

"REVISITING THE PAST: THE SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA  
IN CHARLESTON SOUTH CAROLINA"

**Mary Jane Jacob**

For me, as a curator, the process of exhibition-making is one of locating questions that define the aims of an exhibition as an artistic and social enterprise. These aims guide the curatorial process, inform and are informed by the artist's concepts, effecting the production of works to be shown emerging in the form of exhibition. In the end, the exhibition re-presents questions, though not necessarily answers to them, articulating these questions in both the art related programs for the consideration of audiences.

I would like to illustrate this process through a series of curatorial engagements in Charleston, South Carolina, a southeastern U.S. coastal city founded as a global center of trade since the late 1600s with the dubious distinction of also being the North American capital of slavery. But to begin, 1991 in Charleston I staged a site-specific exhibition entitled "Places with a Past." Its driving question was: "What histories are missing and how can them be represented?" Creating installations in abandoned and reclaimed historic locations, it resulted in the insertion of African-American stories into the standard image of history. Such now-celebrated international artists as Antony Gormley, Ann Hamilton, David Hammons, Lorna Simpson, among others were included.

But my focus here is on returning ten years later to the city of Charleston-revisiting the "past"- and seeking a deeper path of inquiry into this place through a three-year process entitled "Evoking History". For a long time during the first year, the form of this program was undetermined, purposefully, as we listened to the local community and our contemporary art and criticism field in order to build a foundation of clear aims: why were we undertaking an exhibition her, now? Together with co-curatrir Tumelo Mosaka of South Africa, we sought out individuals in different walks of life in Charleston who had a *stake* in the past, who saw its relevance to social issues in the present, who cared about a healthy world for future generations, and who believed contemporary art and artists could play a part in this work.

Year I of "evoking History" was subtitled "Listening Across Cultures and Communities." We focused on the question: Why are there no monuments to "the middle Passage", the historic slave journey across the ocean, and to African-American history in Charleston? This common platform allowed us to investigate the implications of this subject in intersecting realms ranging from personal family histories to Southern politics, from local to global identity issues, form public art to museum display. We commissioned three major projects, each led by an artist

from a different discipline (theater, literature and photography) who practice their craft in an “expended” way, crossing artistic genre and bringing others into the making as a collaborative venture. They were:

*Secret Histories*: an original play by noted theater director/choreographer Ping Chong and playwright Talvin Wilks in which five women powerfully told their personal stories and encounters with racism (see illustration);

*Rehearsing The Past*: a series of site-specific installations, workshops, and community gatherings coordinated by writer Neill Bogan exploring the nature of public monuments (see illustration); and

*The Heritage Garden Project*: by artist and educator Lonnie Graham, consisted of an educational garden based on African sources at an elementary school (see illustration) and the first public designation of a slave cemetery at Drayton Hall Plantation through the placing of permanent sculptural grave markers based on African burial sources.

Importantly, during this year we also initiated a series of “Stakeholder Forums” designed to identify questions for local and national constituencies—multiple publics— and create a means by which persons might talk across professional, social, and class barriers that conventionally limit discourse. From the outside, our aim as curators was to locate the potential relationship between their issues and current modes of international contemporary artmaking; from the inside, the aims of members of local communities was to find validation for their concerns, linking them to parallel issues elsewhere that could inform their thinking; and to seek resolution of these issues through representation and action. This discursive process became fundamental to the artists creative processes, too, as community members to and directly participated in the creation of the content and production of the works.

In a place like Charleston, where painful histories are submerged, to remember and to articulate memories can be an act of political resistance. So, as “listening” turned to “speaking”. Our curatorial process provoked thoughts and began a process of change— initially on a personal level. As one stakeholder Kendra Hamilton wrote six months later: “This experience seems to have completely healed the wounds that I’ve been carrying around in my heart from growing up in that sick and seductive city since childhood. When I return to Charleston now, to visit my family or do research, it’s without that dull ache that used to start throbbing as soon as the pine barrens gave way to the flats surrounding the city. That is a gift ‘Evoking History’ has given me”.

Now in 2002, for year II of “Evoking History”, our focus questions is: what is the nature of our social ecology, and how are ostensibly opposite identities actually interdependent and how can they be mutually beneficial? Outsider and insider, black and white, north or south, local and global, here and there, art and life— these are all concepts that become pitted against each other, but both have a place and are, in fact defined by the other. Our project takes the form of a public art program, itself built around two opposing but deeply connected realms: water and land. “The Memory of Water” is an exhibition of works by six artists, all from *outside* Charleston yet whose work resonates with the

meaning *inside* this place. “The Memory of Land” is a program of documentation and display, speakers series symposia, and a youth training and employment program.

The artworks being created for “The Memory of the Water” are:

*Spacewalk* by Yinka Shonibare (England-Nigeria), located in a former church, re-envision the American pioneer spirit by outfitting astronauts, modern-day colonizers, in his trademark batik cloth, Indonesian in origin but, through colonial passage, became identified as “African cloth”. He aims to raise aspirations by suggesting African-Americans in the protagonist role of explorer.

*Cottage Industry* by J. Morgan Puett (U.S) is a working home-factory where visitors see a multi-class garment in production which brings together missing social histories. While its imagery has Southern roots, it transgresses place and time, evoking textile industries as a continuing site of enslavement.

*Remembered Names* by Kim Sooja (South Korea) transforms America’s greatest Palladian home, Drayton Hall, into a meditation on the past, by placing in each of four like-rooms a carpet bearing the names of slaves. In a companion work, a *Lighthouse Woman*, she transforms the Morris Island into a memorial; this shaft of light and sound rises from land now reclaimed by the sea but famous for the battle fought there by the African-American 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment.

*Fortress* by Nari Ward (Jamaica) is an enormous recycled-glass greenhouse containing a group of gestating concrete-and-iron palmettos. A symbol of defense and resistance, the palmetto is on the state flag and insignia of the Citadel. Ward’s trees reveal their life cycle, as do the words recorded on the glass enclosure which recall everyday life in the African-American community formerly occupying its site. Thus, these trees are a symbol of resistance against erasure of history through gentrification.

*Caravella* by Marc Latamie (Martinique) looks to the historical trafficking of food products and cultural association’s food accrue along commercial routes. Taking the form of a corner store, between the port and the city, it reveals the intertwined identities of this place and the Caribbean. At Middleton Place a new dish on the menu will reflect Martinique tastes.

*Middle Passage* by KCHO (Cuba). He uses his signature imagery of boats to evoke a collective voyage through time by layering references from his own land and here. The site for his work, Sullivan’s Island, is the historic yet unrecognized landing point of African slave ships over three centuries.

“The Memory of Land” program features:

*Exchanging Histories*, a speaker’s series in which individuals from different walks of life will share their experiences with visitors, enriching the experience the artist’s installations.

*The Borough*, sited in a typical small white single house from just after the Civil War- one of only two surviving structures from the former African-American waterfront neighborhood of Ansonborough (popularly called “The Borough”)- will be transformed into a community meeting place filled with family histories of past residents. Visitors will be invited to drop-in and listen to taped recollections, hear discussions, and participate in other events.

*Youth Fellows Program* will, for the first time offer fifteen high school juniors and seniors the opportunity to learn about cultural arts-and-education professions from a critical perspective. Then they will be employed as interpreters at exhibition sites and will serve as interlocutors with local community persons for the *Exchanging Histories* program, participating in the dynamic unfolding of the elder community member’s story. To conclude their training experience and our own investigation of the changing field of curatorial-community practice, Youth Fellows, teachers, local stakeholders, and national arts professionals will join in a symposium to reflect upon the meaning of these artwork’s and public experiences.

As the “Evoking History” program has taken shape through an investigation of the city’s contested history and the crucial issues challenging communities in the region today, we are often brought back to the fact of glaring disparities in the South Carolina public educational system. Thus, in “Evoking History” in 2003, we will plan to look at the possible intersection between the appalling state of local education and the current desire for display of slavery within museum and tourism sites.<sup>2</sup> How these social subjects relate and how artists can participate through their work, even contribute to sustainable futures, is the path of our next year’s research.

The questions which I consider and contemplate as a curator-and into which I bring artists and audiences- also aim to inform our professional practices. I view my work as having two parts: the art and the articulation. Art, of course, is the creative work of artists. As curators commissioning new works, we seek to be creative in our exchanges with artists during the process; the public participates in a creative act during the experiencing of the artwork. Yet only the artist makes the articulation. This can take the form of participatory activities, educational programs, and embedded gestures that make the work of art live in its context and be enriched by the perceptions evoked by it- now and for the future. This is what we are experimenting with and seek to achieve in “*The Memory of Land*”. In this aspect, members of the audience- the public- are specially valued partners because they bring other knowledge and perceptions to the art experience. They enlarge the artist’s work and our own.

The cultural critic Lewis Hyde has compared the artist’s role to that of the trickster, the legendary *boundary-crosser*, the coyote<sup>3</sup>. The trickster is the “joint-worker” who shifts the joints or workings of society. Hyde establishes this link etymologically through a lineage of words with the ancient root\*-ar; from the Latin *articulus*. He assembles a large group of related terms whose original meaning encompassed “to join”, “to fit”, “to make”. Artisan is an \*-ar word meaning a joiner or maker of things. The Latin noun *ars* from the same root means *arts* or

*work of art*. Also from the same root comes *articulate* which meant joining bones together or, in today's usage, words well-joined or the "joint-worker" who shifts the joints or workings of society. Hyde writes: "the possibility of playing with the joints of creation [is] the possibility of art".- Thus , the artist or trickster –artist does this by "changing the manner in which nature, community, and spirit are joined to one another", shifting patterns in relation to one another: dismantling the hierarchy, de-centering it, and making evident the divisions or joints of society. The trickster-artist may play and even more critical role in keeping those lines or joints flexible, porous and receptive to change, rearticulating, or, occupying a place between polarities, suggests Hyde. Finally, the trickster-artist can articulate and bridge differences, such as in polycultural situations in society. It is here that the trickster works, not to unify and resolve the differences as much as to meditate them, to serve as the translator where a lack of communication is.

Artists can mediate and translate between worlds- of audiences and within communities. For those of us who value the place of audience in art and in the practice of exhibitions, this role of artists-and art- has value. Art *evokes* the possibility of change in the culture. Through exhibitions, we can also aspire to shift ideas and work the joints of both "what is art?" and "what is the place of community in art?" It is here that I aspire to be a trickster-curator.

<sup>1</sup> See Mary Jane Jacob, *places with a Past: New Site-Specific Art at Charleston's Spoleto festival* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991)

<sup>2</sup> Ira Berlin wrote: "There is a recognition that American racism was founded in slavery, and a general, if chocolate, understanding that any attempt to address race in the present must also address slavery in the past... In slavery, Americans have found a voice to address some of the deepest hurts and the depressing reality of how much life- jobs, housing, schools; access to medical care, to justice and even to a taxi- is controlled by race" (Ira Berlin, "Overcome by Slavery", New York Times, July 13, 2001, p.A19).

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes this World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: North Point Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998)