

Jimmy Robert

Imitation of Lives

Jimmy Robert's *Kammerspiel*

In the early 1920s, the Weimar Republic saw the brief success of a new theater and film genre called the *Kammerspiel*, or “chamber drama.” Depicting small groups of people whose interpersonal conflicts played out within confined spaces, these chamber dramas offered less spectacular images than the Expressionist plays, and seldom favored happy resolutions. Cinematic *Kammerspiele*, in particular, made novel use of moving cameras that placed spellbound audiences in the role of voyeurs, and spun out intricate plots in spaces at once enclosed and on display.

It was the *Kammerspiel* that offered Jeff Wall, in a 1988 essay, the ideal frame for his study of Dan Graham's provocative work *Alteration to a Suburban House* (1979). *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* saw the Canadian artist and art historian carefully examine the programmatic blurring of interior and exterior, and of private and public spaces, in Graham's proposal as well as in such modernist residences as Philip Johnson's Glass House (1949) and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (1945–1951). These glass structures afford not only unobstructed views but also fleeting, mirror-like reflections, and their occupants accept a constant exposure not unlike in *Kammerspiele* of decades past. The residents of a glass house, like the actors in a chamber play, continually reassess their visibility not only to others inside the space, but to real or imagined gazes from outside.

Jimmy Robert first approached the Glass House with Jeff Wall's text in mind. With *Imitation of Lives*,

Robert builds on this game of reflections: characters are mirrored and doubled by the Glass House, and play with the pavilion's transparency and reflectiveness to appear and disappear. Robert's performance addresses the complex processes by which the self is constructed, or misconstrued, through the gaze of others. Yet his characters—played by the artist and fellow performers NIC Kay and Quenton Stuckey—are volatile, and always slip past the reductive assumptions of outside perception. A gray hoodie, a security guard uniform, an African wax-print shirt: these garments seem to assign the performers of this *Kammerspiel* a number of predefined, racialized roles. But quickly these characters mutate into new subjects, freer and more complex than the stereotypes we too often draw on from the other side of the glass.

—Charles Aubin and Cole Akers



Jayne Cortez
Phraseology

I say things to myself
in a bitch of a syllable
an off tone wisp remarkable
in weight and size
completely savage to the passing of silence
through mass combinations of moisture
uncaked in pockets of endless phraseology
moving toward sacred razors
like air like untangled bush
over a piece of dead scar
instant in another smashed ear lobe
shivering between word echoes of
word shadows
jugular veins of popular contradictions
well dressed and groomed in the mirror of language
transparent and useless against
the impulsive foam
of a spastic

Lorenzo Thomas
Song

You asked me to sing
Then you seemed not
To hear; to have gone out
From the edge of my voice

And I was singing
There I was singing
In a heathen voice
You could not hear
Though you requested

The song—it was for them.
Although they refuse you
And the song I made for you
Tangled in their tongue

They wd mire themselves in the spring
Rains, as I sit here folding and
Unfolding my nose in your gardens

I wouldn't mind it so bad

Each word is cheapened
In the air, sounding like
Language that riots and
Screams in the dark city

Thoughts they requested
Concepts that rule them

Since I can't have you
I will steal what you have

*J'AI
DEUX
AMOURS,
MON
PAYS
ET
PARIS*

Audre Lorde
Touring

Coming in and out of cities
where I spend one or two days
selling myself
where I spend one or two nights
in beds that do not have the time to fit me
coming in and out of cities
too quickly
to be touched by their magic
I burn
from the beds that do not fit me
I leave sated
but without feeling
any texture of the house I have invaded
by invitation
I leave
with a disturbing sense
of the hard core of flesh
missed
and truly revealing

I leave poems behind me
dropping them like dark seeds that
I will never harvest
that I will never mourn
if they are destroyed
they pay for a gift
I have not accepted.

Coming in and out of cities
untouched by their magic
I think without feeling
this is what men do
who try for some connection
and fail
and leave
five dollars on the table

Marguerite Duras
Hiroshima Mon Amour

Contre l'inégalité posée en principe par certains
peuples contre d'autres peuples

Contre l'inégalité posée en principe par certaines
races contre d'autres races

Contre l'inégalité posée en principe par certaines
classes contre d'autres classes

*Against the inequality set forth as a principle by certain
people against other people*

*Against the inequality set forth as a principle by certain
races against other races*

*Against the inequality set forth as a principle by certain
classes against other classes*

In the 30's

Philip Johnson, who built this house, had a brief relationship with Jimmie Daniels, the cabaret singer from Harlem.

Jimmie wrote a song titled: *Chez moi*.
At mine.

Carl Van Vechten, writer, photographer, promoter of literary talent and critic of dance, made a portrait of Jimmie. When picking up a camera, Carl felt the reversed power of the photographic portrait on himself. With newly available color film, he invited friends and acquaintances to sit for him for more than 25 years, many of them central figures in the Harlem Renaissance, often against backdrops reminiscent of the vivid colors and patterns of a Matisse painting.

The body is a false promise. To be lifelike is not to live. Or, live-ness (liveness) is not lifelikeness. Just because somebody is actually there, a body on a stage is no more of a guarantee that what we are seeing is categorically live than an emotion portrayed by an actor on the screen is an indication of that something was actually felt, even though we might think they are these things. Cinema is not live by definition. The same 'film' is played every time. A theater play might require bodies but the actor is as controlled by the mechanization of rehearsal and repetition as the 'moving' image. Even if it is not seen as such, the same hand moves to the same place, at the same angle, through the same axis at every performance.

Harlem is almost refined and respectable these days... and particularly these nights although the Mimo and the Elks rendez-vous still strive to maintain the old time excitement. True there on 116th Street is Jimmie Daniels place with low-hung ceilings and pastel walls, but oh my friends, it is high-brow. Ribaldry and boisterous outbreaks are frowned upon. Jimmie with features like a character from Noel Coward, carols divinely in an intimate voice, leaning on two ebony pianos for support physically and musically.

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References

P 3: Jeff Wall, *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel*, Art Metropole (1991). Originally published in book form in French under the title *Kammerspiel de Dan Graham* by Daed-Goldschmidt, Belgium in 1988.

P 5: Jimmy Robert, *Imitation of Lives* (rehearsal view), 2017. Pictured: NIC Kay and Quenton Stuckey. Courtesy of the artist, Performa, and The Glass House. Photo by Charles Aubin.

P 7: From *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*, edited by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, University of Alabama Press (2006), p. 70.

P 8: From *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*, edited by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, University of Alabama Press (2006), p. 256.

P 9: Josephine Baker, *J'ai Deux Amours* (1953).

P 10: From Audre Lorde, *The Black Unicorn*, W.W. Norton & Company Inc. (1995).

P 11: From *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). Translated in English by Richard Seaver in *Hiroshima Mon Amour: From the film by Alain Resnais*, Grove Press, New York City (1961).

P 12-13: Text by Jimmy Robert, including citations from Ian White, "Performance, audience, mirror" in *Here is information, Mobilise*, edited by Mike Sperlinger, LUX (2016); and Bill Smallwood, "On the beam," *The California Eagle* (September 1941).

P 15: *Jimmie Daniels* (1940) by Carl Van Vechten. © Van Vechten Trust

Music

Howard Shore and Ornette Coleman, "Naked Lunch" in *Naked Lunch: Music from the Original Soundtrack* (1992).

Brian Eno, "Sparrowfall II" in *Music for Films* (1978).

Bro Safari x UFO!, "Burn the block" in *Animal Deluxe Edition* (2014).

Johannes Brahms, *Variations on a Theme of Paganini, Op. 35, Book II, No.2: Variation 13, Un poco più andante* (1863), played by Nicholas Angelich (2006).

Jimmy Robert:
Imitation of Lives
November 3 - 5, 2017
at different times of day

Co-curated by Cole Akers (The Glass House) and Charles Aubin (Performa)
Co-commissioned by Performa and The Glass House for Performa 17

Performers: NIC Kay, Jimmy Robert, and Quenton Stuckey

Painting: *Loos / De Bruycker marble* (2017)
by Lucy McKenzie

Costume design: Carmen Secareanu (robes) and Regina M. Rizzo (t-shirts)

Voice coach: Emily Kron

Graphic design: David Knowles

Thanks to Felix Burchrichter,
Ion Dumitrescu, Jason Farago,
Davalois Fearon, Mario Gooden,
Matthias Mau, Tom McDonough,
Ben Pryor, and Mabel O. Wilson.

Monday, 6 November, 3pm
Jimmy Robert in conversation with
architect and scholar Mario Gooden
Performa 17 Hub
427 Broadway, New York, NY 10013

Performa 17
17.performa-arts.org

The Glass House
A National Trust Historic Site
theglasshouse.org

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The Glass House
Performa 17

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