

reviews

k.g. Guttman: *Visiting Hours*

Performed by k.g. Guttman, Ahlam Hassan, Johanna Householder, Kelly Keenan, Mikiki, Shahir Omar-Qrishnaswamy and Bee Pallomina, with contributions by lo bil, Seika Boye, Francisco-Fernando Granados, Jessica Karuhanga, Matthew-Robin Nye and Joshua Vettivelu
 Gallery TPW, Toronto
 June 29 – August 3, 2019

by Fabien Maltais-Bayda

Many performers wore gloves—textural beige, with satiny red palms and extra-long, tubular fingers—at the opening reception of k.g. Guttman’s *Visiting Hours*. In one moment, Guttman stood behind a simple chair, caressing its back with spindly, softly probing digits. Another afternoon at Gallery TPW, Johanna Householder wordlessly prompted me to don a pair myself, before indicating an envelope to open. Householder, one of seven artists who performed *Visiting Hours* during the exhibition’s run, was leading me through an interaction with dance artist and scholar Seika Boye’s *an image I re(turn) to* (1955/2019). Inside the envelope, and grasped after a few poking tries, I found an image, printed on paper, and redacted in black. After examining, and clumsily replacing the document, I selected a book from a shelf to which Householder had led me. We proceeded to read a few paragraphs from Fred Moten’s *Black and Blur* (2017). As the exhibition’s program notes detail, the obscured image tucked in the envelope was a reproduced cropping of a larger 1955 photograph showing “an interracial street dance in Toronto.” Part of a private archival collection, and thus unavailable for public display, the picture is one that Boye has viewed and reviewed repeatedly in the context of her research.

Asking what it means, or how it feels, to visit an image, *Visiting Hours* brought together six offerings from collaborators like Boye, which became foci for a series of performative explorations generated by the show’s ensemble of seven performers. During TPW’s opening hours, each spectator entering the gallery was met by one of the performers, and guided through a series of gestures, actions and propositions with which to view the works. Importantly, each performative episode was arranged not only around an image, but also, more specifically, around an image that documents a previous performance. In our encounter with Joshua Vettivelu’s *Fort/Da!* (2015–ongoing), this intermediality shows up in a collection of large coloured squares, like giant paint chips, which the performers use in a viewing exercise conducted on the sidewalk outside the gallery. These swatches are actually blown-up pixels from a photograph of Vettivelu’s extemporaneous performance series in which he tosses rocks into bodies of water he meets. So, while Guttman deploys choreography to ask what it is to visit an image, she simultaneously volleys a series of questions about what it is to image performance, how the image might carry performance’s histories, and what aesthetic and conceptual possibilities lie in iterative processes of viewing.



k.g. Guttman (with Shahir Omar-Qrishnaswamy), *Visiting Hours*, 2019, Gallery TPW, Toronto
 PHOTO: HENRY CHAN, IMAGE COURTESY OF GALLERY TPW

Of course, images, and especially photographs, are often tasked with carrying choreography into history; what remains in the archive of much dance and performance are the photos taken. Throughout the artist talks presented alongside *Visiting Hours*, questions around the contributed works' archival character were raised repeatedly. Yet, with the exception of Boye's contribution, these images are all relatively recent. If there is an archive here, it's a relatively new one—still in the very soft stages of forming. As such, the exhibition feels less concerned with presenting historical images than with the arguably more compelling task of imagining a historical present, through performance across time.

Scholar Rebecca Schneider uses the phrase “architectures of access” to describe the infrastructures through which bodies interact with archival material: “books, bookcases, glass display cases, or even the request desk at an archive.” In a thoughtful turn, the gloves we wear to engage with Boye's *an image I re(turn) to* become articles of inaccess. They muddle our dexterity, calling new attention to the gestures required to get at an image; and finally, the document we do reach keeps that image out of view, problematizing visual access by raising questions around consent and positionality. Meanwhile, the green-screen set-up for Matthew-Robin Nye's *Refugia* (2016) serves as architecture for some spectral access, allowing artists and visitors alike to be seen entering a projected space of previous performing.

The exhibition's performance situations diffract spectatorship, across material, memory and movement. For Francisco-Fernando Granados' *towards a minor abstraction (Translation)* (2016–2018), we look at abstract drawings held in our hands, close our eyes and imagine their not-quite-grasped outlines, then watch a performer dance the drawings in the space before us. Holding, picturing, viewing, our bodies are as much architectures of access for the images in the exhibition as are the more mechanical accoutrements it employs: a pulley system or a frame mounted on backpack straps. Schneider's observation that archival contents “necessarily meet bodies and engage in the repetition and revision, the citing and becoming that is also choreography” resonates here.

With an ongoing resurgence of interest in choreography among galleries and museums, a few problems persist. As many writers, including Claire Bishop, have noted, the integrity and impact of dance works can suffer when dropped into the white cube without attention paid to the form's demands. What is more, visual art spaces are rarely equipped to care for dancing bodies. In contrast, the deep consideration

that undergirds Guttman's practice not only creates a comfortable home for moving bodies in the gallery, but also proposes a model for exhibiting dance and performance in such a space; it's a framework concerned with specificity and responsiveness. Guttman's approach, as with other successful exhibitions that present choreography—and all its complexities—in the gallery, is intermedial. In *Retrospective by Xavier Le Roy* (2014), performers learned the choreographer's oeuvre by, among other things, studying frequently disseminated photographs of his works. For Derek Liddington's *the body will always bend before it breaks, the tower will always break before it bends* (2017), the artist used performance stills from two 1928 Ballets Russes works as starting points for a series of experiments that spanned painting, textile, sculpture, dance and video. Similarly, *Visiting Hours* embraces the ways in which performance can move among and between media; this intermediality is essential to the remarkable flexibility and multivalence of the viewing experiences offered.

One of the fundamental questions that exhibition spaces pose to choreography is: what happens to spectatorship when performance is rendered visitable? In other words, what happens when the dynamics of watching choreography shift from the delimited space-time of a theatre, to the unconstrained come-and-go of a gallery? In a sense, Guttman has turned this query back towards the material entities that make up that space's more usual inhabitants: objects and images. Visiting images is nothing new; in fact, it's the fundamental practice upon which galleries and museums operate. And yet, by thinking with choreography, a relative medial newcomer to being visited, Guttman renegotiates this form of encounter. *Visiting Hours* refigures the actions, expectations and interactions that constitute the art viewer's visit, revealing, by contrast, the staleness of rote visiting experiences.

The exhibition participates, then, in artistic genealogies that seek to parse, complicate and expand the field of spectatorship. Where the novelty of Guttman's intervention is especially felt is its investment in the somatic contingency and choreographic potential of the visit—not just the visit to, but also the visit with, and, importantly, the visit with again. *Visiting Hours* encourages us to put to use what its title denotes. It asks us to return, extending an oddly gloved hand, to look again and look anew.

Fabien Maltais-Bayda is a Toronto-based writer, researcher and arts administrator. His writing can be found in *Canadian Art*, *CTR*, *The Dance Current*, *esse* and *Momus*, as well as in the recently published catalogue for Derek Liddington's exhibit *the body will always bend before it breaks, the tower will always break before it bends* at the AGYU and the anthology *Curating Live Arts* (Berghahn Books, 2018).

Ken Lum: *Everything is Relevant: Writings on Art and Life, 1991–2018* by Saelan Twerdy
Concordia University Press, 2020

The most remarkable thing about this generally remarkable anthology of writings by Ken Lum is that it took so long for such a book to appear. In one of the essays collected here, Lum's now-classic “Canadian Cultural Policy: A Problem of Metaphysics” of 1999, he laments “the complete absence of any book that critically and theoretically addresses in a historically comprehensive manner developments in Canadian art

over the last thirty years.” *Everything is Relevant* is not exactly that book, but it does cover 27 years of an artist's writing life and, now that it exists, I wonder how we managed to get by without it. Of course, quite a few of these texts were already part of the public record, but it is a credit to the nascent Concordia University Press that they saw the need for such a collection and made it one of their very first releases. (It is also