Zigzagging Aesthetics

Setting Ideas in Motion

<Agitprop>, the linguistic lovechild of the Russian words <agitatsia> and <propaganda>, gets a bad rap these days, used as a reductive label for much politically-inflected art.¹ In Bolshevik Russia, however, <propaganda> referred merely to the public dissemination of ideas (from the aesthetic to the agricultural), and <agitatsia> (agitation) the act of putting something into motion. Whether pamphlets changing hands through the circulation of individual bodies, or Soviet trains crossing vast swathes of land to reach multiple publics, agitprop posited an integral conjunction between ideas and movement across space and time.

When, in 2008, Ângela Ferreira produced the installation For Mozambique (Model No.1 for a Screen-Tribune-Kiosk Celebrating the Post-Independence Utopia), she based it on a 1922 design for an agitprop kiosk by the Russian Constructivist artist Gustav Klucis. In its earlier manifestation, the kiosk would have been a temporary structure for use at special events, replete with loudspeakers, bookstands, screens and speaking platforms. In Ferreira’s work, the socio-political optimism that followed in the wake of the Russian revolution becomes the formal framework for exploring another celebratory moment: Mozambican independence from Portuguese rule - invoked in two films from the seventies. In one, documentary footage shows Bob Dylan performing the song Mozambique (with its naively exoticising lyrics suggesting one mode by which independence was mediated); in the other, Makwayela (directed by the anthropologist Jean Rouch in 1977), a group of Mozambican workers displays a jubilant mood through singing and dancing in unison. Dance itself manifests the most temporary, fluid form of the monument; a performative mode of choreographing new spaces for memory and agency.

Makwayela was, in fact, a teaching film made for the Institute of Cinema in Mozambique. The glass factory workers who performed in it were men recently returned to Mozambique after working under difficult and exploitative conditions in the gold mines of South Africa. Rouch described how the workers had engaged with the experience by <[forming]
a mixed chorus that sings and dances about their work in the gold mines ... In the Barakolo language (a secret language of the miners), they denounce imperialism and apartheid.²
Within the rigid apartheid structures of labour and segregation that policed the right to move freely across space, the workers had choreographed a hybrid form of personal and collective resistance; a creative yet everyday act that sidestepped the physical parameters of their experience. As migrant labourers, these ideas were set in motion - enfolded into dance - and travelled with them between South Africa and Mozambique.

**Entangled Times and Spaces in the Postcolony**

For Mozambique [...] is an ambivalent architectonic monument to an idea of <home> that never really was, but might once have been, had things played out differently (for independence gave way to civil war in Mozambique). It is parsed in the future anterior, an entanglement of time and space that draws on and yet exceeds the futuristic utopias imagined at the beginning of the twentieth century and the nostalgic impulses of its closing decades, both of which underpinned so much of the century’s monumental art and nationalistic architecture. Perhaps it is, instead, a product of a contemporary moment that Svetlana Boym has called the <off-modern> : offbeat, off the beaten track, a detour into the unexplored potentials of the modern project. It recovers unforeseen pasts and ventures into the side alleys of modern history at the margins of error of major philosophical, economic, and technological narratives of modernization and progress.³

Within the specific context of the African postcolony, the <off-modern> conjures up the current generation of postcolonial artists, once removed from the era of revolution and struggle; self-conscious heirs to compromised and complicit aesthetic and ideological frameworks.

As Achille Mbembe and many others have pointed out, the lived experience of the postcolony <the time of existence and experience> is not diachronic, marked by the before-and-after marker of independence. Rather, the postcolony bears out a more synchronic reality: an <entanglement> of multiple, overlapping orders, identities, power structures and institutions which constitute material and social relations.⁴ This <time of entanglement> is an <interlocking of presents, pasts and futures> and is characterised by a plurality of public spheres. For Mbembe, in a discussion aptly entitled <Time on the Move>, this spatiotemporal entanglement <harbours the possibility of a variety of trajectories>⁵ something akin to Boym’s detours and ventures off the main paths and into side alleys. Much like the Makwayela dance, which traverses given boundaries, taking unexpected forms, so these trajectories - while invariably influenced by the momentum of economic, cultural and socio-political flows both local and global - are nevertheless marked by the <oblique, diagonal, and zigzag moves [which] reveal the play of human freedom.⁶
One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Notes on a Lateral Choreography

The notion of a trajectory, the path taken by a body moving through space, under the influence of various forces and flows, is reminiscent of the title of a manuscript Lenin wrote in 1904 (a decade prior to his project for monumental propaganda): One Step Forward, Two Steps Back. His words referred to the frequent missteps of the tactical tango of overthrowing imperialism in a particularly tense moment in the Party's historical development. For Lenin, this trajectory was linear - it encountered obstacles, but it only ever moved forward or back - ideally in a teleological manner evincing progress and unity (like most modernist narratives). Moreover, the principles he outlined could be applied beyond the Party itself: "One step forward, two steps back... It happens in the lives of individuals, and it happens in the history of nations and in the development of parties."

However, the [various] trajectories of the contemporary postcolony - the desire lines etched in and around urban planning and social structures - suggest that rather than merely forwards and backwards, individuals are moving laterally, in manners often unexpected and subtly subversive. "Desire lines" is a civil engineering term used to describe those well-worn ribbons of earth that you see cutting across a patch of grass, often with pavements nearby... they indicate the space between the planned and the providential, the engineered and the 'lived' and between official projects of capture and containment and the energies which subvert, bypass, supersede and evade them.

Sidestepping and feinting, eluding and improvising, the politics of everyday life means engaging with, retracing and reimagining, the steps and spaces of inherited social and political (infra)structures.

Early Enlightenment political theory often framed the freedom of bodies to move through space as the foundation of political freedom. In colonial Africa (and writ large in apartheid South Africa), this was a freedom insidiously or overtly denied to specific groups through the architectonics of civil engineering, labour systems, and social infrastructure.

Dan Halter's Untitled (Zimbabwean Queen of Rave) directly invokes the potential of dance to catalyse critical thought and mobilise resistance. The insistent strains of the 90s rave anthem Everybody's Free (to feel good), released three years before South African democracy by Rozilla Miller (a.k.a. the Queen of Rave) - the first Zimbabwean pop singer to have a world hit - overlays grainy film footage that veers between white kids raving in open, unregulated spaces, and images of mass protests and uprisings in black townships.
Despite the jarring juxtaposition, a tangible reminder of the differential production of space and bodies in this context, the ravers’ bodies pound the ground and they raise their arms with a resolve similar to that of the protestors. Stripped of their ideological disparities, both scenarios demonstrate the participants’ desire for an alternative reality, a freedom that may perhaps be found by setting bodies and ideas in motion, differently.

In The Production of Space, Henri Lefebvre proposes a trialectic of spatiality; an interwoven fabric of perceived, conceived and lived space; space not as transparent or given but as dynamically constituted through acts of naming and imagining as well as moving. Art production partakes of this trialectic by configuring and refiguring the dance; imagining different ways of being together or apart, inside or outside, in front of or in the midst of. The political in the art of the off-modern generation is that which, to return to our initial premise, agitates.

**Choreography as an Aesthetics of Change**

Lefebvre referred to the lived experience of space and time as a multiplicity of patterns and rhythms crossing and recrossing, superimposing themselves upon each other experienced subjectively through individual desire and social practice. Perhaps, then, this notion of an art which moves (both in terms of stirring thought and affect in the viewer and in negotiating entangled times and spaces) working with given sequences and attuned to diverse rhythms, but also stepping out of line - is central. For, while dancing was certainly not uppermost in Lenin’s mind in One Step Forward, Two Steps Back, it provides an unexpectedly productive model of exchange for the generation of artists who are today navigating the complex postcolonial spaces in which they find themselves. While not employing the more overt strategies associated with Soviet agitprop, these artists are nonetheless disseminating ideas across space and time, setting them in motion through dynamic and hybrid aesthetic moves.

From the Bolshevik concept of agitprop, through Ferreira and Halter’s works in which dance functions as subversive manoeuvre, to navigating the fluid terrain of the postcolony, the idea of choreography has been humming along in the background - offbeat - throughout. Indeed, in recent interdisciplinary discourse across the humanities, social sciences and life sciences, choreography has become an evocative metaphor, as well as a cognitive tool, for engaging with dynamic constellations of thought and (inter)action, from biology to religion. Choreography is no less apposite as a way of thinking about aesthetic interventions into contemporary issues of space, memory, and identity. Inspired by the potential for unfixed order underlying pattern systems from complexity theory to cybernetics, choreography is not to constrain movement into a set pattern, it is to provide a cradle for movement to find its own patterns; patterns no longer confined to a linear arrangement of one
step forward or two steps back. As Michael Klein articulates the relationship between choreography and aesthetics, if the world is approached as a reality constructed of interactions, relationships, constellations and proportionalities, then choreography is seen as the aesthetic practice of setting those relations or setting the conditions for those relations to emerge. By agitating for new ways of seeing and knowing the entangled, <off-modern> present, artists of the postcolony are choreographing the formal conditions through which new relations may emerge: oblique, diagonal, perhaps even zigzag.

Amy Halliday

1 See the entry in the Tate's glossary: http://www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/definition.jsp?entryId=19.
5 Ibid. p. 16
6 Boym, p.1.
13 Lefebvre, p. 205.
14 Michael Klein and Steven Valk, 'Choreography as an Aesthetics of Change' (part of a three part paper released on: http://choreograph.net/articles/lead-article-choreography-as-an-aesthetics-of-change).
15 Ibid.
Dan Halter

Daniel Halter was born in Harare, Zimbabwe in 1977. Now based in Cape Town, South Africa.

Untitled (Zimbabwean Queen of Rave), 2005
Video and stills, 3min 33sec

The opening refrain of the early-90s dance anthem <Everybody's Free (to feel good)>, serves as the beginning of Dan Halter's Untitled (Zimbabwean Queen of Rave). Interspersing these images of rave culture, which was criminalised in many parts of Europe in the 1990s, is footage of mass political protests in Harare, which employ the Southern African protest dance known as "toy-toying". Initially, Halter's apparent comparison between hedonist entertainment and liberation politics reads as cynicism, bringing to mind the frequent accusations of settled protests becoming 'carnivals'. However, ultimately both scenarios are re-cast via their overarching politics of bodily and psychological freedom.

Space Invader (Johannesburg taxi rank - port of entry), 2009
Photographic light jet print
Zimbabwe Bags, 2009
Plastic mesh bags, embroidery thread - Dimensions variable

In this work, Dan Halter takes an 8-bit Space Invaders motif, designed by Tomohiro Nishikado in the 1970s, and the ubiquitous plastic mesh bags (made in China) stereotypically used by migrants and refugees across the globe. The bags are frequently named after the (maligned) populations, such as 'Chinatown Tote' in the USA, and 'Turkish Suitcase' in Germany. In South Africa, the bag has become known as the 'Zimbabwe Bag' with the influx of Zimbabweans fleeing across its borders, via taxis, buses and many on foot. The artist has installed the Space Invader bags in several sites, including a Johannesburg taxi rank: their physical presence and menacing arrangement stake an impermanent claim on spaces of enforced transience and anonymity.

Works courtesy of the artist and Whatiftheworld, Cape Town
دان هالتر

ولد دانيال هالتر في هزاري بزمبابوي في العام 1987، ويعيش الآن في كيب تاون بجنوب أفريقيا.

بدون عناوين (ملكة الاحتلال الزمبابوية)، 2006

فيديو 3 ق. و33 ث.

تصبح الزيارة الإفتتاحية للفنان التحسينيي الرائع الراكز فيموقع يشعر بتجدد ميدل لعمل دانيال هالتر. بدون عناوين (ملكة الاحتلال الزمبابوية). تتخلل مشاهد ثقافة الاحتلال البيضاء والجزء في معظم أوروبا التشاتوينيات - القطان لمشاهير سياسية جامعية في هزاري، حيث يرقص المتظاهرون في الشوارع. يمتد هالتر هنا مقبرة ساخرة وحائزة بين اللذيذة التي تنتمي إلى ثقافة الاحتلال وسياسة الحرية، يعكسنا بإيجابية وصدى الاعتصامات الممتدة بأنها "معركة الأمة".

وفي النهاية يعاد صياغة كلا السيناريوهين من خلال سياستهما المشتركة المتعلقة بالحرية الجسدية والنفسية.

غزة الفضاء (رخص كتابة جوهانزبرج - ميناء الدخول)، 2009

طباعة آيت جث فلكلورافية

حقائب زمبابوي، 2009

حقائب محدودة من البلاستيك وخطاب تطور مقاسات متعددة

يتميز دانيال هالتر في هذا العمل موثيقية لعبة غزاة الفضاء التي صممها توموهايرو نيشيكادو في السبعينيات، وحقائب البلاستيك المحدودة المنتشرة في كل مكان (صناعة الحكاء) والتي يستخدمها عدد المهاجرين والاسترلينج دول العالم.

يطلق هذه الحقائب عادة اسم المجموعات السكانية (غير المرغوب فيها) مثل "شنت تشالينا تاون" في أمريكا و"الحقائب التركية" في ألمانيا. عرفت هذه الحقائب في جنوب أفريقيا بـ "الحقائب الزمبابوية" مع ترفق المواطنيون الزمبابويين عبر الحدود مستخدمين النظم أو الحافلات أو مركبات. قال الفنان بإدانة تهجير حقائب غزاة الفضاء في أكثر من موقع، كان منها موقف سيراسات التاكيسي في جوهانزبرج. حيث يطالب حضورها الملأس وترنيهما المتعدد بحقها في وجود موقعة في فضاءات تُفرض فيها العرضة وطمس الهوية.

 أعمال هالتر إذن من الفنان وجاليري وباشر واختراق، كيب تاون