

CARNIVAL and THE ARTISTIC CONTRACT

SPRING IN GWANGJU

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Mario Benjamin (Haiti), *The Banquet*, in *SPRING*, May 18 Democratic Plaza, Gwangju, September 5, 2008.
Curated by Claire Tancons for Gwangju Biennale '08. 200 participants, 90 min. Photo: Akiko Ota.

Can a Masquerade Salvage Humanity's Declining Star in the Era of Spectacular Power?

Feathers for Smoke

In 1985, a group of Trinidadian artists calling themselves "Project MAS" (referring to both "Masquerade" and "Mutually Assured Survival") contributed a carnival procession to the peace march organized in Washington, D.C., commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Designed by Peter Minshall, *The Adoration of Hiroshima* sought to admonish humankind for its deadly worship of nuclear weapons through the artistic idiom of *Mas'*, a carnival tradition native to the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago. The procession's masterpiece, *Madame Hiroshima*, was a grotesque embodiment of the nuclear threat, a baroque Madonna whose aureola was a cloud of feathers reminiscent of the atomic mushroom that signaled the destruction of Hiroshima on June 6, 1945.

The Adoration of Hiroshima had first been performed earlier that year during the annual Trinidad Carnival. As a proponent of *Mas'*, the artistic component of the island's national festival, Peter Minshall was the leading *masman* of the 1980s and 1990s. His *mas'* were characterized by an unabashed critique of society rooted in the tradition of old-time carnival characters and *Ole Mas*, brought up to contemporary relevance through the choice of topical subject matter and the use of innovative techniques. Minshall's *The Adoration of Hiroshima* at the Washington Anti-Nuclear Peace March signaled the possibility of successfully combining Carnival and political demonstration, of marrying the Caribbean vernacular of resistance with the Western language of political propaganda against spectacular power, of which the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was one of the first examples.

If, with *Madame Hiroshima*, Minshall has created an icon that partook of the spectacular, the procession as a whole was far from a cheap spec-

tacle sold out to the diktat of entertainment. Indeed, it should come as no surprise that a carnival designer whose first carnival band was *Paradise Lost* (1976) would question the strategies of the spectacle. His approach was much like the San Francisco-based activist group Retort, whose book rallying against spectacular politics, *Afflicted Powers*, also borrows its title from the verses of the seventeenth-century English poet John Milton.¹ Discussing the 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, an updated iteration of spectacular power perpetrated against—rather than by—the West, Retort advanced the statement, "We do not believe that one can destroy the society of the spectacle by producing the spectacle of its destruction." But wasn't what Minshall had accomplished with *Madame Hiroshima*, by transforming the costume into carnivalesque, in itself grotesque? In Minshall's words, the 18-foot-tall, 120-pound costume was "a purposeful vulgarity of glitter and ostrich feathers," a "Folies-Bergère nonsense."

Bacchanal and Parangolé

Far from being meaningless, Minshall's Can Can figure is agitprop theater and nonsense is fruitful foolishness, bearing the blooms of an alternative carnivalesque ideology that opposes senses to sense and reverses the age of the Encyclopedia to that of the Bacchanalia. "Bacchanal!" exclaims the Trinidadian when unexpected events erupt, which outcome cannot be predicted. "Parangolé," proposed Hélio Oiticica at the height of the military dictatorship in Brazil. Almost synonymously, the Greek vocable turned Caribbean vernacular in typical Walcottian fashion² and the Brazilian near-neologism of the Tropicália era signals a New-World strategy by which carnivalesque excess disarms spectacular conflict and the grotesque gauges power.

If the carnivalesque strategy of antispectacular spectacle thrived as the native colonial language of the Americas, it was only disrupted in Europe, where unmediated popular undercurrents of resistance were kept alive after the festival vanished. It now plays a central role in Asia, where the democratic movements of the 1980s are finding a new breadth on the global stage. Indeed they are

becoming a lingua franca—not least because of the opposing yet concomitant currents of accrued individual freedom on one hand and increased state media control on the other. To Washington's posthumous nuclear guilt, Minshall offered a buoyant parade of sins. To Bush's purported anti-nuclear crusade against Iraq, Washington antiwar protesters retaliated with placards and banners bearing threatening messages of peace. To the masquerade of the Iraq war, suburban recruits turned American soldiers responded with the theater of horror of Abu Ghraib. Taking their uniforms for mere costumes of G.I. Joe dolls, and disguising their POWs as hooded penitents in one of the darkest farces of the beginning of the twenty-first century, America's soldiers staged a carnival of war grotesques where torture became entertainment—*The Disasters of War* brought on by *The Sleep of Reason*.

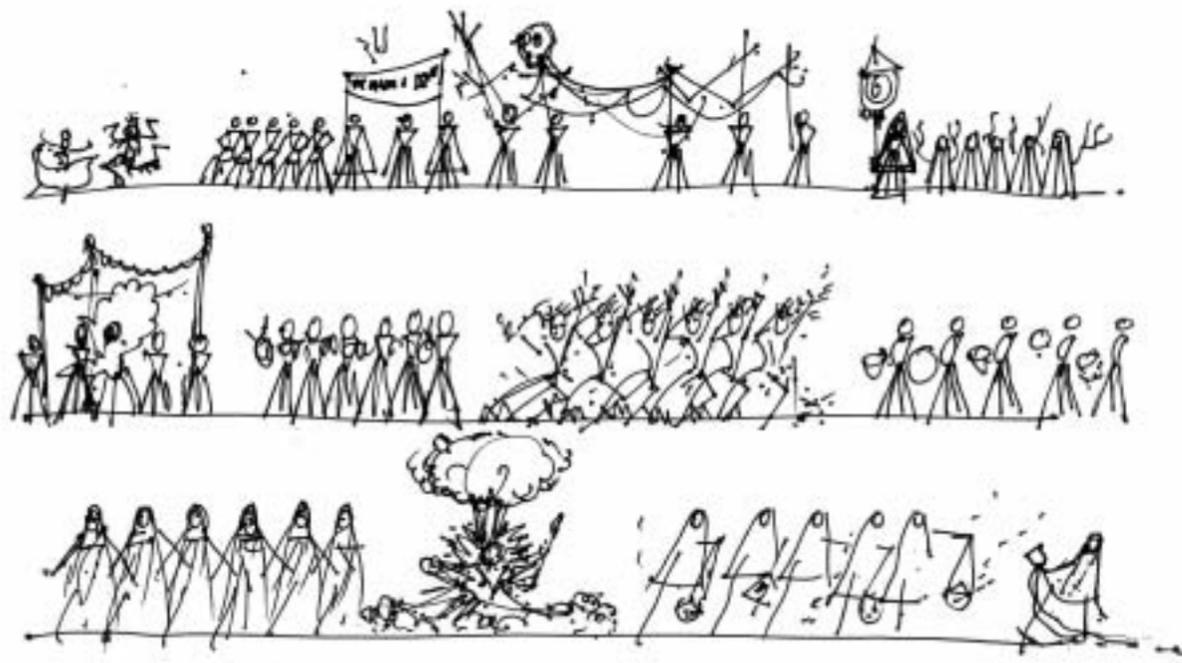
If Debordian Spectacle Is To Be Rejected, Shall Bakhtinian Carnival Be Allowed Back In?

Sleep and Dream

The monsters in Francisco Goya's famous etching *El Sueño de la Razón Produce Monstruos* (1797–1798) could have been born out of the sleep of reason as much as out of the dream of reason—the Spanish word *sueño* can translate into either "sleep" or "dream." For these monsters—a cat, owls, and bats with iridescent eyes—can be seen as both the last specimens of the not-yet-vanished folkloric substrate of Europe upon which its carnivals were bred and the metaphorical monsters that the mechanical and nuclear ages would bear out of Man's blind reliance on logic and science—the cremation chambers, the atomic bomb.

There is only a short step between the sleep of reason and war, which disasters Goya rendered with rhetorical excess and eloquent violence. The unrelenting darkness of *The Disasters of War* (1810–1812) is further deepened in the portrayal of the killings of the *3rd of May 1808* (1814), which would inspire Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* (1951). The genealogy of erring reason from the first modern artist (Goya) to the icon of modernism (Picasso) reads like an alternative chronology to mainstream art-historical trends, with

Peter Minshall, Sketch for *The Adoration of Hiroshima*, 1985. Ink on paper. Courtesy of The Callaloo Company, Chaguaramas, Trinidad.





Peter Minshall, *Mancrab* from *River*, Trinidad Carnival, 1983.
Courtesy of The Callaloo Company, Chaguaramas, Trinidad. Photo: Noel Norton.



Peter Minshall, *River*, Trinidad Carnival, 1983.
Courtesy of The Callaloo Company, Chaguaramas, Trinidad. Photo: Derek Gay.

Goya's insane nightmares and Picasso's primitive fantasies defying the cool, linear ideology of progress.

Indeed, Picasso's affinity with ancient and non-modern civilizations helped reframe art-historical discourse away from the univocal Western narrative of modernism. His soldiers in *Massacre in Korea* are naked barbarians wearing rustic helmets and antique, three-pronged weapons, grotesque warriors whose crude nudity leaves them as exposed as their victims. In the 1983 Trinidad Carnival, the king of Minshall's band *River* was *Mancrab*, a river-polluting crab and genocidal criminal of the River People. Though more elaborate than Picasso's crude warriors, *Mancrab* bore resemblance to them in their metallic harnessing and embodied the line of development from primitive modernism to carnivalesque sophistication along a path of history still too often left unbeaten.

Capital and Carnival

The Middle Ages were the times of the grand European carnivals to which the painter and printmaker Pieter Bruegel gives a long-lasting mystique with *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559). But by the time dawn came upon the

seventeenth century, Europe had not yet lost its Shrovetide festivals. In Paris, under the impulse of King Louis XIV (1638–1715), whose love of dancing and costuming is well documented, carnival masquerades flourished and slowly gave way to a formalized type of spectacle that was to engender the grand classical tradition of ballet. During that same period, France and other Catholic European nations that celebrated Carnival were engaged in the colonial enterprise. Goya's bats flew to the Indies. (The Bat is, in fact, one of the oldest traditional characters in the Trinidad Carnival.)

As Carnival withdrew from Europe as a major popular manifestation, giving way instead to the rarefied enjoyments of the few, it surged in the New World, where slavery and colonization replaced servitude and feudalism. Europe's growing, and soon excessive, consumption of spices and sugar, cocoa, and cotton announced the beginning of capital accumulation and stood in contrast to the famishment of the naked masses of slaves and indentured laborers, breeders of its material pleasures. To their masters' materialist pleasure, the newly oppressed opposed the physical and spiritual experience of transient existentialism.

If the accumulation of capital is the condition of the Spectacle, the cancellation of capital is the condition of Carnival. If capital excess breeds Spectacle, the lack of capital engenders Carnival. Lack, however, is not absence, but presence denied, the nullification of excess by an excess of excess. In "Orphée Noir," Jean-Paul Sartre's introduction to Léopold Sédar Senghor's *L'Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache* (1948), Sartre uses a similar figure of annulment to define *Négritude* as the "negation of the negation of the black man," a form of despectacularization of the black man (a barrier to the bulimia of the gaze)—a rhetorical figure and conceptual tool in keeping with Retort's own double-negative theme of the destruction of the Spectacle/the spectacle of destruction.

Is a Funeral Procession a Carnival or Is Carnival a Funeral Procession?

The Balisier and the Red Devils

On April 20, 2008, on the occasion of the national funeral of Martinican poet-politician Aimé Césaire, the people of Martinique convened in the streets of Fort-de-France by the tens of thousands for a daylong march that ended in the Dillon/Pierre Alier stadium. Whether following the call of the procession's organizers or because of their own choice, most participants wore white and held a red balisier, symbol of Césaire's political party, but also simply, a flower—a traditional element in a funeral. The polysemic nature of symbols is in accord with the complexity of meaning that different crowd organizations, or indeed, the same crowd organization, can have.

In the New Orleans Jazz Funeral, for example, second-liners carrying umbrellas are followed by brass-band musicians surrounded by followers whose number is commensurate with the reputation of the deceased being led to his or her final repose. Emanating from the so-called Social Aids and Pleasure Clubs, with roots reaching back into the slavery era, the Jazz Funeral, more than any other type of funeral procession, has undeniable artistic aspects that, ultimately, concur to serve the needs of the community, much like African masquerading traditions.

Césaire, the proponent of the black-consciousness movement *Négritude*, which has been seen as the French West Indian equivalent of the African American Harlem Renaissance, would not have contested the African origins of many Caribbean socio-artistic practices. Witnessing a masquerade in Senegal along with *Négritude* cofounder Léopold Sédar Senghor, Césaire had the revelation of the African origins of the *Diables Rouges* (Red Devils) masquerade of the Martinican Carnival.

Colonial Burial

Carnival in New-World Creole societies—from New Orleans to Martinique, Brazil to Trinidad—has evolved as a major field of artistic practice during the last three centuries and, more specifically, over the course of the nineteenth century, becoming a national festival in the twentieth century in the case of the Trinidad Carnival. Continuing into the twenty-first century, Carnival has exported itself to American and European metropolitan centers such as New York with the Brooklyn West Indian Labor Day Parade, London with the Notting Hill Carnival, and Toronto with Caribana in a movement of retro-colonization where globalization meets diasporization. Much like in the Trinidadian motherland, diasporic carnivals carved themselves a piece of urban space out of the necessity to resist and exist, to assess and assert West Indian identity in the face of racism and discrimination. But they also did so to integrate and assimilate in a new environment. The Notting Hill Carnival is a case in point.

Recognizing Creole carnivals and festivals as a major, if not the main, field of artistic creation in the Caribbean world is not just about going against the grain of current scholarship about Caribbean arts that too often merely follows the trend of European academism that has befallen the islands in the more traditional mediums of painting, sculpture, and drawing. It is also attempting to delineate an alternative art-historical narrative that did not engender modernism but a form that is neither subservient to it nor, for lack of taking part in it, alien to the refinements of high art. Paying tribute to the resistance ethos of Carnival is also recognizing the extent to which carnival processions and political manifestations often collide and converge as

expressions of popular angst against real and perceived abuses of power.

A Democratic Coup?

Torch and Candlelight

The Olympic torch relay of 2008 often turned into a political rally as pro- and anti-China protesters many times outnumbered and sometimes outdid athletes in their display of global sportsmanship. Following the Olympic torch on its world tour was like holding the thermometer of freedom. And in this freedom world tour, cool was greater than warm in indicating a nation's freedom temperature. In Paris, which was gearing up for the fortieth-anniversary celebration of the May 1968 student movement—an event remembered to this day as an example of freedom of expression—the flame was extinguished. In San Francisco and London it had some cold moments as pro-Tibet demonstrators tried to get hold of it. In Seoul it could have frozen, had protesters against the Chinese, for the return of North Korean refugees, managed to spray water on it with a fire extinguisher. But then it was noticed that it would burn high in Pyongyang, the capital of the North Korean dictatorship (and world capital of the Mass Games, large-scale performances based on group dynamics often depicting a living tableau of a patriotic scene or national leader). China, the 2008 Olympic host country that is under scrutiny for various human rights violations, offered a con-

trasting picture. The torch left Tiananmen Square under the warm auspices of Chinese officials and returned to Hong Kong to muffled protests by activists for Tibet and Darfur who had not been barred entry to the former British territory.

It is in Hong Kong rather than Tiananmen Square that the massacre of June 4, 1989, officially referred to as "riots," is remembered by public commemorations. As the flame from Olympia continues its tour of China, it is a different fire that will burn in the streets of Hong Kong, the fire of memory set alight in a candlelight vigil on the anniversary day of the students' killings following so-called "patriotic pro-democracy marches," organized by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China.

Red Festa

In contrast, the Gwangju Democratic movement of the 1980s, which started with a coup d'état in 1979 and only truly ended in 1993 with the election of the nation's fourteenth president and the launch of the "Civilian Government," has become an official celebration as the cornerstone of (South) Korea's democracy. Since being established in 1994, the May 18 Memorial Foundation (named after May 18, 1980, the first day of the Gwangju uprising) has hosted youth festivals, commemorative events, and international peace forums and given awards for human rights activities. One of its most emblematic events is Red Festa, a street festival hosted by the Youth

Funeral procession for Aimé Césaire through the streets of Texaco, Fort-de-France, Martinique, April 20, 2008. Photo by and courtesy of Mike Irasque.



Jazz funeral for John Brunious, Preservation Hall, New Orleans, February 24, 2008. Photo: Claire Tancons.





Historical image of the 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising in front of the Former Provincial Office. Photo: Kyungtaek Na.

Committee for the May 18 Festival, which reenacts scenes of the uprising. The year 2008 celebrated the fifth Red Festa and comprised mock battles between youths splashed in red paint and armed with sponge sticks instead of the paratroopers' billy clubs, and reenactment of the iconic scene of May 20, 1980, in which a protestor, standing on a

bus, led a demonstration of public transportation workers, including dozens of buses and thousands of taxis.

Korean Carnavalesque, Korean Spectacular

Mad Cow as *Bœuf Gras*

According to one of its disputed etymologies, the celebration of a farewell to the flesh (from the Latin *carne levare*, to take away meat), Carnival has staged the parade of a fattened ox or *Boeuf Gras* to be sacrificed before the strictures of Lent. Popular in Paris throughout the nineteenth century, when it also became a fixture of the Rex Parade in New Orleans Mardi Gras, the *Boeuf Gras*, originally a live ox, was eventually replaced by a papier-mâché representation.

The 2008 manifestations in Seoul were carnivalesque in nature. Started as protests against the government's reopening of the American beef trade, the manifestations escalated into widespread, large-scale, antigovernmental demonstra-

SPRING, May 18 Democratic Plaza, Gwangju, September 5, 2008. Curated by Claire Tancons for Gwangju Biennale '08. 200 participants, 90 min. Courtesy of Gwangju Biennale Foundation. Photo: Cheolhong Mo.



Contemporary reenactment of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising by the Youth Committee of the May 18 Foundation, as part of the annual Red Festa festival.

tions spanning over a month. The motif of a healthy fattened ox, the *Boeuf Gras*, had been replaced by that of a sick bovine, the Mad Cow, the symbol of happy consumption traded for fear of global consumerist strategies.

For the beef protests in Korea were as much a product of a carnivalesque spirit as they were the result of extreme mediatization. Indeed, the popular manifestation was a media revolution, the coming together of interest groups through protest organizations relayed by Internet servers, blogs, e-mails, text messages, and so forth. It also represented the dramatic leap that the country had taken toward democratization of and through the media since the 1980s. Where, in the Gwangju Democratic uprisings, the protesters set fire to broadcast stations to prevent the spread of wrongful official information, in the 2008 beef protests, the media—digital media in particular—proved a powerful tool in organizing the manifestations, a tribute to the country's unprecedented success with the digital technology.

Destroyed Tower

By contrast to South Korea's carnivalesque demonstration of popular strength brought about by its hard-fought democratic struggle, and supported by its competitive media industry, stood North Korea's exhibition of spectacular power with the destruction of a cooling tower at the Yongbyon nuclear complex near Pyongyang. A symbol of North Korea's nuclear power, the tower, however, had since long been disaffected. Its destruction was thus seen more as a spectacular gesticulation than as a real commitment to nuclear disarmament, for which many steps still have to be taken.

Over just a couple of months, in the divided Korean peninsula, the two opposing tendencies of the Carnival and the Spectacle were brought to climactic heights—in popular manifestations in South Korea and in the theatrical staging of destruction in North Korea—once again asserting that the two never cease to coexist and are the function of diverging political systems. In this

way, they definitely demonstrate that the carnivalesque still has contemporary relevance and may, in light of other popular manifestations worldwide, pose a serious threat to spectacular politics.

Of the Idea of the Social Contract Applied to Artistic Practice

The Artistic Contract

The idea of the social contract, upon which modern democracy rests, stipulates that citizens must abide by mutually coercive laws if they are to remain within the bonds of society, in exchange for which they are guaranteed fundamental rights. With overpopulation looming and the idea of democracy being challenged, the problem of the twenty-first century might well be about how to organize the crowds of the world's corners into global citizens and to give them agency. Recent worldwide manifestations, of which the June 2008 Seoul manifestations are the paragon, show that in the Information Age, popular assemblies remain a powerful mode of communicating content or dissent, and that humankind has not reached, not that it should have, the Age of Reason that was supposed to crush its instincts.

There may then be something to learn from processional traditions which, having escaped the anesthetic power of reason, the hygienization of modernism, and the clarion call of individualism, organize people in a way that binds them together as well as frees them of the bonds of daily life, colonized by false images and empty slogans disseminated by deceitful leaders.

If the avant-garde—as an actual position of leadership as opposed to a metaphorical one, long derided by the proponents of postmodernism—is the strategic and ethical position in which artists should always strive to be, they should all become *masmen*, leaders of carnival bands or public demonstrations of thousands to whom liberatory, if temporary, power would be conferred through collective artistic creation. Through Carnival and other similar public manifestations, the social contract is constantly renegotiated, turned into an artistic contract between the artist-leader and the viewer-participant that, ironically, best realizes the postmodernist ideal of the viewer completing the

artwork, as carnival bands only exist insofar as potential revelers are willing to join in and literally, play the game, or rather, play their *mas*'.

SPRING in Gwangju

The Fall of SPRING

The biennale project *SPRING* paid homage to the Gwangju Democratic movement and to the spirit of May. Spring is a season that, throughout history, coming on the heel of harvest-celebrating pre-Lenten carnivals, has always been fertile in revolutionary movements such as the Gwangju Democratic movements. The word “spring” also calls to mind the idea of sudden motion and constant tension that is at the core of popular manifestation. Although *SPRING* was inspired by Gwangju's own May 1980 street uprisings, it was more concerned about recreating the conditions for the release of the emancipatory energy, which is at the root of popular organization, as it was about offering a narrative critique of a particular historical moment—critique that is usually inherent in street manifestations. *SPRING* thus manifested itself as a procession borrowing from various processional models from carnival parades, to funeral processions, to political demonstrations. Refusing the constricted space of the gallery, *SPRING* sought to experiment with the processional format as an alternative curatorial model for the organization of an exhibition in motion, a space of active social participation, best suited for the understanding of self-government and cooperation toward which street demonstrations and human participation tend.

As the only element exhibited in Annual Report: A Year in Exhibitions was an experimental film by Caecilia Tripp, her own *Spring in Gwangju*—shot in the spirit of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Germany in Autumn*—it was only fitting that *SPRING* was a teaser for the feature-to-be. *SPRING* was a procession rather than a parade, a Carnival rather than a Spectacle, the ideas of procession and Carnival being understood here in the context of “parade” in contradistinction to “Spectacle,” in accordance with their etymological roots, which might best attest to their differing meaning and intent. While parades are spectacles

first and foremost destined to passive visual consumption (spectacle comes from the Latin *spectare*, to look), processions (from the Latin *procedere*, to move forward) imply the idea of motion that epitomizes the progressive (both literally and metaphorically) nature of Carnival (à la Peter Minshall). The live and recorded music played and mixed by Jin Won Lee (a.k.a. GAZAEBAL) during the procession and used as the score of Tripp's film, reflected the in-progress nature of the performance through the use of repetitive structures exponentially expanded along with the procession itself.

SPRING was part carnival, part demonstration, and part funeral procession, a diurnal and nocturnal performance of revelers, revolters, and wanderers. Unfolding along one of the main avenues leading to the roundabout across from the Former Provincial Office, the location of the procession, where the students' uprisings took place more than two decades ago, was as much of an homage paid to the democratic movement as it was a formal experiment with an itinerary that combined

linear and circular properties that impacted, quite literally, on the turns and shifts, both physical and emotional, of the procession and its participants. Leading the procession was visual artist, *sambista* and *carnavalesco* Jarbas Lopes with an unlikely float of Styrofoam, the reconstruction of a vessel of discontent (in its original context, the 2006 Rio de Janeiro Carnival, with the polluting effect of carbon dioxide emissions). Coming next was Karyn Olivier's investigation of the very ethos of ancient sacred festivals out of which carnivals grew, with the presentation of body prostheses such as additional limbs, wings, stilts, and other such things, designed to confer godlike powers on their wearers. Marlon Griffith followed at dawn with an embodiment of the spirit of the Canboulay riots waged by the people of Trinidad against the British attempts to suppress Carnival in 1881. Mario Benjamin's work illuminated the night with a *son et lumière* (sound-and-light) mobile sculpture that was also a spirited vehicle. Closing the procession was a MAP Office funeral procession of chariots of offering, which borrowed

Jarbas Lopes (Brazil), *Demolition Now*, in *SPRING*, May 18 Democratic Plaza, Gwangju, September 5, 2008. Curated by Claire Tancons for Gwangju Biennale '08. 200 participants, 90 min. Photo: Akiko Ota.





Karyn Olivier (USA), *Grey Hope*, in *SPRING*, May 18 Democratic Plaza, Gwangju, September 5, 2008. Curated by Claire Tancons for Gwangju Biennale '08. 200 participants, 90 minutes. Photo: Akiko Ota.

as much from a Southern Chinese custom (according to which the dead are to be accompanied by everyday objects as a viaticum for the travel to the afterlife) as it did from the carnival tradition of setting an effigy on fire at the end of the revels.

SPRING's premise and success relied on the artistic contract between a handful of artists and a multitude of people. Each artist became the head of a rhizomatic experiment in artistic collaboration within his or her own workshop, during which skills were shared, knowledge disseminated, human bonds sealed. At the core of this rhizomatic dissemination of knowledge there soon became not one but several leaders, as each workshop participant took over control of the production process from the artist. The artist was to diffuse artistic authority and authorial power as the people gained ownership of the artistic process in a joint enterprise of collective self-definition.

Claire Tancons is a curator, writer, and researcher based in New Orleans, focusing on Carnival, processional art, and popular protest. She has experimented with the procession as a curatorial medium at Gwangju Biennale '08 and CAPE '09 and is currently working on a project about Carnival and contemporary art as well as a book tentatively entitled Carnival, Procession, and Protest: Art, Agency, and the Re-Possession of Perception.

Notes

This essay, slightly modified, was originally published in Okwui Enwezor, ed., *The 7th Gwangju Biennale—Annual Report* (Gwangju: Gwangju Biennale Foundation, 2008), pp. 334–363. Illustrations from the procession have been added.

¹ Retort includes Iain Boal, T. J. Clark, Joseph Matthews, and Michael Watts. The full title of their book is *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London and New York: Verso Press, 2005). The book is an expanded version of the group's highly successful 2003 broadsheet, "Neither Their War Nor Their Peace."

² In *Omeros* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), Derek Walcott relocates Homer's ancient tale *The Odyssey* to the Caribbean island of St. Lucia.