

Context Notes For *Court/Garden*:

If I could imagine the past, this is how I might remember the future

With "Court/Garden" my question is: how does our shared imperial, Western, cultural history dictate the ways in which we come together?

Yanira Castro

History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now (p. 261) . . . A historian who . . . stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead . . . grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (p. 263)

Walter Benjamin, "These on the Philosophy of History"

In his essay "These on the Philosophy of History" Walter Benjamin evokes the presence of an angel:

". . . looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating . . . This is how one pictures the angel of his- tory. . . His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."(p. 257)

Benjamin's angel is both a witness and a victim. A Cassandra in reverse, unable to turn around and warn the future of its encroaching consumption by the past, he is cast alone, with no one by his side to aid him in the moment of the present. Thrust forward by a narrative he has no way of reshaping, he faces history on his own, a specter of the spectacle before him.

The spectacle of history could be one way to describe the subject of a *canary torsi's* piece *Court/Garden*, the vision of its founder and artistic director, choreographer Yanira Castro. Another would be the history of spectacle, of, in Castro's own words, "the ways we come together" as a social and political body, and how this is reflected back to us through the politics of performance.

Organized in three Acts, titled respectively *Court*, *Solidus** and *Garden*, *Court/Garden* performs how different political, ideological and economic systems of power can be reflected, reinforced and, possibly, questioned through the making and viewing of performance. The differing quality or qualities of each system of power and each manner of spectacle, is reflected in the pieces multiple aesthetics, modes of performativity, and means of representation.

And, here too, there are angels.

Hovering at the edges of the many transformations the piece makes are two young performers clothed in white jeans and t-shirts. Identified in the program as *cupids*, their image is echoed into a mirrored multitude by a back-up band of "cherubs" (a group of similarly clad and young performers). Looking contemporary, and yet ageless in their evocation, Castro's angels could not be more unlike Benjamin's.

Full of purpose, they are ever engaged with their surroundings, their fellow performers, and with us, the audience. They, like us, are never alone. Collectively they are the worker bees of the performance's many physical shifts, as well as acting as its human relations department. The two cupids, and their brethren of cherubs, quite literally usher *Court/Garden's* audience through the piece's three acts and two "interludes" - dramatic set changes - each of which includes a complete repositioning of the audience. They are the ones, smiling and gracious, who greet us as we enter the space, initiating us into their world. In contrast to their youthful presence and their dress in the hue of the novice, they are the ones who seem to know where we might be going.

Sociable, beautiful, and at ease, Castro's angels take on neither the role of victim or witness. Rather they act as the guardians of our own spectatorship, guiding and coaxing us through the epic journey of the piece. They are the ones who seat us in Act I's performance of monarchy, then move us physically and metaphorically through "interlude one: labor spectacle" (a dramatic disruption and realignment of the performance space) into Act II (whose subtitle is "A

Play", but which could just as aptly be called "A Republic or The Story of Performance in Late Capitalism"). Finally, after experiencing the physical and sonic deconstruction of monarchy, and the scenographic construction and reenactment of our own institutionalized system of cultural and political power, at "interlude two: group preparation" they sing us into Act III. "Garden", the piece's last act, is an experiment and performance of the direct democracy of the Occupy Movement, which introduced another possible way to perform the ideals of social equity. It is the performance of possibility and, in Court/Garden, it is framed through the asking and answering of questions, which themselves beget more questions. A game of round robin that is never resolved, nor is it meant to be. It is a performance of the hoped for, the doubted, and the unknown.

The piece, which structurally reflects the linearity of western historical time, is continually turning in upon itself. Throughout, Court/Garden's cupids and cherubs, along with the rest of the cast, crew and collaborators (all of whom make an appearance) literally work and re-work the space of the performance, re-positioning the seating, the set, and the audience. In much the same way they work and re-work the many historical, political and cultural references that appear, disappear and reappear, re-imagined, over the course of the piece.

The court of Act I, which is where Castro and her talented group of dancer-collaborators began their own research, looking at the role of performance and baroque dance in the court of Louis XIV (including the "The Canary", a baroque dance that is the direct source of the Act's choreography), is made manifest via the aesthetics and cultural references of our present. Like the jeans and t-shirts of the cupids, the elegant minimalism of the set, populated by the Act's stunning skin-tight costumes, consciously reference the culture of contemporary fashion. While in a reversal of referential direction, the "Step and Repeat", which as audience members we each partake in when first entering the space, is actually itself a reference to courtly conventions, to a time when Kings and Queens were divined by "god" rather than by the media's mirror image of itself. As we move forward in the piece, as we "progress", we never fully leave the baroque world of Act I behind; rather it is swept along with us. Its images are reframed, its steps reconfigured through the lens of different eras, beholden to different mechanisms of power and of representation. In the semiotics of the piece the signifiers remain; what gets signified shifts, conflates, and at times contradicts itself.

Along with a penchant for angels, Castro and her team of collaborators share Benjamin's dialectic understanding of history as the territory of the imagination of the present. Like so many cultures, the past, too, can and has been colonized by those in power, crafted to form a narrative that arrives at the destination of its own reflection, a memory of its own making. What Castro reminds us is that performance is culpable in this process, and hence, has the possibility to tell a different story.

Nothing of the past in the piece ever stays fixed, neither in space, time, or meaning. What was once the rarified, becomes the banal, what was once singular becomes a multitude, not once but over and back and again. The steps of this particular dance are social and repetitive, and one imagines that it could and might go on and on. It is spectacular, and it is a spectacle. This is history, and it is constructed by human hands, spoken and writ in the way that only bodies can make a moment appear and disappear and still stay present. It is performance; it is what can happen when we come together.

- Susan Mar Landau

* The Oxford dictionary defines Solidus as a noun meaning:

- 1.) another word for slash (/)
- 2.) *chemistry* a curve in a graph of the temperature and composition of a mixture, below which the substance is entirely solid.
- 3.) *historical* a gold coin of the later Roman Empire.

Note: The quote from Yanira Castro is excerpted from Ivan Talijancic's piece "Choreographic Wizardry of Yanira Castro" published in Brooklyn Rail on October 3, 2014. The quotes from Benjamin's essay, "These on the Philosophy of History," are taken from the following translation:

Benjamin, Walter. "These on the Philosophy of History." Trans. Harry Zohn. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Ed. Hannah Arendt, NY: Schocken Books, Random House, Inc. 2007.