

from SPECIAL AMERICA: A Digitally Mediated Performance in Ten Parts

As presented at Interrupt 3, Granoff Center, Martinos Auditorium, March 12, 2015. Performed by Claire Donato and Jeff T. Johnson. Multimedia slideshow and soundtrack operated and manipulated by Todd Anderson.

V. Who Made You Special America?

(Music: "Myth," by Beach House.)

(CLAIRE sits on edge of stage. JEFF at mic, eyes wandering the crowd.)

CLAIRE

(reflective, self-appraising)

In 2008, in Providence, Rhode Island, I arrived to spend a year in residency at Brown. At the time I was taken by the black box McCormack Family Theater—a house of dreams, darkness surrounding a point of light.

(Music: "Herod 2015" loop via Sunn O))) and Scott Walker.)

JEFF

(extremely mediocre tone: avant-garde in an incredibly naïve sort of way)

Our own house in the aptly named Armory district was cavernous and barren of decor. *(Holds hand mirror before face, reflecting audience.)* Our every move was visible from the street. We had learned to live without heat; neighbors and ghosts cried in the floors and walls, and so did we.

CLAIRE

I was 22 and on my way to becoming an artist. I had grown tired of working with words, and wished to work with more oppressive and overwhelming forms.

JEFF

(lowers and conceals mirror; dawning horror)

It was there, and in the halls of 68 1/2 Brown Street that Special America was conceived. We came to recognize it as as a living, breathing, moderately self-aware organism.

(Music: "Nothin to Win," by YO.B.)

CLAIRE

(lies down on back, writhes)

Our lives had become a senseless driving from the Armory to the Pawtucket Gold's Gym to Whole Foods University Heights and all o'er the icy slopes of College Hill, desperate for an end.

Then we heard The Voice of Le Corbu, who spoke in a stentorian whisper voiced by an operating system: *(voice of Alex) Let that end be architecture, so that no where can be now here.*

(Music: "Providence," by Sonic Youth.)

JEFF

(holds mirror as before; low, distorted, uncanny voice)

One morning, deep in a matrix of meltdowns, I told Claire about a waking nightmare I'd had in which a long, tapering cloud sliced the moon in half, like a razor blade slicing through an eye. Claire immediately told me she'd seen a hand crawling with ants in a dream she'd had the previous night.

CLAIRE

(false hope)

'And what if we started right there and made a new performance administration center, directly across from our wholesome black box family theater?'

JEFF

(lowers mirror as before)

...she wondered aloud. Despite my hesitation, we soon found ourselves hard at work, and in less than a week Special America had a plan for an infernal inversion of McCormack. Where the black box was warm and opaque, the new structure would be cold and transparent, sliced in half and re-joined in a central slippage, the slick surface stained with clouds. In our forthcoming machinations, this cold illusion of transparency would directly appeal to us.

(lowers forehead to mic)

(Music: "It Took the Night to Believe," by SUNN O)))

CLAIRE

(intensifying gothic demeanor)

The catastrophic double, the suicidal version of McCormack, is intended to create a tremor of anxiety, a bifurcated and all-seeing eye staring back at the observer. It was our intention to build a vision of horror that absorbed all passersby, drawing them into its vast, omni-surveillant eye-maw.

CLAIRE AND JEFF

(chanting)

We are watchers and watched, ruminant and cud, a ruptured perspective stranded in ambiguous space, hovering over a glass floor between masticated subjectivity and partially digested objectivity.

JEFF

(gradually tilts mic stand and body to Expressionist angle)

Our nascent fascination with ambiguous political speech resonated with this atrocity exhibition: If poetry aspires to a derangement of the senses, our theater of cruelty could take us to the next circle of hell, and suspend us perpetually on display in this state of disorientation. An architorture...

CLAIRE AND JEFF

(chanting radical crescendo)

A washing machine churning with bloodied garments, a window sewn onto the side of a cow.

JEFF

(swipes mic from stand, gazes upward, at top of voice)

Ah, transparency! Finally the administration would come home to roost in the torn and tangled nest of the arts.

(Music: "Angel" loop via Beyoncé.)

CLAIRE

(measured)

What we are talking about is a very real, carefully sustained collective schizophrenia approaching structural collapse. And lo! It appeared, just as we envisioned it: The very projection of our demonic fantasy.

(Music: "Sugar Daddy" loop via D'Angelo.)

JEFF

(steps to front of stage with calm but assertive rationalist bearing, mic cable in hand)

But let us come back to our current reality, and speak directly to contemporary design needs. We must relate our vision to the economic blueprint of the new enhanced performance academy, using Special America's Brown campus as its premiere model.

CLAIRE

Take initiative, Special America!

JEFF

(awed, mystifying)

Arts initiative, that is: a Global Arts Strategy...

CLAIRE

(incredulous, pleased)

It's literally a GAS!

JEFF

(ominous, controlled whimsy)

If we imagine it, we are obliged to build it. Raise vast performance facilities, and content will fill the vacuum. As Kevin Costner once said, If you build it, they will come...

CLAIRE

(triumphant)

If you rebuild it, they will come again!

(Music: "Tell the Lie" loop via The Body and Thou.)

JEFF

(falls to knees, then onto back)

Any campus building can be an art space, but every regent, every developer, every university CEO knows it takes a big ass new building to really make art sing. Bigger, people, is bigger!

CLAIRE

(assertive, winning)

Art is money and these buildings are fucking expensive! We know how much even the rarest piece of art goes for in the open market, but these buildings are post-economy, literally invaluable. Indeed, these buildings *are* art.

VI. See Through the GAS, Special America

(Music: "The Line" loop via Jose Gonzalez.)

JEFF

(pedantic)

SPECIAL AMERICA's enhanced performance art initiative, GAS, is too idiosyncratic and controversial ever to be initiated by socially responsible institutions. That's why entrepreneurs have stepped in to fill out the spreadsheets and get things cooking!

CLAIRE

(unctuous)

We see through the GAS! Like a center split in two, section drawn into plan, sutured together with slippage [*JEFF clap and slip gesture*], as a glass sandwich made askew, we are transparent, surveilled and surveilling. We see what we are doing and are very impressed!

(Music: "123 400 Lux Beat (Sia Meets Lorde)")

JEFF

But let's hear from the experts, all-seeing architects and administrators who design the to-come —their words make our world. Here's just a sample of those language materials: The stuff our future is made of, the big ideas that make even bigger buildings.

(Music: "Blue Money" loop via New Order.)

(CLAIRE and JEFF trade lines at mics in formal, exaggerated lyric poetry reading style)

This is an ethical center as much as an arts center.

It's an orientation to peace!

Explicit and transparent

A steep grand stair,

Internally illuminated balustrades

With a geometric lattice

Cascading to the ground floor

A fluid language that moves up

A second skin

Morphosis-covered sections with acoustic paneling

A geometric lattice made from glass-fiber reinforced gypsum

... because we're at the very edge of credibility!