But Sarah Michelson working with the black guards, why is that perhaps more brilliant, racially harmless and or less obvious?

MP: It brings to mind the whole scandal about the score by Kara Walker for Clifford Owens in his show *Anthology*. Walker hadn't intended for him to actually perform it, and when she saw him do

it, she interrupted the performance. It was a spectacle, but at the same time, the artist was giving himself permission to experience an eroticism that is publicly censored, and the audience was participating in it. Where else could he have explored that, but at an arts institution? I had a lot of problems with it, but I also felt that it was an important moment. In comparing it to the notoriety of Deborah Hay's piece, I actually didn't think it was the most transgressive work in Owens' exhibition, even though it got all the attention.

Ralph: In Sarah's work, *Devotion Study #3*, the seven black guards were holding the space for a young, white woman. Protecting her world. To me, that was epically rich, elegantly outrageous and fraught from an American point of view because the black male in American culture is historically characterized as "monstrous." Part of the genesis of racism in this country has to do with the idea of white men protecting the white female from the black slave monster. In the surround of this, Sarah was composing another dazzling architectonic dance about nothing but dancing and the space it inhabits.

Marissa: Was part of your role acting as liaison between the artists and curators?

Ralph: I didn't need to do that because Kathy, Jenny Schlenzka, Sabine Breitwieser and the other co-organizers were all supportive of the choices I had made of the particular artists involved, and the choices the artists made for their work. I did feel like I had to be immediately and unconditionally supportive of the artists throughout the process. It was important that everyone got what they wanted, at least what they needed. Of course, there was the instability of watching the work in the space, of watching the audience's reactions, and what that brought up for me. It's a very complex space in the heart of MoMA. Its size, scale, whiteness. It's a public art space, for a price, and also a space that seems to break down a hierarchy in the museum. A kind of ante-space; hybrid and full of potential