

Theater, like art, is often ensconced in ontological explorations of the real. Actors and artists alike commonly present work that either strives to assimilate a familiar reality, or to create an alternate one. There are many tantalizing questions that theater proposes: What does it mean to act out reality? To create an identity? A character? To perform one's own identity? To find one's self? To lose one's self? To recreate an act(ion)? To not act? To suspend disbelief? To rupture the fourth wall? To affect consciousness? To reject illusionism? What accounts for life being a performance, and for theater being like life? Such questions were most passionately addressed in the numerous avant-garde, postwar theater movements: Epic Theater, Theater of Cruelty, Theater of the Absurd, or Living Theater. Today, as we are inundated with reality TV shows and a prevailing re-examination of neo-realism and documentary in the art world, similar questions are posed in two recent projects by Jose Alvaro Perdices.

Perdices, a Madrid native, has been making art in Los Angeles for the last 15 years. His theatrical videos, photographs, and installations mine the interstices of identity, place, social behavior, and archetypal dichotomies that speak to human existence: inherent identity versus culturally imposed identity; hiding versus revealing; solitude versus community. Perdices' practice resists the typically American frenzy for easily consumable, discreet objects that has prevailed in the market of late. Instead, he tends to make polysemous, multi-channel or multi-part installations that are intellectually and semiotically complex. His projects reflect a more European affinity for existential and philosophical discourse. Nonetheless, Perdices' topics of inquiry are decidedly derivative of a life in Los Angeles, a city in which issues of identity have been historically polemicalized by the celebrity fetishism of Hollywood and the predominantly Hispanic immigrant population.

Perdices' two most recent projects, *Sapeli Nova Mas* and *IRREVERSIBLEMENTE beautiful* are multi-channel video installations that use post-war theatrical strategies (think Beckett, Beck, Artaud, and Sartre) as characters in his videos explore the grain of the voice, the purpose of their bodily presence, and the texture of place to deconstruct identity and subjectivity. Though these videos address universal and anachronistic notions of existence and voice, it is difficult not to also consider how poorly the voice of the individual has fared during the last 4 years, as so many voices have been silenced – or ignored – during the war in Iraq. The war in the Middle East has resuscitated a new form of existentialism, renewing the relevance of the mid-century theorists, and infusing Perdices' work with global significance.

Sapeli Nova Mas offers a disconcerting manipulation of voice and emotion through two videos that juxtapose a man and a woman as they individually navigate a small room. This is a two-channel installation in which a large video projection fills the back wall of a room. This video features Lisa, a forty-something woman neatly dressed in a cotton black dress, pearl earrings, and hair tied back. A smaller video plays on the right wall of the installation, with the bottom edge of the aligned with the floor. This smaller video features the male subject, Martin, who looks to be in his 30s and wears jeans and a black sweater that has a tendency to ride up and reveal his sexy stomach. It is notable that the female subject appears physically larger, as we will consider through further analysis of the piece.

In both videos, the camera slowly pans across the room that appears to be a small cabin, perhaps a vacation home, flooded with afternoon light and warmed by a robust fire in the fireplace. There are wood-paneled walls, a round table, a couch, some chairs, a wall-mounted light fixture, a mantle with an empty vase, a candlestick, and two very rusty beer cans. Voices are heard before any people are seen. Lisa's voice emphatically proclaims "I am loving it!" over and over, while Martin groans and wails in non-verbal utterances of emotion. Both characters seem to explore a wide range of emotion with their voices, adjusting volume, pitch, rate, and meter to connote ecstasy, agony, anger, despair, joy, etc. The modulations of Lisa and Martin's voices recall the transformation in Sam Taylor Wood's video *Hysteria* (1997), in which a woman's face is seen close up with extreme expressions of joy and sadness, and in its convulsions it is ultimately unclear whether she is laughing or crying. In different ways, both Lisa and Martin evoke Lacan's notion of *jouissance*, that torturous and delightful encounter with the object of desire that can manifest in expressions of pleasure (ecstasy) that are indistinguishable from expressions of pain (agony). It is also fitting to note that Lacan identified repetition, such as Lisa's repeated phrase, as a hysterical symptom indicative of an eruption of *jouissance*.

As Lisa moves into the frame, we see that she is moving slowly around the perimeter of the room, fondling the mantle, the candlestick, the couch, tabletop. As she repeats "I am loving it!" she varies intonation, emphasis and volume, as if to experiment with ways that she might convince herself and the unseen viewer that she really is loving it. As she does this, the words take on myriad different meanings, until eventually they become meaningless. There's something exhilarating about watching someone in the throws of such emphatic expression, but this jubilation soon turns to consternation, as it begins to seem like Lisa might be insane. In the other video, Martin seems helpless and anguished as he moans, wails, grunts, and whimpers. He drags his body, as if almost giving up, across the walls, couch, and chair. He throws tantrums on the floor, and howls in despair, too distraught to find language at all; a true state of trauma.

Perdices has presented an unusual dichotomy between Martin and Lisa. Typically, women are the ones who are depicted as inarticulate, objectified, and diminutive. But in *Sapeli Nova Mas*, the video of Martin is physically smaller, he is childishly non-verbal, and seems to be a pathetically victimized by his own feelings. Conversely, Lisa is empowered through the play, experimentation and proclamation of her own pleasure while Martin is tortured by his inability to articulate his apparent displeasure.

Through Lisa's intentional palilalia and Martin's fits, Perdices constructs an intricate examination of language and meaning. As Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Saunders Peirce taught us in their famous explication of semiotics, signs (words, gestures, sounds) are ambiguous until and unless they are inscribed in a symbolic order. Young children learn to associate meaning with words by having those words repeated to them over and over. Later on in life, the child learns that if he or she repeats a word over and over, the word as well as the voice will soon sound alien and meaningless again. Repetition, on one hand, can emphasize importance. On the other, it can widen the gap between sound and meaning. In a 1976 performance, *Freeing the Voice*, Marina Abramovic explored the notion of liberating the voice from the body, and perhaps from semiotic relevance, as she yelled until she lost her voice. The voice, like fingerprints or irises, is an index of identity. To remove the voice from the body forces a relocation of the site of identity to the location of the body in space, the gestures the body enacts, the expressions of the face.

The abstraction of language, the emptying of meaning from Lisa's text is further compounded when she begins to recite numbers at random. As if to seduce the chair she is looking at, she whispers huskily "fourteen, twenty six...three thousand...one...one...one...one..." The numbers have no discernible significance, reiterating the fact that they, like words, are arbitrary codes, waiting to be paired with a context and meaning that is comprehensible to the viewer.

As Lisa and Martin's vocal outbursts accompany their enthusiastic physical exploration of the room, the work also recalls Freudian notions of hysteria, and the Victorian-Era rooms that confined women in domestic spaces as well as in sanatoriums. The display of too much emotion was often cause for involuntary confinement. Place is an important consideration in Perdices' projects, and this room has a plurality of references. Moving into the 20th century we can call upon Sartre's *No Exit* when looking at *Sapeli Nova Mas*, for the characters in the famous existentialist play are, like Lisa and Martin, confined in perpetuity to a room with no bed, and they similarly experience a range of emotional responses to their environment. Mirrors are missing from these rooms, but nonetheless, the objects in Perdices' room – vase, candlestick, fire – evoke a *vanitas*, a classic metaphor for narcissism, self-indulgence, and mortality.

At the beginning of the 16-minute video, the channel featuring Lisa is fixed on the light switch, then slowly pans around the room. In both views, the fire burns heartily in the fireplace. At the end of the piece, the fire has diminished into mere embers, and now Martin's channel rests on the light switch, bringing the visual component full circle, and symbolically implying a potential for something being turned on, or turned off. The inconclusiveness and ambiguity of this ending is in perfect accordance with the polymorphous and infinite implications of the actors' voices and gestures.

In a concurrent piece, titled *IRREVERSIBLEMENTE beautiful* (2006), Perdices explores existentialism through similar themes of voice, place, and gesture. In this configuration, however, the room is dark and gritty, the light is cool, and there are several figures in the room at once. The setting is the rough-hewn cellar of a house in Los Angeles, between the support beams of the house and atop a raw dirt floor. Twenty spectators stand around the perimeter, as silent versions of a Greek chorus, apparent witness to the actions of the three main actors. These actors, "Martina", "Paulo", and "Paul" were instructed to repeat their own names with varying emotional prompts, and at times with accompanying action. Martina (coincidentally the feminine of 'Martin' from *Sapeli Nova Mas*) calls out to her own vagina, acknowledging the biological component of gender and identity. Paul and Paulo call out to themselves – or each other – and it is worth noting that the Latino and Anglo iterations of the same name echo Perdices' own bi-cultural identity. The actors throw stones at the wall, break a light bulb with an axe, and one digs a hole in the ground in a Sisyphian gesture of futility. Their actions seem hopeless, directionless, and increasingly irrational as the scene progresses.

The cavernous, claustrophobic space that the actors inhabit in *IRREVERSIBLEMENTE beautiful*, with cool and eerie light seeping in from the outside, or emanating from a single dangling light bulb, is a bit like Plato's cave. Perdices likens it to standing inside Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, in the midst of a contradiction between the dynamism of the diagonally leaning beams, and the stasis of the structure itself. The figures occupy a conflicted space, one in which personal and collective identities are problematized, and one in which there is no exit.

Partially Buried Woodshed is also an apt analogue because of its manifestation of the idea of entropy. Smithson adopted the woodshed to exemplify entropy, as the earth that he dumped on top of it would theoretically lead to the collapse of the woodshed itself, and the eventual reabsorption of the shed into the ground. Though the woodshed and the figures in *IRREVERSIBLEMENTE beautiful* thankfully does not collapse, the language – that which provides integral social structure – for each of Perdices' characters, is the system that succumbs to entropy in this case, as the repetition of names or phrases leads ultimately to the annihilation of meaning.

The ambience of the installation of *IRREVERSIBLEMENTE beautiful* evokes the cellar itself, and features several free-standing walls in a room equally as dark and cold. Five walls feature projections of different shots of the actors and the spectators. A sixth wall shows the hole, at hourly intervals throughout the day, which emblemizes a chronologically and geologically infinite landscape. The hole also seems to stand in for absence, placelessness, the void.

Perdices' installations contain seemingly contradictory elements of postwar theater. In his ideas on Epic Theater, Brecht advocated the notion of defamiliarization. In *IRREVERSIBLEMENTE beautiful* defamiliarization occurs as a result of the actors' incessant repetition of words, numbers, or names, as well as from the subterranean environs which seem to estrange the participants from a tangible sense of physical or psychological space. Though Brecht's dystopic ideas tend to oppose those espoused by Artaud in his *Theater of Cruelty*, Perdices nonetheless also incorporates elements from Artaud as well as from Julian Beck's philosophies of Living Theater. In his first performance at the Theater of Cruelty, Artaud seeks a utopian and primitivist recovery of "the notion of a kind of unique language, half way between gesture and thought. This language cannot be defined except by its possibilities for dynamic expression in space as opposed to the expressive possibilities of spoken dialog." This indeed seems to be the effect of Lisa's and Martin's vocal iterations in *Sapeli Nova Mas* as they feel their way through the room. Both actors are earnestly engaged in a performance of pure emotion, in what seems to be an honest and phenomenological experience. If Artaud seeks social awareness through theatrical performances, Perdices establishes awareness through a hyper-awareness of self and through the juxtaposition of the polarized attributes of Lisa and Martin's performances: masculine and feminine, aggressive and passive, articulate and incomprehensible. Lisa embodies the civilized, and Martin the primitive.

Finally, as in Beckett's *Theater of the Absurd*, there is a sense of placelessness in Perdices' videos, a disassociation of place and body. The figures in *IRREVERSIBLEMENTE beautiful* are stranded in the dark, a purgatory between the earth and the structure of the house, in darkness that makes recognition of others even more difficult. Beckett also explores the futility of action, and the inability of humans to communicate effectively. This is clearly exemplified as Martina, Paul and Paulo seem to want to communicate, but instead can only call their own name in vain, in a narcissistic version of Marco/Polo. Lenny Bruce, famous for his transgressive use of language in comedy, popularized the notion that the more a word is repeated, the less and less meaningful it is. How many times must one repeat one's own name, before a sense of identity starts to dissipate?

The characters in Perdices' videos traverse the various constructs and collapses of meaning, identity and place through language and gesture. Meanwhile, the viewers of these pieces are inundated with a cumulative layering of possible meanings until the work becomes so dense it is indeterminate and uncontainable. Appropriately, Perdices succeeds in asking more questions than he answers and consequently reignites the retro existentialist discourse as a substantive alternative to the mere commodity fetishism that drives so much contemporary art.

Micol Hebron, Los Angeles, June 2007

(Footnotes)

⁶ Lacan, Jacques *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981

⁷ "Jouissance (Lacan)." *Answers.com*. 25 May 2007

<<http://www.answers.com/topic/jouissance-lacan>>

⁸ de Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in General Linguistics*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966

⁹ Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotic By Charles Sanders Peirce*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991

¹⁰ Artaud, Antonin. *The Theater and Its Double*. New York: Grove Press, 1958