



OPINION - 29 MAY 2018

## Whose Rights, Whose City?

Post-Grenfell, mid-Windrush and pre-Brexit, a day-long forum invited artists and organizations to re-imagine the communities we live in

BY ISOBEL HARBISON

'I write memory on the margins of history, in the shadow of empire, and the frontier of silence', opened Barby Asante's performance for 'Rights to the City?', a day-long convergence of presentations, talks and performances at London's Conway Hall. A quote taken from Canadian poet and author M. Nourbe Se Philip, Asante's work is a meditation on 'circles, rituals, openings and closings', taking many different forms; a history of post-colonial migration ('we are here because you were there', read a slide quoting Sri Lankan novelist and intellectual Ambalavaner Sivanandan); a tribute to close friends who have recently passed (including artist Khadija Saye who died in the Grenfell fire); an indictment of resources fenced in by white supremacy; and an exploration of speaking circles as a method to 'present pain and dissidence', to enact honest dialogue, to create a space in which one might attempt to 'change one's relation to oneself'.



"V Nightingale", Implicated Theatre, 2015. Courtesy: Serpentine Galleries, London

Like Asante's overlapping circles, corresponding themes emerged throughout the day from different speakers, at the centre of which lay a uniform anxiety about how one might understand one's 'right to the city' when these rights continue to be distributed differently. This specifics of London's current political climate came under scrutiny through a range of presentations, as its early child care and education provisions are dwindling, while living prices soar, as home office hostility and active threats of deportation continue to target numerous London residents of the Windrush generation, during an ongoing Conservative Party policy effort to slash immigration figures. These difficulties were contextualized throughout the day with those faced by artists and city dwellers elsewhere. Mumbai-based Clark House Initiative (who have an upcoming exhibition at London's The Showroom) discussed what it is to allocate studios to artists of diverse caste, class and ethnic background, and what it means for that ethos to remain necessary where these signifiers continue to segregate. From Puerto Rico, the Brigada Puerta de Tierra, ably moderated by Julia Morandeira, articulated their strategies to counteract their barrio's recent experience of 'regeneration', which sounded much like social cleansing, with youth-centric activities of mural painting and gardening to build social consciousness and confidence for Puerta de Tierra inhabitants and those families recently resettled in distant boroughs. From the US, a discussion between leading academics and authors Simone Browne and Mia White, and artist Sondra Perry spoke about individual and collective strategies to counteract a rule of law that has historically undermined black subjects.

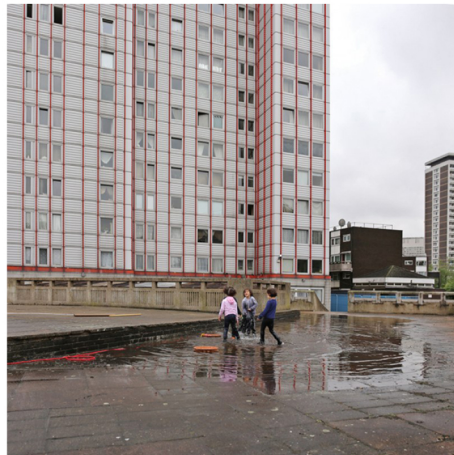
Organized by Serpentine curators Amal Khalaf and Alex Thorp, some of the day's presentations took the opportunity to reflect on work previously undertaken in their local Edgware community. Three artists that they had commissioned reflected on their time working on the Serpentine's 'Changing Play' programme with the Portman Early Childhood Centre, run by Jo White. Designer Bahbak Hashemi-Nezhad presented his project considering the concrete grounds of a local tower block as a site where groups of pre-schoolers were invited to reimagine its contours and divots as apparatuses of play, aided by basic, cheap building materials, ropes, planks, poles and dust sheets. A stop-motion video (directed by Studio Ard with music by Manami Kakudo) was shown: lighthearted documentation of the merry-making and an instructional guide for future carers who might encourage their charges to co-opt their own environs. Jasleen Kaur presented her project about the micropolitics of cooking and eating together through cooking and baking sessions, challenging the streamlined menus of a council regulated food system with an approach that privileged the specific skills, senses and appetites of chefs, carers and parents involved with the centre. Kaur talked about cooking Punjabi food throughout her life, its particular colours and aromatics, to guard her own specific cultural identity and how sharing this routine encouraged conversation and cultural cross-pollination.



Alla Fard, *A Stage For Any Revolution*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Serpentine Galleries, London; Photograph: Manuela Barczewski

Kaur was alert and vocal about the risk that her work, and that of the wider programme, might only act as a sticking plaster for the funding cuts experienced by this children's centre (and many other across the UK) and legitimize an art institution with a complex relation to the free-market capitalism that has driven this programme of austerity in the first place. It's a reflexivity that resonated with Adelita Husni-Bey's presentation-workshop about the differential way in which care is spread. Hers will manifest as a book project drawing from theatre workshops with the children considering care as a common, rather than a right.

A number of pedagogues, practitioners and curators took the microphone throughout the day, voicing different theories, strategies and geographies of radical pedagogy, community outreach and de-institutionalization, but high points invariably came through the more poetic and politically incisive presentations by artists. Artist Rehana Zaman was joined on stage by sociologist Gail Lewis for a new performance titled 'Echo'. Lewis read aloud a text message issued by the government, received by a 64-year-old man, threatening his right to remain. Lewis collated Windrush reports, quoted poetry by Alexis Pauline Gumbs (*Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, 2016), read her own observations of city walls: the self as seen through reflective surfaces, the city's infrastructures, ports and stations built by diasporas, trafficked, still facing a double-dealing system long exploiting black labour without granting it a right to remain. She paces. Zaman's reading interposes Lewis's and meets it with intensity, hers a reflection on the paths to Britain her parents travelled some decades ago from what was East Pakistan, train stations and house walls, graffiti, slurs, daily aggressions, the privileges of creating culture without unsolicited tasks of diplomacy and translation, art-world incongruities (she reads aloud [this tweet](https://twitter.com/xaymacons/status/989441569047678977) about Luke Willis Thompson's *Autoportrait* to much applause), Zaman exploring the roots of brown rage, in conversation with Lewis. Intervals. Lewis signals to the audio booth to play Lauryn Hill's *Black Rage* and then Coltrane's *Favorite Things* but neither worked: the sound technician had gone home. Zaman's collaboration with Lewis was a joint response to Audrey Lourde's *Uses of Anger* (1981). Theirs is a play about pain, subjectively felt, different, mutual, reverberating against the impermeable surfaces of this impossible city built upon it, tracing what Lewis calls, 'not quite life.'



Bahbak Hashemi-Nezhad, *On What Grounds*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Serpentine Galleries, London; Photograph: Bahbak Hashemi-Nezhad

'Rights to the City?' with its case studies of radical pedagogies and creative activism was part programme recap, part showcase of vital new works. Post-Grenfell, mid-Windrush, and pre-Brexit, with London's housing scarcity and welfare-cuts, it let light in.

'Rights to the City?' <http://www.serpentinegalleries.org/learn/rights-to-the-city/rights-city-forum> was a one-day forum at Conway Hall, London, on Saturday 12 May, organized by Serpentine Galleries.

Main image: Bahbak Hashemi Nezhad, *Changing Play*, 2017. Courtesy: the artist and Serpentine Galleries, London

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