

Exhibition

With regard to form and content, our exhibition concept is strictly connected with the performance concept.

The exhibition will integrate Carnival arts (Mas, Pan and Calypso), British-Caribbean literature and photography in an audio-visual event. The structure of the exhibition, the specific form of combination of different elements from different artistic areas, is based on the immanent qualities of the individual elements.

Although the exhibition is a form of presentation which has to develop and to follow its own genuine rules, in our understanding it also complements the performance. The aim of both, performance and exhibition, is to stimulate a reflection on the significance of the Notting Hill Carnival by emphasizing the interrelation between Carnival and literature, by creating a cross-cultural experience for the audience and the spectators, an experience which transgresses historical periods, geographical regions and cultural spheres. The construction of a new sphere in which Carnival, literature and images are fused to a new explorative context which allows to experience where Carnival came from, and what it is at present, and an anticipation of what it could become in the future - this is the intention of the exhibition and the performance. Both forms of presentation are based on the principle of *participation*, they want to transcend the limitations of passive consumption of cultural products by the stimulation of an *active reception*.

The *time factor* is important in this respect. While in the performance time is a constituent part of the performance structure itself, i.e. the audience has to accept the chronological course of the performance, in the exhibition time is on the side of the spectator. It depends on his own decision how much time he spends in the exhibition and how he uses this time, i.e. how he works with the elements the exhibition is offering him.

What expects him when he enters the exhibition is an audio-visual adventure with Carnival, the experience of the intensity and the potential of this cultural form.

These considerations are essential for the format and the structure of the exhibition.

We said it already: The totality of Carnival, the real intensity which Carnival develops in the streets, the complex lively combination of all forms of human expression which characterizes Carnival, the moment of collective ecstasy, can not be exposed. Therefore, the exhibition is basically an abstraction of Carnival. But also the abstract attempt to demonstrate something of the essence of Carnival has to be conceptualized in a big format.

A Carnival exhibition should not take place in a conventional gallery. Carnival arts transcend conventional definitions of art, therefore it would be a reduction of their potential to adapt them to the conditions of conventional exhibition spaces. They have to discover, occupy and structure their own adequate space.

The exploration of the potential use of space in the Carnival context is an important part of the exhibition experiment. In our opinion, the significance of Caribbean-style Carnival in postmodern

metropolis would become more transparent, if the exhibition takes place in what we could call the *ruins of industrial modernity*: an old factory hall, an abandoned bus station or warehouse, places which would be adequate to host a large-size exhibition and would at the same time contrast effectively with the aesthetics of beauty which characterize contemporary Carnival arts.

For the spectator, entering a space of this kind which has its own history within the history of London, would increase the experience of adventure and discovery which is intended by the exhibition.

Inside of the exhibition space, the combination of Carnival arts, literature and images will work with the principle of *contrast*. In analogy to the normative political statement *Unity in Diversity* we conceptualize the structure of the exhibition as *homogeneity in heterogeneity*:

Carnival and literature - the visual level and the audio level - tradition and innovation - historical masquerading and contemporary costumes - sculptures and images - music and words - written words and spoken words - traditional music (Calypso and Pan) and new musical forms (Soca Sound, Rap, Rapso experiments) - Creole and standard English.

On the level of visualization, Carnival arts will be represented by an installation of costumes.

The original products of Carnival craft and design will be installed in the form of sculptures throughout the entire exhibition space.

There are several possibilities to apply the principle of contrast on the concrete structure of the exhibition: historical costumes of the Trinidad tradition can be contrasted with contemporary design of the Notting Hill Carnival. Traditional themes which developed in a historical context, can be contrasted with fantasy creations which reflect the actual cultural configuration. The development of the craft can be displayed by contrasting costumes whose production is based on traditional techniques like *wire bending* and the use of traditional material with designs which use modern technology and modern materials. The process of construction of a costume can be displayed by exposing the different stages of production: from the outlines on paper to the basic structure of wire or whatever material and to the final arts product.

A combination of all these different options would be appropriate in order to show the multitude and variety of design creativity which exists in Carnival.

With regard to thematical and technological diversity, the selection of designers (*Lawrence Noel / Vernon Williams / Carl Gabriel / Clary Salandy*) which was already made during the initial phase of the project, represents the full range of Carnival design which exists in London.

From the performance concept we take the element of the *frozen dance* for the exhibition. The costumes will be installed in a way that gives the impression of movement that stopped abruptly.

It is the task of the spectator to complete the fixed moment by adding the moment before and the moment after in his imagination, to thaw out the frozen dance. (As we will see later, the audio level of the exhibition will support this form of active reception.)

The costume installation in the interior of the exhibition space will be contrasted by the exhibition of a series of large-size black-and-white photographs of the Notting Hill Carnival.

The photographs show portraits of individuals in Carnival. It is the same series of portraits which are projected on the scenery during the reading of *Earl Lovelace* in *Scenic Image 1* of the performance.

The central theme of the photographs is the interrelation of individual and mass in Carnival. The portraits try to capture essential features of the mega-happening. Focussing on faces and gestures of people who take part in the event, they give an impression of the intensity, the seriousness and the joy with which the ritual of Carnival is performed.

Photographing Carnival faces the same problem as every attempt to represent the complex totality of Carnival in another specific art form. It is again the problem of the incompatibility of formats, which forces the photographer to abstract from the reality of Carnival and select certain elements which are of importance for him because they transmit something of the spirit of Carnival.

The black-and-white image eliminates exotism: It is not the exotic far away culture of a tropical island what the photographs show, but rather the dignity and pride of an old and vital culture, expressed with full self-confidence on the streets of London. The portraits of Carnivalists transmit an idea of the historical experience of the people who produce and celebrate Carnival and of what Carnival means for them.

The exhibition concept of combining Carnival costumes with their artistic and iridescent colouring with the aesthetical austerity of black-and-white photography tries to provoke, from another angle, the form of active reception which is already inherent in the installation of costumes as sculptures of a frozen dance. By comparing the black-and-white portraits, which have to be enlarged to a size which matches with the size of the costumes, with the costume-sculptures, the spectator should be enabled to colour the pictures in his imagination and simultaneously animate the installed costumes. Thus, the offer of a productive reception should provide the possibility for the spectator to integrate himself in the theme of the exhibition, to understand the complex phenomenon of a non-European cultural form in Europe in a more intuitive way.

This specific quality of the visual part of the exhibition opens the structure of the exhibition for the integration of *poetry*, the most sensitive form of literary representation.

The exhibition will combine poetry with Carnival arts and photography in two different ways: *visible* and *audible*.

¶ Text will be exposed between the photographs or between the costume-sculptures. It is exactly the sort of text which connects the Caribbean-style Carnival and the combination of costumes and

images, presented in the exhibition, with the origins of this cultural form: *Enslavement* and the complex interrelation between masters and slaves. We will use poems that express the experience of enslavement in the most precise form of language: poems from *David Dabydeen's Slave Song* (1984, winner of the 1984 Commonwealth Poetry Prize). The poems are in Creole, that means they are immediately understandable only for those who have a command of this idiom. In order to emphasize the interrelation and the difference between standard English and Creole, the historical condition of linguistical processes, we suggest to reproduce the poems on big sheets of old and rusty metal, in big letters which have to be cut out of the metal. By a special light effect, the letters will be projected on the wall.

The contrast between this form of presentation of these specific poems and the colourful art products of Carnival is indeed very harsh, but exactly this contradiction is - in combination with the black-and-white images which can function as a link between the poems and the costumes - intended in order to open the historical dimension of Carnival, the dark ground from which the celebration of joy emerged.

It is one of the aims of the exhibition to make the Notting Hill Carnival understandable as a historically developed cultural form of people whose history has been a long and violent odyssey, initiated and perpetuated through the centuries by Europeans. The creation and development of Carnival, its spreading throughout the Western world, are remarkable signs for the strength and vitality of a culture which for centuries had to define and shape itself in resistance against the attempts of extinction by the culture of the masters. David Dabydeen's poems evoke the historical relation between slave and master in the clearest possible form.

Their integration in the exhibition creates intellectual tension and should contribute to the stimulation of a reflection on the interrelation between Carnival and literature, a reflection on the historical and contemporary significance of Black popular culture.

- The second form of integrating poetry in the exhibition consists in a *sound installation* which is based on the audible qualities of Carnival and literature and will complement the visual dimension of the exhibition.

For that purpose it will be necessary to produce a tape in a recording-studio that mixes literary texts with Carnival music (steelband music, Calypso, Soca - but also other forms which exist in the Notting Hill Carnival: Reggae, Ragamuffin, Rap etc.) and Carnival streetnoise.

The production of the tape will require the collaboration of poets and writers with musicians, Calypsonians and studio technicians.

Text material which can be used for the soundtrack: literary and poetical works in which Carnival appears as a central theme or which are corresponding with Carnival in their formal structure:

e.g. - *John Agard's Man To Pan* (1982) where the shape and sound of the steelpan provide the basic structure for an entire system of poetry; or *Limbo Dancer in Dark Glasses* (1982) where the spectacular limbo dance is elaborated to a symbol of cultural resistance; or *Palm Tree King* (1983), poems which play ironically with the multiple identity of the migrant and the projections of white Britons towards the Caribbean.

- Amryl Johnson's complex Carnival poems in *Tread Carefully In Paradise* (1991); or the Calyptos in *Gorgons* (1992); or her *Rainbow Dragon Trilogy*, a poem written in the context of this project.
 - Poems of Grace Nichols from *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (1984) and *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989).
 - John Lyons's poem *Behind the Carnival*.
 - Faustin Charles's story *Signpost of the Phoenix*.
- Of course, this list is expandable.

The idea to add the sound dimension to the visible part of the exhibition, is based on the oral quality of British-Caribbean literature and poetry. These texts have to be *heard*, they need the human voice in order to become alive. The mere act of reading them on paper does not open their full meaning which includes certain rhythms and forms of intonation.

Like the performance, the exhibition wants to inscenate a direct *dialogue* between Carnival arts and literature in order to highlight the interrelation which exists between both systems of representation. The texts, produced by British-Caribbean writers have strong roots in Caribbean popular culture, they obtain images and symbols, patterns of language, rhythm and structure from this cultural level, thus contributing to the development and substantial extension of contemporary British literature by adding to the traditional European poetical systems the images, the language and the perspective of the so-called periphery and to the traditional European paper form of literature the communicative quality of orality.

Carnival arts, on the other hand, obtain many of their themes from global history. History is, in a certain understanding, a network of stories and myths whose contents and narrative structures depend on the position of the story-teller, the socio-cultural context of the historian. Carnival artists often choose their themes in analogy to current discourses, the political, social or religious discourse, for instance, and elaborate them from the popular perspective.

Another even more obvious example is to be found in the traditional music of Caribbean-style Carnival, the Calypso. The Calypsonian is directly connected with popular discourses: he has an open ear for the voices of the voiceless, he collects particles of the social discourses, transforms them into songs which are a combination of popular poetry with African-Caribbean rhythm, and he gives these songs back to the people in the communication context of the Calypso Tent.

Considering it that way, it is possible to state that Carnival arts define and realize themselves in a literary context, while the substance of literature comes from the popular cultural sphere.

The arrangement of a meeting of these two artforms in an exhibition gives this specific form of presentation the character of an innovative art practice, that aims to make transparent the intimate interrelation between two spheres of cultural production which are normally seen as separated, although they are mutually fertilizing each other.

Thus, the cross-cultural experience, offered by the exhibition, should stimulate the spectator to reflect on the usefulness and capacity of explanation of the established definitions of art, genera of arts and the notion of culture in general. The collaboration of different artforms in the artificial

environment of the exhibition will create a new space for new or deepened questions to history and aesthetics, the dialogue between products of different art spheres, and between these components of the exhibition and the spectator should provide the opportunity of a stimulating experience of aesthetical and historical co-ordinates of our present time. In the age of *globalization* the Carnival-Literature Exhibition is an attempt to pierce the surface-skin of the historical moment, an attempt to go *beyond the masquerade* which conceals the *reality* of our alienated epoch.

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Like the performance, the exhibition can only be realized on the basis of collaboration between designers, photographer, musicians, poets and technicians.

The technical dimension is highly important for the installation of costumes, photographs and text, for the production of the sound track, for the installation and operation of the sound equipment, for the installation and operation of a complex light system. Adequate use of light will be important for the realization of the concept. The creative possibilities of light will be used to set off the dramatic structure of the exhibition.

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The aim is to use the potential of Carnival and literature in order to create a vivid exhibition, full of contrasts, loud and stimulating. In other words: a Carnivalized exhibition.

If the exhibition space is big enough, this concept allows to combine the exhibition with other events:

The exhibition context could be used as an adequate framework for Carnival workshops, for storytelling: key figures of the Notting Hill Carnival could tell the history of the London Carnival, for public discussions about Carnival issues, for film & video shows, concerts and performances (for instance, Dub Poetry, Rapso-experiments, etc.).

It is an immanent idea of the exhibition concept that the Carnival-Literature Exhibition should be instrumentalized as a focus for diverse experimental activities in the area of Black Arts and Black Popular Culture in London.



Project Ideas

Carnival Season: various events in the Carnival context.

Structured in *module construction technique*.

Core events

- ☞ ***Authentic Performance:*** unique event with highly complex structure and high artistic variety. Must contain the possibility of modification for exportation in various forms.
- ☞ ***Exhibition:*** Uses elements of the performance. Variable size (important for exportation) - can be used as a framework for distinct events and experiments.

Associated events

- ☞ ***Performance of the complete "Rainbow Dragon Trilogy" by Amryl Johnson:*** including music, costumes and choreography.
- ☞ ***Performance of the Carnival Poem written by Grace Nichols:*** including music, costumes and choreography
- ☞ ***Theatre Play "Vampires in de steelband" by Vivian Comma***
- ☞ ***Rapso-events:*** Calypso - Rap - Fusion
- ☞ ***Literature/Carnival-Conference organized by David Dabydeen and The Centre for Caribbean Studies at The University of Warwick, Coventry***

plus whatever the project process will invent and create....

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