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CARLOS REYES: *West Side Club*

by Vijay Masharani

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Carlos Reyes, *West Side Club*, 2018. Salvaged sauna cedar from West Side Club, glass, birch, hardware, four components, 95.5 × 21 × 6 inches each, total dimensions variable. Courtesy bodega

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In his first exhibition with Bodega, Carlos Reyes showcases a series of sculptures constructed from wood salvaged from the sauna of the West Side Club. Described on the club’s website as a “premier social relaxation club for gay and bisexual men,” the West Side Club has been at its Chelsea location since 1995. The sculptures, hung such that they hover an inch or so off of the ground, are quite formally restrained; the planks of wood are assembled to create tall cuboid structures with the artist occasionally substituting panels of glass instead of wood. The pieces are taller than the space itself; they extend into holes cut out of the ceiling. Some of these pieces were previously exhibited in a two person exhibition with sculptor Dominic Nurre at Museum Gallery in Brooklyn.

Upon viewing the works, the initial impulse is to attempt to discern the content of the various messages carved into the wood. A couple of the messages are sexually suggestive—one reads, “NYCURIIOUS—ANY AGE, ANY RACE.” Others are generic and aspirational—“LIVE FREE,” and elsewhere, one finds an elongated smiley face. Not only do visitors to the club somewhat predictably carve their names, or their partner’s initials enclosed within crude hearts—“THEO,” “ANDY,” “Z+G,” “BB,” “G+D”—they also carve the names of different locations around the world. Some of these are more ambiguous than others—India could be somebody’s name, and Irish could refer to national identification or to a UND alum. Nevertheless, as noted previously by Nicholas Chittenden Morgan in his short write-up of the show for Artforum, the countries and cities scrawled point to unmistakably international clientele—Palermo, Trinidad, VNZLA (Venezuela), Portugal, Istanbul, Colombia, Cuba, Sri Lanka.

Although we can imagine that the moisture of the sauna might have made it a little more supple, judging by the crudeness of the marks, the toughness of the wood presumably made it quite difficult for visitors to inscribe their messages. What visitors did choose to represent about themselves was the implicit internationalism of the space. In a similar vein, the press release for the exhibition outlines a kind of rival geography, in which the cardinal directions are redefined according to an individual's relationship with the club. Carlos Reyes's sculptures effectively bridge the local and the global; they act as a locus for movement in an almost religious manner. As Zygmunt Bauman notes, "if the tourist [sic] move because they find the world irresistibly attractive, the vagabonds move because they find the world unbearably inhospitable."¹ These categories are far from stable—we can imagine over the course of an international journey to the West Side Club, an individual's identification could oscillate between tourist and vagabond multiple times depending on political and social context.

These works emanate a kind of aura that can be linked to what Michel Foucault described as heterotopic spaces. Introduced in 1966 in his preface to *The Order of Things* and further elaborated in his 1967 essay "Of Other Spaces,"² the heterotopia is defined in relation to a utopia. Foucault writes, "[utopias] are sites that have a general relation ... with the real space of Society ... but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces." Heterotopias, on the other hand, are "real places—places that do exist ... which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which ... all the other real sites that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted."³ Foucault continues to articulate six traits of heterotopias. In the case of *West Side Club*, the aggregated gestures encoded in the grain of the sourced wood alludes to the fourth defining trait, what Foucault would call a "strange heterochrony" or an "absolute break with ... traditional time"⁴ insofar as layers of activity and engagement are flattened and represented concurrently. In a sense, these sculptures share qualities with two of Foucault's exemplary heterotopias, the museum and the cemetery. Beyond putting a strain on traditional experiences of time, the club seems to fit many of the other criteria of a heterotopia such as how its function changes as cultural norms (in this case, relating to sexual orientation) evolve, and although it is penetrable, it is not public. It is a pseudo-private space, bounded by a form of identification and a purification ritual.

But Carlos Reyes's sculptures, while they render legible the heterotopic qualities of the original club, are themselves kind of the opposite. They are not spaces; they're objects. What was the inside of the sauna has become an outside to a new enclosure, impossible to inhabit but viewable through the glass panes which, to the extent that they resemble lenses, further increase our awareness of our spectatorship over participation. It could be that the works act as a wayfinding device for the actually existing space, or as a monument to safe spaces for LGBTQ men across the world. Another read considers the fragmentation—from one single enclosure to multiple uninhabitable pillars—as an ominous gesture that alludes to the investment in desire by capital. This is not to speak about the club's membership fees; rather, it is to discuss how today, romance is a highly mediated experience in which, as Ana Cecilia Alvarez recently noted, "desirability and desire are reduced to a data set of 'taste,' [and] the single starts sounding like the job seeker, courting mutually beneficial relationships and setting up coffee dates like one would an interview." Leaving *West Side Club*, the viewer is left wondering whether these pieces are in mourning or in defiance.

Notes

Zygmunt Bauman, "Tourists and vagabonds: heroes and victims of postmodernity" *Reihe Politikwissenschaft / Institut für Höhere Studien, Abt. Politikwissenschaft* 30, 1996: p. 147. Available online at https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/26687/ssoar-1996-baumann-tourists_and_vagabonds.pdf (accessed 29 March 2018)

For a history of Foucault's notion of heterotopia, see: <http://www.heterotopiastudies.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/2.1-History-of-Concept.pdf> (accessed March 28, 2018.)

Michel Foucault trans. Jay Miskowiec, «Of Other Spaces» *Diacritics* 16, (1), Spring 1986: 22–27. available online at <https://foucault.info/doc/documents/heterotopia/foucault-heterotopia-en-html> (accessed 29 March 2018)

Ibid.

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