

TRANSCRIPT

Hear, Now
Episode Five

Something
Necessary
and Useful

A Podcast from Whitechapel Gallery

JS: Hello, and welcome to Hear, Now, a Whitechapel Gallery podcast that delves into the stories behind the exhibitions on view at the gallery here in the heart of East London. Each episode invites a curator to be in conversation with artists, collaborators and other thinkers about the works and themes explored in the displays, giving us special access to the ideas that shape the artworks.

My name is Jane Scarth, curator of public programmes, introducing you to today's episode featuring curator Emily Butler in conversation with artist Carlos Bunga in the context of his first major UK commission, Something Necessary and Useful. Here they discuss Bunga's monumental sculptures made from everyday materials, the American Shaker movement and the relationship between bodies, physical space and time.

This exhibition was on display in Gallery Two from 21 January to 13 September 2020.

EB: My name's Emily Butler, and I'm a curator at the Whitechapel Gallery. I'm delighted to be in conversation with Portuguese artist, Carlos Bunga, over Zoom just after the close of his first major UK commission at Whitechapel Gallery.

Carlos Bunga was born in Porto in 1976 and his work speaks of his family's experience of displacement having emigrated to Portugal as a result of the Angolan civil war. He creates remarkable works that explore cycles of construction and destruction, mutating cities and our bodily relation to different architectures.

For his installation at the gallery, he produced a monumental building that filled the space of Gallery Two, made entirely of card and tape. Gallery Two is

where we host our Commissions programme which is a prestigious series of site-specific works by leading international artists that responds to the architecture and history of the Whitechapel and unfold over the duration of several months. Carlos Bunga created here an imaginary space in two parts, painted two different colours. The white side painted the same colour as the space as towering columns seem also to mirror the existing Victorian architecture, and the other side was painted a kind of pastel blue-green, a colour reminiscent of the external household paints of his native Portugal.

It was a large curved area that created a nave-like corridor in the centre of the space. Colour is important to Bunga as he initially trained as a painter. The installation was also filled with items necessary for everyday life, for example, chairs, furniture, tools, and objects that were simply placed but were presented by the artist in an unusual way. They were painted or hung, sometimes upturned on a giant peg rail that encircled the space.

Bunga is renowned for large-scale architectural interventions made in card. They are imaginary architectures in the sense that he sees his work as a projection of ideas of a possible future whilst also referring to an existing past, the fabric of a building and in our case also vintage furniture and domestic objects. He invites the viewers on this journey as forming the link between past and future as they inhabit it in the present. His installations are emotive. The relation to the body is very important. He makes all the structures by hand to the scale of his own body. As a viewer, we're impressed by different scales and also the tactile relatable simple nature of the material he uses.

So Carlos, can you tell us what the source of inspiration was for the Whitechapel commission and how this relates to your interest in the relationship of architecture and the body?

CB: Yes. Two years ago, I travelled to London for the first time to visit the gallery. That first trip was very inspiring for me. The gallery was not like a white cube, and I feel a lot of stories and memory in that space. I feel that that space, you know, has these...I try to imagine the tables, the chairs and also bodies reading and studying in that space, and I feel it was a place full of ghosts.

I talk about ghosts because that helped me a lot to think about the project, that helped me to connect the body, us with the memory and absence. I think that it also inspired me a lot to walk also around the neighbourhood and see and feel the generation of immigrants from different parts of the world, and artisans, the small markets that still exist contrasts with the big gentrification that formed the whole area, that was so important also for the concept of the project. And that gentrification for me means lost stories and to write a new story, you know?

I really think for me the cities are a kind of big model that can be manipulated, and I really think we live in a very ruined and exiled society.

EB: And can you talk a little bit about this idea of contrast, because you've talked about your structure almost being in two parts and you're talking about it, reflecting a little bit what's going on outside the building, so the contrast between...

CB: Yes, I think when I walk outside, the neighbourhood for me was very impressive, what I saw there. I feel the

gentrification is so aggressive in some points. And in the other side, where we have the gallery, the neighbourhood is the old story in some points, it's the new and the old story. And these two contrasts helped me a lot to think in the project and I decided to make two buildings, two constructions inside of the gallery, and with that I tried to bring that energy, that tension inside of the gallery, because I really wanted this project to be a mirror of what's happening outside.

EB: And you also made an interesting short video performance piece as a result of your commission here at the gallery, which is called Domestic Revolution, where you walked all the way around the neighbourhood, around the Whitechapel, and in a way that video also captures these contrasts and this gentrification in the neighbouring area.

Carlos, I wanted to ask you, you often work with card and tape, and I wanted for you to explain what interests you in working with these very immediate and everyday materials?

CB: I'm very interested in using materials that connect us with life. I really think that material, the cardboard, is something that comes from the real world in some points, very simple, banal, it's very easy to find it. I think it's a material that is at some points part of our lives, you know? And for me, when I've been in university and I started painting, and I'm very frustrated with my paintings and then I started to also look for the old buildings and the buildings who collapsed, and for me, I was a little bit frustrated, tried to create that situation of demolition or the situation of all the buildings in a real place. And because of that, I started to use very easy material like cardboard, plastic, papers, because it was very easy to manipulate it and with that, I feel that with

the very simple gesture, with this simple material cardboard, we can create a new world and I can make a kind of metaphor of that fragility that I found in that space outside in some points.

EB: So you were saying how, for example, you're bringing a ready-made object outside into real life and it disappears, but on the other hand, there's this idea of the urban landscape in itself being like a ready-made, and so what you're trying to do in your practice is to bring this back into the gallery space, and trying to capture this transience, then the shifting urban landscape in your installations?

CB: Yes, I think I tried to bring to the inside of this space, this concept, but in a very abstract way. My idea had never been to make a representation about the reality. Mine is more to take care about the concepts, memory, time, space. All these concepts for me was very interesting to work with and to bring to the space and my installations actually always you can feel that they always present this kind of abstraction in a very personal way. I'm not interested to make these very precise windows, doors, it's really more in a very abstract that when you see you can feel that, but it was not like a representation from reality, it's more like a suggestion about that space. Really my work I really think talks a lot about concepts, trying to bring those energies, but never trying to make a representation or copy of the reality.

EB: The installation is called Something Necessary and Useful, and it's drawn from a quote by the Shaker community, which was a 19th Century US community that lives simply, and they were precursors, in a way, of minimalist furniture and interior design, and one of their maxims was famously 'don't make anything unless it's

both necessary and useful, and if it is, don't hesitate to make it beautiful'. I understand you were drawn to the idea of stripping architecture and objects and things to their most essential form, questioning what is important, but as we were saying just now, it's almost about this idea of projecting a possibility into them, so the Shakers projected their faith for example into their beautifully crafted objects. You talk about your installations as referring to a possible future. Can you tell us a little bit more about your interest in the Shakers for the Whitechapel Gallery?

CB: In Whitechapel public library, there used to be tables and chairs, and that is why at some point when I saw and I felt that sensation in the space, I placed domestic objects and tools around the peg rail that frames the physical space of the show. I want to bring to the project this idea that you are always inside of the house.

And the Shakers used the peg rail to hang tools, objects and also furniture like chairs to transform the space depending on their needs and for me it was so beautiful that Shakers used that space, and used that for many different ways, from simple prayer, dance, eat and others. I really think the Shaker community was very advanced for their period because they also have these advanced notions of gender and racial equality. I love the idea that Shakers were farmers, built their own houses, made their own tools and furniture, and followed always these principles of utility and simplicity. They are precursors of minimalist furniture and interior design if it was necessary and useful, and beauty.

I really feel close to this idea of stripping the architecture and objects and things to their most essential form, because you know what is important in

life in some points. It was a community that lived in a very simple way, and also I'm interested in the idea of when they made the objects they used their hands. I think to use their hands to create something is part of our essence, the sense of the humanity in some points. I think to use hands makes it possible to create beauty using imagination and dreaming.

EB: As you were mentioning now your interest in the Shaker community's approach to what's handmade, it's something that's a central part of your work, this idea of making the work, something that you make deliberately apparent, the relationship to your body, so when we installed the exhibition, the public was very welcome to walk through this space and to witness it. In the past, you've even demolished your work as a performative action. For our catalogue, for example, we documented through the time-lapse images, the whole of the installation process, which tracks the labour and the physical reality behind making the work. The installations themselves are very tactile and very physically inviting and I think that was something that really struck the audience when they came back to see the installation after lockdown as you were talking about the Shakers' approach to making beautifully crafted objects.

How do you see your personal bodily relationship with the process of making your work?

CB: In my work, the process is really, really important. Always for me, the process is to be present in the creative process. Also, I think the creative process is a mix of emotions, I think we don't have answers to many of the questions that we have in the process. I really think if we are more conscious about the process of things, the perception of the objects will be totally

different because that conscience about the process changes how we look for the reality, you know? And in a society where we don't think too much about where the objects come from, I think we have some problems, and I really believe how I work with my installations and in my studio is to put a real strong emphasis in the process.

For this show, for example, and for the first time, the installation process was open to the public. That was in a very personal way. I never did that, but for me it was very important this project in Whitechapel talking about Shakers but also about the process. Open the process to the public, it's a very generous attitude, I think, that the people can see something happen in the space. I really want to bring the visitor the possibility to follow the process since the very beginning, so different bodies interact with the installation, the audience circulation, the technicians, the curators, the dancers, and also myself, everybody in the installation, everybody's there in this ecosystem all together.

Regarding the installation, there are no previous drawings. That is very important to say. I don't work with the previous drawings. What I have is the concept in some points, because that is important to travel for the first time to make the first visit and after that I try to understand the space. What exists is the concept and some ideas. In this recent space, I make most of the decisions, the space is my studio, it's a kind of laboratory and it's an exhibition space. I'm interested that it is an open process in permanent dialogue with the story and the memory of the place. I think it's a kind of temporal process.

The building where I'm going to perform the intervention is a kind of past, the installation is kind of a

projection of the future, and the present is our body when we go to this space.

EB: So whilst there's a conceptual rigour and ideas as you approach the exhibition, there's a real spontaneity, which is also somewhat of a physical spontaneity when you come to realise the exhibition. I suppose talking about changing things and obstacles, I want to talk about how the fact that the exhibition was in a space for normally six months, but during three months of this it was actually closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. I mention this as it affects the initial aims of the project and it's changed a little bit how the project unfolded. The initial idea was that you wanted to challenge the idea of an exhibition being fixed in space and time, you wanted to come back to the space to cut it and change it and you also wanted to invite dancers to respond to the structure before and after its transformations.

Unfortunately, because of quarantine rules, you were unable to come back to the Whitechapel Gallery. Can you talk us through how you adapted your way of working or rethought certain ideas around shifting the physicality of the exhibition and thinking about the dancers' response to it because of the COVID pandemic and can you explain how we proceeded to change it without you being physically present?

CB: That is a very great question and put me to think in time, the moment when came this pandemic situation I did this process with the idea to transform almost three times the installation. I wanted this project to be transformed over the course of several months. I wanted to this work to give us the feeling that it was alive. That is in some point what I was dreaming with this project in the beginning, that this installation was

not something that we're opening and then finishing at the end of the exhibition, but it's something that will be in all these months, six months, I think, to be in the process of the installation.

During the COVID-19, which was a totally unexpected situation for all of us, we're more or less under house arrest. So the house became a kind of prison, and at the same time the city was a ghost. In this, for me it was very contrary, the sensations that I've been feeling with this pandemic, when I returned to my house because I thought the domestic space...and the gallery was being closed for several months, and it was empty because of the lockdown, while our houses were more occupied than ever. For me, it was very...in the first moment, a kind of frustration but in another way, it was a situation that put me to make a lot of questions, and one of the questions that for me came to my mind was, well, that means also one opportunity to think, you know, a new step to this project.

And after months confined and reflecting on the situation, I decided to make a performance replacing my body with a dancer. That was what I was thinking. It was the first time that the work was constructed without me being present in the space.

EB: So it was a kind of a big conceptual shift, I suppose, in your practice, and in practical terms, what happened was that you sent us some instructions to cut the installation although you weren't present, and you sent some instructions for a dancer to perform and a filmmaker to record the dance performance, which we're making into a video work. And I suppose there was a whole new direction generally in your work for the Whitechapel Gallery commission which was to work closely with other bodies in inviting other dancers to

respond to the work, so choreographer, Joe Moran, was invited to make a dance commission during the course of it. Also, unfortunately because of the lockdown, we weren't able to host the performance that he'd rehearsed, but it was recorded just before the exhibition came to an end behind closed doors. It was recorded for camera and will be released as a film. And as you just mentioned, you were unable to travel back so you invited dancer, Dane Hurst, to participate with the technicians to cut the installation, and this was also filmed behind closed doors and will be made into a work.

Can you talk a bit more about your interest in working with dancers, and how their performances are now also part of the legacy of the project that exists both as a kind of memory, a physical memory by them, and also as a kind of memory in the sense of being a filmed performance?

CB: Yes, in my process, my body, because I make myself always present in the process, also in the museum I start to look for the public, how the public walk around this environment of installations, and I feel that the public start to dance in a very conscious way, and that was a very magic moment to have that sensation. Then in a very natural way, I start to try to work with the dancers because I want to bring a very strong way this concept about movement, body and space and architecture.

EB: And something that really interested you was this idea of the bodily relation to space, challenging the idea of architecture, objects or an exhibition itself being permanent. You wanted to highlight how things change, how things are lost, and you were talking about revealing past energies, you were talking about the

term ghosts, for example. After you cut the installation with Dane Hurst, you left the initial traces or the foundations of the initial columns visible. And you've also talked about referring to the history of the building where you make your installations.

So in a way, I suppose everything did change in the installation but perhaps not initially in the way that you had planned it?

CB: It was a very strange situation for me and sensation, but I really believe when we work to be a kind of open mind process, that means that you need to accept the unpredictable, you know, you need to be open to accept these new situations that can happen in the process, and then you need to adapt your feelings, your sensations to these new situations. I think these bring a new challenge, put you in a different step, and for me, always I try to look for these new situations like a new challenge, and that is amazing because if it didn't come this pandemic situation, I will for sure come to London, make by myself and this situation that happened now will not happen, and for me that is a very positive situation because I feel very happy that this happened and bring a new energy. For me, it was very surprising in a very good way at some point.

Also then we have the documentation that we are editing the video, but without a doubt the people who were able to physically be in the space are privileged ones in my point of view because documentation can never, I think, replace the physical experience of the place, of the moment, because it was not only a question of to see the one image, it's a question of to feel and to have sensations in that space and in that moment. That makes a very big difference when, for example, when we are in the quarantine and you have

to use the Zoom online, it's a big change and I really think how much more goes the technology, how much the technology advanced and internet then, the more nostalgic we will be, because I really think we need to touch, to have this physical experience. It's part of our nature.

It looks interesting to me and I'm glad that we are documenting all the events and I think that is important, but without a doubt that documentation will always be always a document in a fragmented state where there is almost always something that was missing in that documentation.

These absences have become another ghost that can inhabit the walls of Whitechapel Gallery and be in our memories at some point.

EB: So we were delighted to host the exhibition, Carlos, and thank you so much for our conversation today.

CB: Thank you so much.

JS: Thanks for listening to this episode of Hear, Now. You can find all of our other episodes online at www.whitechapelgallery.org. Bye for now.

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