A GENEALOGY OF DESIRE

RENEE GREEN EXPLORES THE CONTINENT OF POWER

G. ROGER DENSON

G. Roger Denson: You currently have a work at PS 1 in Queens, New York. Could you start by talking about that?

Renee Green: Well, it’s an ongoing piece, in three locations at PS 1: the boiler room, the attic, and some of the stairwells. It’s an associative piece about those types of rooms, and I thought of the stairs as the liminal connections between them. I used texts to inform the work.

GRD: What are the texts?
RG: In the attic I refer to a chapter from the autobiography, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, by Harriet Jacobs, and in the boiler room I quote passages from the novel Native Son, by Richard Wright. It occurred to me to use these texts because I usually think of literature when I work. When I saw the boiler room at PS 1, I immediately thought of Native Son because there’s a scene in it where Bigger Thomas, the lead character who is a young black man, burns the body of the daughter of the white family he works for. The book was published in 1940 and it was the first bestseller by a black author; it was very controversial. I read the criticism that surrounded the book’s release and the things that were said about it were similar to what was said about Spike Lee’s film, Do The Right Thing. There was a fear of uprisings and riots expressed in many of the reviews. I chose small passages from this and surrounding scenes. These quotations are meant to give the viewer hints that a black man had accidentally killed a white woman and that, afterward, he attempted to dispose of her body by cremating it in the boiler. But I don’t give all the details or the names of the characters. Together the spatial signifiers indicate what is about to happen to this black man. The boiler room installation is called Fear, Flight, Fate, taken from the three headings in the novel.

Leading up from the boiler room to the attic are stairwells containing six plaques with quotations from different sources ranging from the era of the ancient Greeks to the present, all referring to aspects of blackness and whiteness. Some of them relate to philosophical distinctions; some are from literature. They’re meant to stimulate different kinds of thoughts regarding color, including thoughts pertaining to metaphors of “race.” When you reach the attic, you find a room with wooden floorboards and beams. This part of the installation is called Loophole of Retreat, the name of a chapter in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. This character, Linda Brent (who is based on the author, Harriet Jacobs), had to live in an attic for seven years to hide from the slave holder who was trying to capture her. It was her grandmother’s house (her grandmother was free), located in the same town she’d always lived in. A little niche was made for her under the roof; it was very small, something like nine by seven by three feet. In the PS 1 attic, I blocked off a little garret area and vertically hung a slat fence that has a rubber-stamped text which alternates between slats, quoting parts of the chapter in which she describes being confined to this space. Slats attached to the floor and rubber-stamped with the chapter titles lead to the windows where there are twenty-six jars, labeled from A to Z, containing different substances relating to whiteness.
and blackness. I also put up a muslin curtain that covers part of the site from the ceiling to the floor behind three vertical nail-studded posts around which string is gradually wrapped to create an inner sanctum within the space. Inside the sanctum is a desk which is also a sewing table. I conceived of the entire installation—the boiler room, the stairs, and the attic—as being connected. Several kinds of genealogies are being traced. One is that of the terms blackness and whiteness: the genealogy of these terms is resonant with associations. Another genealogy referred to is that of African-American texts which are used as an index of predicaments which classically have been faced by members of the African diaspora. The history of artists’ installations is another genealogy being traced here, specifically in reference to Duchamp’s 1200 Bags of Coal and Mile of String.

GRD: Could you talk a little about the politics implied by this work and also its relationship to the audience? I want to point out that at Pat Hearn gallery the audiences that attended were much more racially diversified than is ordinarily seen in the New York art world. I assume that this is somehow a point of the work, it’s ability—as an interested and content-laden art form—to expand and diversify the art world.

RG: I did try to think about who normally sees the artwork and who I would like to see it, especially as the Pat Hearn show was my first one-person show in a commercial space. This kind of thinking about who comes to exhibitions was stimulated by an artist’s residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem, in 1988 and ’89. At the Studio Museum I was in contact with a number of people who came into the museum, as that’s a part of the program: to be available to talk with the people who come in and look at your work. Here I was thrust into a public position and it afflicted my production. And because there were reviews of the work in papers that African-Americans read, I was encountering a sector of the population that wasn’t ordinarily going to galleries. I didn’t want to lose this audience when changing my exhibition location. I’ve been interested in the ideas of some black British writers, like Stuart Hall, who writes about diasporic “identities” and the “burden of representation,” and Kobena Mercer, who writes about the diversity within black “communities.” Hall’s thoughts on the burden of representation treat the externally enforced notions of what is considered “politically correct” in terms of community. Both Hall and Mercer are questioning the whole notion of community in terms of blackness, because there are so many different kinds of blackness that the notion of a rigidly defined “black community” can become another form of oppression—and therefore a burden of representation—as well for people involved with cultural production.

GRD: You use the terms “cultural production” instead of “art,” as the term “art” is really an Eurocentrism derived from aesthetic and ideological notions of production separate from function. These notions are largely responsible for the Western circumscription of cultural production made by the indigenous peoples of Africa, Asia, Australia, and South America to categories of ethnography and ethnology, while Western cultural authorities elevate their own production as something special and inherently transcendental, something we call “art.”

RG: Exactly. The term “art” gets in the way. It’s a term I’ve been questioning for a while. I’ve been questioning the notion of Western authority in terms of art historians creating categories and divisions for things of another culture, which even when they are called “art,” their use in that culture cannot be defined in the same way as in the West.

GRD: All the language of Western discourse is entrenched with Eurocentrism. This topic might actually be a good lead into your installation at Pat Hearn, VistaVision Landscape of Desire, particularly the reconstruction of the Teddy Roosevelt tent and the wooden, painted zoological files which struck me as being all about the Eurocentric nature of the language of science, particularly with regard to the obvious Latin roots of each of the species filed.

RG: The names on those files were all taken from the appendix of Teddy Roosevelt’s book, African Game Trails. In this work I was pursuing the notion of explorers. The explorers were obviously those who explored Africa and were credited with naming territories and aspects of territories.