



David Bowie is... Hyperreal

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Abstract

David Bowie is..., the recently ended exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario, stands in stark contrast to a similar exhibit mounted by Marina Abramovic at the MOMA entitled *The Artist is Present*. Unlike Marina Abramovic's insistent, troubling presence, David Bowie's body is absent. The exhibit offers the performative figure of "Bowie" as simulacrum, a "real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994, 1). The simulacral "Bowie" is presented as a de-centered, dis-oriented subject, transecting gender and performance boundaries as he effortlessly moves through physical and artistic geographies. This paper argues that the exhibit merely performs the subversive, "demonic" (Deleuze 1990, 258) character of the simulacrum, and by doing so closes it off from its radical potential to challenge the neo-liberalized space of the museum.

In their critique of the City of Toronto's *The Creative City: A Workprint*,ⁱ Laura Levin and Kim Solga underscore the emphasis that the 'creative cities' doctrine places on the

Physical renovation of [the city's] most important cultural institutions, with dollars not only for bricks and mortar but also for a glimpse of the world's most visible "starchitects" and the

performance of creative allure and cultural fashionability they trail in their wake [...] These architectural projects resonate with [a] hyper awareness of "spectacle and theatricality." (Levin and Solga: 39)

They point to the renovations of the AGO and the ROM respectively by Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind as examples of this pursuit. These spaces are created not for the formation of publics and the nurturing of public discourses, as might be the goal of modernist urban discourse,ⁱⁱ but are geared specifically toward developing the public as spectator and tourist: "the creative city, then, is finally about the spectacle, rather than the performative production, of public space," write Levin and Solga (39).

[2] Theatrical references have been part of the language of urban planning since the early twentieth century. But equally, Paul Makeham writes, the rise of the "experience economy" has placed an emphasis on performance and the spectacle as the 'fluid' of consumer transactions (Makeham: 150). This has taken many forms, mostly involving retail and corporate branding. Maurya Wickstrom, in her book *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions*, makes clear that modern, urban spaces such as stores and public squares are being affectively co-opted into corporate and political brands through their ability to use theatrical codes and spatial dramaturgy to "produce subjectivity as aspects of their brands through

mimetic and identificatory processes akin to those of performance, somatic and embodied" (Wickstrom: 2).

[3] The focus of this paper is the exhibit, recently ended, at the AGO called *David Bowie is...* While placing the exhibit within the context of the narrative of creative cities set out above, I will also question how performance itself— theatrical performance, aesthetic performance—is contained, framed and presented within these spectacular contexts. *David Bowie is...* is an exhibit about performance, yet notable for the absence of the body of the performer himself. *David Bowie is...* stands in stark contrast to a similar exhibit mounted by Marina Abramovic at the MOMA entitled, *The Artist is Present*. Bowie's absent body, unlike Marina Abramovic's insistent, troubling presence, offers the performative figure of "Bowie" as simulacrum, a "real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 1994, 1). The simulacral "Bowie" is presented as a de-centered, dis-oriented subject, transecting gender and performance boundaries as he effortlessly moves through physical and artistic geographies. But, despite signifying "Bowie" as such, I argue that the exhibit merely performs the subversive, "demonic" (Deleuze 1990, 258) character of the simulacrum, and by doing so closes it off from its radical potential to challenge the neo-liberalized space of the museum.



Figure 1: The Discovery District

[4] The AGO is located in Toronto's self-proclaimed "Discovery District."ⁱⁱⁱ While the name is meant to evoke to the hospitals and University of Toronto science institutions that border the area, it is also home to a mish-mash of public housing, Chinatown, and, of course, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO), the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD), and several small galleries. People scurry along, catching streetcars, loading and unloading supplies from trucks that block the flow of traffic. The restaurants on Baldwin Street serve a quick lunch to the workers of the hospitals and offices nearby. The streets fill and then thin out quickly within two hours, reminding me of my time employed in restaurants. The lunch rush, we called it. It leaves the area

not so much a discovery zone, but an extension of the office, a cafeteria. The neighbourhood transforms into a zone of consumption and then collapses back into a backdrop for passing through.

[5] Jones and Foust (2008) argue that in these urban spaces, pedestrian malls and areas like Baldwin Street and the Discovery District, heterogeneous bodies and identities “are simplified by liberal ideologies” (4) through the enforcement of a dialectic of subject and other in a fluid state of aspiration toward, or being barred from, market enfranchisement. Nowhere is this more obvious than the corner of Dundas and McCaul, where the AGO and OCAD dominate. The sheer visibility of these two buildings provides an interesting contrast: the slouchy student bodies, hanging around the doors of the school, furtively smoking cigarettes and exhibiting their “otherness” through codes of dress and hair style, superficially attest to this dialectic. But one suspects the proximity of the buildings has more of a “feeder system” aesthetic at heart, an aspiration to “move up” performed by the short distance between the two which suppresses the great distance between the status of “student” and “celebrated artist.” A yearning to move, to be discovered, lies waiting in the back alley.

[6] Matthew Cooper might describe the McCaul/Dundas area as a “landscape of consumption” (381), a place for tourists and gentrified city dwellers to

consume cultural events. It is, as Jones and Foust write, “a controlled and orderly retreat where a properly behaved public might experience the spectacle of the city” (9). And the spectacle begins with the AGO’s new skin.



Figure 2: The Gehry-designed façade of the Art Gallery of Ontario

[7] The AGO hired Frank Gehry hot off of his triumph at Bilbao to “redesign” the museum, and I use quotation marks only because the redesign’s main feature is its façade, an outer shell reminiscent of Gehry’s well-loved use of fish imagery. Quoting Paul Makeham, Levin and Solga suggest, quite appropriately, that architectural projects held within the *creative cities* ideology employ “a kind of urban planning which endorses not realism but

façade, which models itself not on utilitarian ideas of traffic flow and pedestrian efficiency, but the stage set, the carnival, and the forum” (Levin and Solga: 39).

[8] The photo below indicates just how this façade is literally pasted over the old building. It reminds us in a rather obvious way, that both the engagement of Gehry and the work he did was not meant to design a new space, or rehabilitate an old one, but rather, as Joan Ockman writes almost prophetically of this building, to act as a “function and an event more than a place, a container waiting to be filled” (Ockman: 227).



Figure 3: Behind the façade

[9] Jones and Foust take this idea further with their description of these types of venues as being produced by neo-liberalism “infused with consumerist aesthetics and values that clearly conveys who is welcome and who is not” (9). While Jones and Proust cast the roles of “consumer” and “other” with the wealthy, gentrified consumer/tourist, and the homeless and

unemployed that connive to live in the streets outside consumerism respectively, the AGO is much more subtle in its approach to "othering." There are three levels of participation: the artist (and, by extension, those who are in cahoots with him), and two categories of spectator: the *insider* and the *non-member*.

[10] The Museum itself, despite its renovation, has not wavered from the norm of moving people in two directions from the entry: the store/restaurant in one direction, the coat check and ticket booth in the other. Rather than ropes and angles, the architect employs curved, wooden walls to move people through to the paid space. This movement gives a sense of play to what can only be described as a herding to the ticket booth. Children ran up and down the ramps, unable to see above the wood walls, as though they were caught in a maze. The smooth wood gives a sensory pleasure that soothes the fact that one is waiting in line for a chance to pay. Everywhere can be found invitations to become an "insider," a task that can be accomplished by joining the museum. The coat check lines are divided into two: one, a shorter, corporate-sponsored *insider's* line nearest the door, the other for *non-members* who were forced to walk to the back of the hall. From the ticket booth, museum personnel issue our tickets and admit us into the museum. We are asked what time we would like to see the exhibit and

are informed that in order to control the crowds groups are only let through every half-hour. We are allowed to go in right away.

[11] The space between the ticket booth and the exhibit's entrance, marked by an orange wall emblazoned with "*Bowie*" in large letters, is a cavernous hall accented by curved staircases that echo the ticket line in the entrance. Empty of art, its purpose is to be moved through quickly. The effect is one of entering an amusement park, and people around us rush from the ticket booth to the exhibition with the same kind of roller-coaster driven urgency to beat the line-up. Once past the wall, we are channeled toward a check-in where we present our tickets and are given headsets. Sennheiser provides them, several signs assure us.

[12] Headsets on, we are escorted to an elevator as the recorded voice of AGO Director Matthew Teitelbaum's explains the nature of the exhibit. He outlines that we should spend 20-30 minutes on the first floor, and that the last hour should be spent on the second floor of the exhibit. There were no attendants to monitor this timeline, but my sense of its presence in the narrative of the show is more to free us from the burden of contemplation, a fundamental aspect of the modernist museum space. It also keeps one on a timeline similar to an evening at the theatre, where dinner reservations play a role in a night on the town. The museum is meant to be part of an evening

out. Teitelbaum also boasts that the exhibit is multi-sensual. I wonder how many senses must be used in order to become "multi-" rather than "bi-sensual," for there was nothing to taste or smell, and certainly in this case, there were plenty of attendants present to ensure that nothing was touched.

[13] As we get on the elevator accompanied a man in an electric wheelchair, a museum attendant jokes with him, badly, that he should not break the speed limit. "As if I could," the man says to us with a smile, as the door closes. This is what I mean when I suggest that not all non-homeless, employed bodies are free from being "othered" in this kind of space. We are not all "homogenous in the sense that we operate smoothly within and through the space" (Jones and Foust: 9).

[14] Indeed, it is in the realm of movement that the exhibit stakes its claim. After leaving the elevator, we are encased in a space that is divided by white walls into small rooms, each room laid out with video monitors, roped off dais with costumed mannequins, and glassed in exhibit cases. Much of the chatter I overhear expresses surprise at how small Bowie's costumes (and thus Bowie himself) are. There was little sense of the scale of Bowie's spectacular aesthetic. It was all as small as a television set.



Figure 4: David Bowie is... here

[15] "David Bowie is here" say the signs. So where is he? The answer is, clearly, that David Bowie, the ordinary subject, is not here. What we do get to see are the material and discursive remains of his performances. His music plays from screens and over speakers as well as through our headsets. One also hears the music as well as Bowie's voice on the headphones telling stories of his past and his influences. The headphones

are directionally anchored, so when I move my head or walk, the sound changes according to the direction I am looking or heading. The effect was somewhat dislocating. Sound is disjointed and my movements, of which I am normally unconscious and which are subtly managed by the orchestration of the space itself, are magnified by the swift changes in aural landscape. This dislocation, I imagine, might be part of the point: how does one “nail down” David Bowie? The exhibit suggested quite literally that it was not possible; that Bowie changed his “image” so frequently and persuasively that there really is no essential “Bowie,” no body, no life, only the shape-shifting icon. And that this ability, and the documents that he produced, were enough to declare him a performance artist, and thus, the exhibit as art.

[16] But the exhibit was essentially about performance without trying to critically encounter the problems of tracing performance. The texts of the exhibit spoke frequently of Bowie’s relationship to theatre and theatricality. Literally, the writing on the wall compared Bowie in the most vague terms to artists such as Warhol, Brecht,^{iv} and Marcel Duchamp. The exhibit’s artistic bona fides were supported by quotes written on the exhibit walls from philosophers ranging from Plato to Barthes. The words suggested things about the nature of art and music without actually raising the question of what art might actually be, allowing us to infer Bowie’s performance remains

in one corner of a powerful triangle formed with philosophy and the museum space, much the way advertising works. In order to unpack this, it would be useful to compare *David Bowie is...* to a similar exhibit mounted at the MOMA by the performance artist Marina Abramovic called *The Artist is Present*.

[17] In the spring of 2010, the MOMA mounted a performative retrospective of Abramovic's work. Videos, photographs, material remains, such as the van in which she toured with her former performance partner, Ulay, were on display. Her past performances were re-performed by other artists throughout the museum space, and in the main lobby of the museum, Abramovic sat in a chair, lit by stage lights and filmed by video cameras, as spectators were asked to line up and take turns sitting in silence in the chair across from her for a duration of their choosing, thus becoming part of a new performance.^v The Artist was indeed "present."

[18] Amelia Jones, who saw the exhibit and took her turn sitting with Abramovic, describes feeling as though she was not participating in a performance, but that, because of the lights, audience, and cameras present, "the experience overall was very strongly one of participating in a spectacle—not an emotionally or energetically charged interpersonal relation, but a simulation of relational exchange with others" (A. Jones: 18). Employing the modernist idea of "presence," Jones describes feeling as

though the exhibit offered a paradox between the material, durational body that occupied the space, and the sense that “presence”—the unmediated state of time and place, self and other that is so often promised and ideologically assured by spaces of exhibition and exchange such as a museum—is itself an impossibility.

[19] Jones’ feeling rests on a political and critical idea that liveness has an ontology of disappearance, as Peggy Phelan has argued (Phelan, 1993). However if one accepts, as Phillip Auslander has persuasively argued, that the live is always already inscribed by the mediated, that the cameras and lights that surround the performance mark it as live (Auslander, 2008), and the videos, photos, and material remains are themselves performative (Auslander, 2006), then this sense of loss begins to slip, questioning the very nature of the liveness that Jones seems to yearn for.^{vi} Without reiterating this discourse, Jones chooses instead to argue that regardless of their relationship, documentation and re-enactment serve to “flatten out or aestheticize the act (precisely by evacuating the act of its original political specificity) and thus reduce or erase the act’s potential for provoking awareness or for transformation or change” (25).

[20] This is interesting compared to *David Bowie is...* because, I would argue, the majority if not all of Bowie’s oeuvre was constructed to be

mediated. He was making records, staging photos and choreographing videos. Even his “live” performances (notably a dance piece he did with la-la-human-steps principal dancer Louise Lecavalier^{vii}) were devised with video display in mind, both during the performance and for later broadcast. David Bowie’s remains were always meant to be the performance. The sense of disorientation that I described above, then, becomes a performance of liveness within the space of the museum. The soundscape that shifts with our movements, the aural jump cuts that we alone experience (no two people are moving alike), can change in an instant and then back again, give us the feeling that we are involved in a live event. Unlike Abramovic, though, Bowie is not present to complicate the inherently modernist space of the museum, and underscore the tension between the museum and performance.

[21] David Bowie’s “presence,” ghosted by displays of his costumes, is what Amelia Jones might describe as the “author function” Bowie (A. Jones: 57). In other words, the discursively constructed “Bowie,” constructed both by the discourse of the exhibit and the museum advertising as well^{viii}, compels us to imagine that we are engaging a post-modern subjectivity, a fractured, displaced self, scattered by mediated iconographies and performances; it is a subjectivity that disrupts gender and racially normative boundaries. But rather, I argue, that like Jackson Pollack before him (rather than Warhol and

Duchamp, as the exhibition suggests), "Bowie" is an entirely modernist, unified construct, one completely, unproblematically, suited for the spectacle of the museum-as-consumption space of the AGO.

As the figure of the artist is defined discursively and self-defined in the high modernist period, he (the artist being explicitly male) represents both an extreme case of modernist desire to unify the subject as a source of intentional meaning and a conduit of divine inspiration (an earthly god among mere mortals), and a subjectivity that attempts to define itself in *opposition to* what is perceived to be mainstream, bourgeois culture. (Jones, 2007:57)

[22] This *tromp l'oeil*, if you will, moves performance from being a problematic event within the material demands of the museum space, to being a reassuring spectacle, one that ends, as does this exhibit, in the gift shop. The real performance, or performer, I should say, is us, the audience, in that we ourselves become performative, or perhaps simply the site of a performance *of* performance. We do not "enliven" the exhibit with our spectatorship, rather, it inscribes us as live performers, as fractured, fluid, nomadic subjects who once (for there is a deep nostalgia in play) stood in opposition to mainstream culture, all the while reassuring us that there is no danger of that being truly so. Perhaps this is also the trap of the simulacrum, as Deleuze suggests. "The simulacrum implies huge dimensions

that the observer cannot master. It is precisely because he cannot master them that he experiences an impression of resemblance [...] and the observer becomes a part of the simulacrum itself, which is transformed and deformed by his point of view" (258).

[23] The exhibit, in short, reproduced the very structures of capitalist mass production and reproduction that Bowie has so successfully exploited. As Jones and Foust write: "Capitalism interpellates consumers as "differentiated and cultivated" individuals who construct unique personalities through the commodities they consume" (7). Bowie was the vehicle, the pretense; we were constructing ourselves, our lives, as art in our very act of walking through the exhibit. Don't forget to buy the t-shirt on your way out.

ⁱ http://www1.toronto.ca/staticfiles/city_of_toronto/economic_development_culture/cultural_services/cultural_affairs/initiatives/files/pdf/brochure_culture_workprint.pdf

ⁱⁱ This was always the Habermasian ideal, which has been significantly critiqued by (Warner 2002) and (Reinelt 2011) to name just two.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.torontodiscoverydistrict.ca/>

^{iv} One wall panel suggested that the year Bowie spent in Berlin was enough to have Brecht "absorbed" by him. But how that happened and what that manifested are left unexplained. Did he see plays, read books, study? Or was being in Berlin all anyone needs to be exposed to Brechtian thought?

^v One of the more interesting remnants of this performance is a YouTube video Ulay's arrival at the exhibit, his tour through some of the objects which once belonged to him (including pictures and videos of his work with her), and his turn sitting before Abramovic, who was clearly unaware that he would be there. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLbFugaFyAA>

^{vi} I suggest that Jones' sense of participating in a spectacle (and perhaps her self-consciousness) is also partially attributable to her lack of experience working with the distractions (audience, lights, cameras) that always, in varying degrees, accompany live performance.

^{vii} http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VEQPvY_uxM The actual "staged" performance starts around the 3 minute mark.

^{viii} <http://www.ago.net/david-bowie-is/>

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