

# Momus

## Performance Art Blows Open the Prairies, in “Stages”

2017-09-14 10:09:42 Mitch Speed

Midway through the rooftop opening for *Stages: Drawing the Curtain* – a show of public art at Winnipeg’s Plug-In Centre – I look through a thicket of summer-clad bodies, and notice a teenager reading a book called *How to Rap*. It was charming, this strangely bookish search for sub-cultural identity; but what made the scene memorable was the youth’s comfort in undertaking this research at a contemporary art opening. This was, evidently, an event leavened by conviviality, encouraging people to shed their armor donned as a defense against the cultural elite. All efforts at geniality have certain structural limitations, of course: fraught relationships across lines of prejudice and disadvantage are not easily healed. With that unfortunate caveat observed, *Stages* did very well in its attempt to dissolve this field’s notorious pretension into good communal faith.

The task was made a little easier by clouds of artificial smoke and drag-queen serenades, that night. These had been orchestrated by the artist Abbas Akhavan, who more than once received the question: “does Winnipeg really have a drag scene?” (The answer was a tickled “yes.”) And it was for this scene, along with the larger, sundry populace of which it is a part, that *Stages* performed. Subject to contingencies, the results were limited but heartening. Winnipeg is a modestly-scaled city, deposited in a tremendous expanse of colonized farmland. This August, the city’s downtown felt thin: emptied by both big-box commerce, and late-summer lake vacations. Strangely, though, the quiet only seemed to amplify the show’s protean function: investing so many half-alive urban spaces with non-conforming life and enveloping color.



Abbas Akhavan, “Variations on a Monument,” 2017. Image Courtesy Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art and the artist.

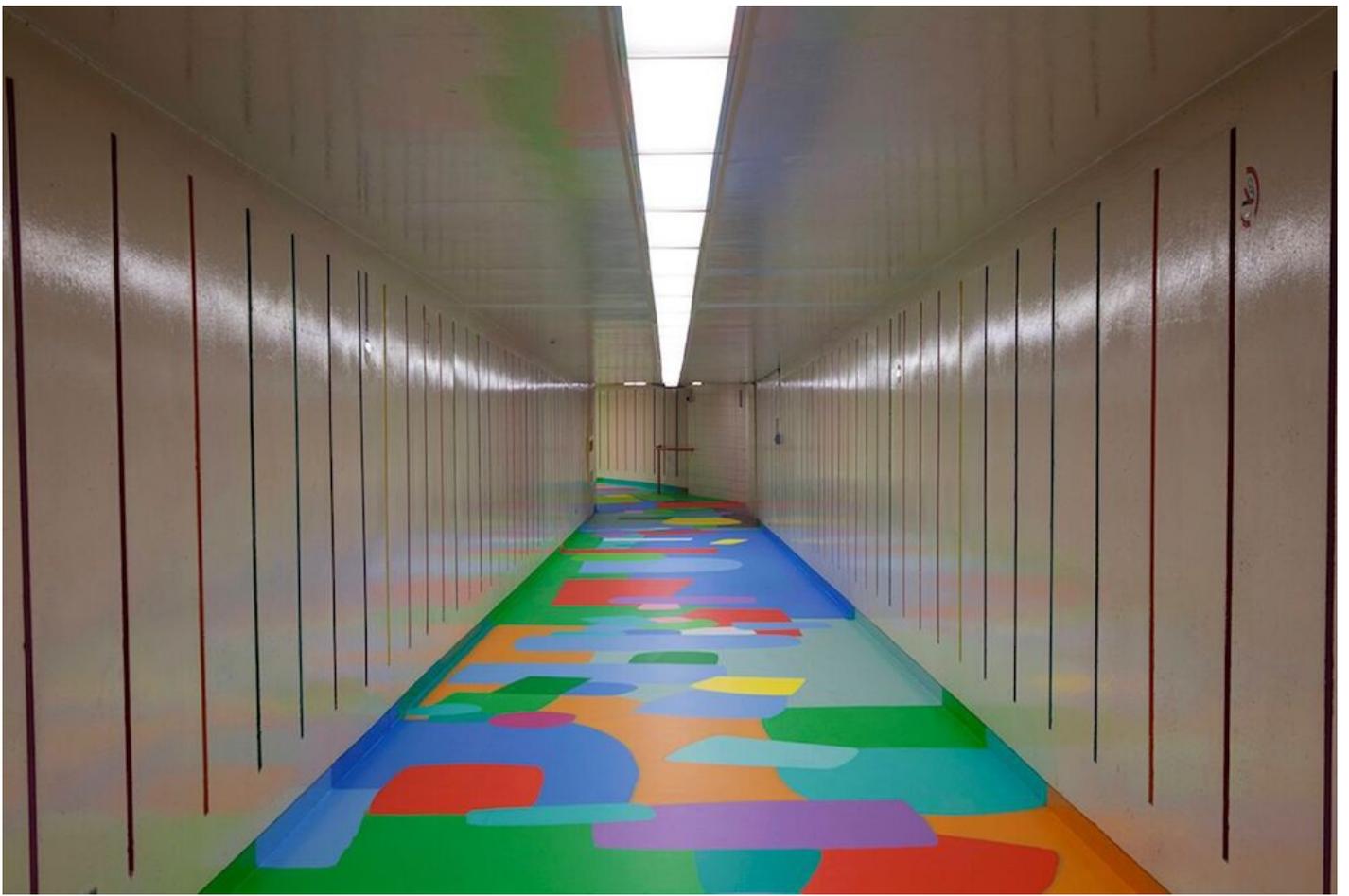
All cities conduct meaning, provided an artist can pick up their fugitive signals. On several subsequent evenings, Akhavan did just this. With his *Variations on a Monument* (2017) – which, as with every piece in *Stages* (featuring nine artists across ten venues), was a work made for this occasion – queens ascended a decommissioned monument plinth, within a concrete pond in a disused park. Licked and swathed by dry ice, the performers pantomimed whipping ballads. Akhavan’s coupling of gesture and history was deft, both touching and elusive. His chosen site had once been a a furtive pick-up zone, for Winnipeg’s gay community, and his performance-over-pond format was cribbed from Iranian custom. Here, the throttling conservatism of North American public space shattered into twilight.

In her introduction to *Stages*, curator Jenifer Pappararo rightly observes that “it is implausible to sum up the aims of the exhibition and the artists within it.” For this reason, there’s a usefulness in the show’s decidedly generic title. Rather than imposing an ego-driven curatorial conceit, *Stages* simply opened the city so that conventional uses of the public space could be momentarily decommissioned and rejigged. And so, when the artists drew Winnipeg’s latent histories and phantasms into new magic, the actions were weighted less by institutional imperative than personal investment.

However, while there is a utopian intonation to this description, certain works pursued the city’s deeply shadowed recesses, forming hopeful inroads via the past, through decidedly painful byways. Among these was Krista Belle Stewart’s *Potato Gardens Band* (2017) at the once-grand and now partially-defunct Hudson’s Bay department store: a syrupy icon of white Canadian identity, structurally fused with Canada’s original, genocidal sin. Dominant in the fur trade, the company ravaged North America’s Indigenous communities. Stewart, having recently made a film about her mother’s journey from the equally-criminal residential school system to a career in nursing, used this edifice to host a kind of intergenerational collaboration. In the building’s dark basement, a downward facing, floodlit speaker breathed droning music into the concrete-slab floor: Stewart’s departed great-grandmother, as recorded by anthropologist James Alexander Teit. Days after I left the city, the artist was joined by two collaborators – Jeneen Frei Njootli and Laura Ortman. Respectively, the three played a contact microphones stirred in a bucket of dirt extracted from the artist’s Douglas Lake home, a caribou antler dragged and abraded, and a violin. Like an attenuated storm, the resultant audio suggests lost labor, and Indigenous and European cultures meeting in some zone between music and nature: not literally or romantically, but soberly haunting, as befits the work’s impossible coupling of beauty and hell.

Even buildings as historically-charged as the Hudson’s Bay Co. exist on multiple experiential strata. To an outsider, the dying department store has an Overlook Hotel spookiness about it. Tori Johannessen leveraged this effect into an installation of audio and found material, which transformed the building’s third floor into a participatory, science-fictional theater. Above viewers’ heads, a radio play speculated on the future of the human eye. Wandering the space, looking at discarded furniture, and feeling the stick of glue left by a recently removed carpet, a person might rightfully imagine vision evolving to cope with an urban somatic deadness wrought by suburban flight, outsourcing, and various other trappings of late capitalism.

Which brings up a thorny point: irrespective of any individual work’s merit, this inhabitation of blighted urban space has become a familiar strategy. For good reason, it sometimes leaves locals rankled. The technique drapes whatever objects happen to be in the room with an eerie post-apocalyptic aura – backed by all-too-real, post-industrial conditions. The problem is that this technique tends to presage high-ticket development. Consider *Berlin Biennale 6* (2010), whose romantically crumbling central venue has just reopened as a luxury hotel. Closer to home, Saskatoon’s former Hudson’s Bay building has already been transformed into upmarket condos. And so *Stages*’s use of The Bay’s building becomes an admonition: low-income residents of Winnipeg might want to watch out.



Federico Herrero, "Landscape," 2017. Image by Karen Asher.

For this reason, I developed a taste for more humble work: the pieces illuminating banal quarters of the city, or throwing strange echoes into curious, but un-imperiled locations. Federico Herrero's *Landscape* (2017) was a mural that exceeded the limitation of murals, coating the walls, ceiling, and floor of a long pedestrian underpass in painted color: stretches of yellow broken by lily-pod patches of blue, green, and orange, and oblong collages made from every hue. It's as simple as it sounds. But the gray cityscape above gave the work a warming consequence: when the buckling prairie winter comes down, this effect will be multiple.

Kara Hamilton lent the cliché of "imposing stone monument" a human disposition far more complex than the solemn jingoism typically innate to such objects. Her *Curtain Wall* (2017) was a limestone rampart, built in another lonely park (there are more than a few around) ascending from the Assiniboine River. Two almond hollows gestured towards the gift of sight. But the sculpture's regal perspective over the river – redolent with the awful power of white settler fortifications – could only be activated by the eyes of a heterogeneous public. Cleverly, the work hit a nerve between my funny-bone and my (perhaps too) proudly politicized spine.



Kara Hamilton, "Curtain Wall," 2017. Image by Karen Asher.

While international art festivals always grapple with an outsider/local dynamic, *Stages's* remoteness from Major Art Centers presented specific challenges. The site of Ron Tran's *Ashes Under the Hill/Let Our Hands Grow to Hold What We Love* (2017), for example, seemed newly curious to me, after having spent ten years living away from my prairie hometown. Called "The Forks," it presents a municipal amenity split between public market and tourist attraction: a confusing, but pleasant, combination of old-world nostalgia, and the cosmopolitan utopia of multi-ethnic food courts.

For years, Tran trafficked in a subtly affecting type of performance sculpture. Like a less hetero-aggressive cousin to Vito Acconci, he once sat for hours in a fast-food joint, lonesomely mimicking his fellow patrons. So The Forks – a public location, where modern loneliness is soothed with collective shopping and eating – is a weirdly appropriate place for Tran to be. In a crescent of shrubs, he'd erected several billboard-like signs, collaged from Canadian products of decades gone by. Inspired by research into a former landfill repurposed into a public park, the piece winkingly recalled the hidden reservoirs of material refuse that accumulate in the back-channels of sanitized urban consumer experience, like that furnished by The Forks itself.

As I prepared to leave, a regret set in about missing *Stages's* most elusive piece, a glowing "Om" symbol fixed to a truck trailer by Divya Mehra: the show's only local artist. My remorse twisted with pre-flight anxiety on the way to the airport, when the symbol suddenly appeared: an eight-foot-tall glowing red circle, emblazoned with Hindu cursive, careening across an industrial intersection, and throwing up a wake of arid dust. I felt better immediately. Mehra's conceit had been to draw the western appropriation of eastern religion to its absurd consumerist conclusion. It was a meaning both obvious and acridly funny. But oddly enough, in this moment, the Om also *worked*.

Short-circuiting commodified relationships with complex cultural forms – not to mention malignant nostalgia and historical amnesia – pieces like Mehra's and Tran's held percipient edges. But I had to wonder if this edge might disappear, in the eyes of a public not on the lookout for such coded gestures. Though perhaps this is simply the inherent vice of contemporary public art. It's an abstruse language of layered meaning and double intentions. *Stages* navigated this terrain deftly, with an incisive – though hardly condescending – wit.