

## Cultural Crossings: performing race and transgender in the work of moti roti

Dorothy Rowe

What performance where will invert the inner/outer distinction and compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality? What performance where will compel a reconsideration of the *place* and stability of the masculine and the feminine?

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*<sup>1</sup>

moti roti was established by Keith Khan in 1991 as a diasporic London-based artist-led performance group straddling three cultures: Trinidad, Pakistan and India. Since 1990 it has produced a number of innovative and wide-ranging cultural critiques of identity construction in a popular, collaborative, accessible and interactive way. At the core of moti roti's artistic policy is the declared aim 'to make art projects that transform space, and the meaning of space' as well as 'to make art projects in the context of and with the intent of progressing current thinking about race, sexuality and gender'.<sup>2</sup> To this end, the company have produced a steady stream of high-profile multicultural and multimedia performance projects of which *Wigs of Wonderment*, of 1995 (plate 8.1), forms a part. Other projects have included *Before Columbus* (1992), a performance project for Notting Hill Carnival that explored the cultural wealth of six areas of the world before Christopher Columbus allegedly 'discovered' them; *Plain Magic* (1999–2001), an installation housed in specially commissioned marquees for touring to melas and festivals and performed by Sonia Boyce, Nina Edge, Keith Khan, D.J. Scanner and Ali Zaidi; and *Fresh Masaala* (1999), a multimedia installation exploring issues of British Asian identity. Performer/participants involved in moti roti are often also celebrated artists/performers in their own right who temporarily come together under the curatorship of Keith Khan or Ali Zaidi for specific and unique installation/performance projects.

Although many of the artists involved in the company at various stages are black or Asian women, their participation in the company is not circumscribed purely by their positions of 'difference'.<sup>3</sup> Those who have been involved with the company over the past decade include the actresses Shobna Gulati and Zita



8.1 moti roti, *Wigs of Wonderment* 1995. Still from original live performance. © moti roti.

Sattar and the artists Samena Rana, Veena Stephenson, Susan Lewis, Nina Edge and Sonia Boyce, amongst others, all of whom have appeared for temporary, sometimes site-specific and always collaborative, cultural projects, whilst simultaneously maintaining and developing their various separate artistic identities.<sup>4</sup> As race, sexuality and gender are the categories of identity formation that the company seeks to explore and transgress, the gender of the performer/participants is not pre-determined and the racial mix is always multicultural. Black, white or Asian, male, female, hetero-, homo- or trans-, the issue of identity construction escapes the potentially ghettoizing categories of 'black art' or 'women's art' to confront instances of 'difference and excess' within the post-colonial, the hybrid and the diasporic spaces of cultural production within the global city.

*Wigs of Wonderment* was first performed by moti roti in 1995, having been commissioned as part of the ICA's *Mirage. Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire* season, exploring and celebrating the critical writings of Frantz Fanon (1925–61). In the accompanying catalogue, commenting on the commissioned works for *Mirage* by artists including Boyce, Khan, Edge, Keith Piper, Isaac Julien, Renée Green and Steve McQueen, cultural critic Kobena Mercer observed:

Each of these artists has contributed significantly to diaspora practices of cultural displacement in post-conceptual art, using a variety of materials and methodologies to examine and challenge the fears and fantasies that continue to enthrall us to the extent that we are each obliged to be the bearer of an ego and its fictions of identity. If Fanon has found a new generation of readers in this context, then it is important to note how their mapping of 'Fanonian spaces' ... delivers the spectator into a place of radical uncertainty...<sup>5</sup>

It is within this 'Fanonian' context that *Wigs of Wonderment* offered its audiences a self-declared 'investigation of issues around race and gender, as manifest in hair and beauty', where the experience of beauty was performed as a 'sensory journey' for and by its participants. A common feature of moti roti projects is their adaptability for repetition in different spaces and *Wigs of Wonderment* is no exception, having been re-staged twice since the ICA event and adapted each time to its different venue and context. In 1996 it was recreated in Denmark as part of the fifteen-day *Copenhagen City of Cultures* festival (with four days of performances) and in 1998, with funds from the Black Theatre Co-operative, it was re-presented in Union Chapel, Islington for one day, as part of the *Windrush* celebrations during 'Black History month'.<sup>6</sup> More recently, it has been digitally adapted by the Live Art Development Agency in London as an interactive home performance accessed via CD-ROM. Although details of the project vary with each different performance, the general premise that there are several spaces or rooms animated through light, sound and smell, through which audience/participants are guided in order to experience different beauty treatments or performances on a one-to-one basis remains constant throughout (plate 8.2). As a live piece *Wigs* is performed either in one large



8.2 moti roti, *Wigs of Wonderment*, 1995. Stills from original live performance. © moti roti.

room with separate spaces created by lighting and hanging embroideries or else as a *physically* site-specific piece using a range of environments.<sup>7</sup> As Sonia Boyce and David A. Bailey have commented:

As a one to one experience, a ‘performer’ offered each audience member a ‘cultural makeover’. Each makeover responded to the individual’s physicality and desires but also encouraged them to consider the broader issues of the appropriation of black popular culture in the West and the construction of identities...<sup>8</sup>

The re-working of *Wigs of Wonderment* in its most recent electronic format divides it into five different sections or ‘rooms’, gently echoing the five senses. The first room – ‘Hair’ – facilitated by Shobna Gulati and Georgina Evans, enables eight male and female participants of different ethnic origins to try on different wigs and discuss their reactions to their appearance in the wigs, the home-viewer having initially chosen whose performance they wish to listen to and watch by clicking on a wig and dropping it onto a participant’s head. In the second room – ‘Make-up’ – participants (male or female) are given a makeover by BBC make-up artist Tammy Harewood, who talks with them about make-up, its uses and its contexts in racial and gendered terms. Again, the home-viewer uses the mouse to click on different visual frames and listen to different narratives. ‘Dressing-up’ with wigs and make-up in the first two ‘rooms’ of the electronic project enables participants temporarily to adopt gendered and racial identities that might be the antithesis of who they ordinarily think they are. ‘Stance’ is the title for the third sequence in which Anand Kumar, an Indian male-to-female cross-dresser in a sari performs popular Indian dance movements to music on a main public shopping street in East London. The viewer witnesses a film of the performance alongside reaction shots of people in the street watching the dance. The audience become witnesses both to the dance and to the viewers’ reactions, and the performance provokes a variety of intriguing speculations on the performative nature of cultural identity and racial stereotyping in the post-colonial era.

All these acts of performance aim to disrupt preconceptions of stable racial, sexual and gendered identities. They are supplemented by the narrative elements of the ‘Perfume’ and ‘Garden’ rooms (sequences four and five) which explore constructions of ‘the exotic’ both through the sense of smell and via oral traditions of fable, myth and storytelling. Room four, the ‘Perfume’ room, consists of an animation of a series of perfume bottles, each containing the essence of a perfume, the origin of which is explained by Ali Zaidi. Each bottle may be picked up (by clicking on it and dropping it into a delicate silver cauldron) and the mixture produced by the combination of two different perfume essences is then explained in terms of the sensuous effects it will have upon those who smell it. The ‘Garden’ room (sequence five) consists of a series of stories, myths and fables about flowers and herbs, narrated by the ceramic artist Nina Edge.

During the live versions of *Wigs*, the participants, guided from room to room by ‘flow coordinators’, activate the performance by their presence in a particular space, a technique that has been translated into virtual terms by using a mouse rather than the ‘flow coordinators’ (plate 8.3). Through an emphasis on the



8.3 moti roti, *Wigs of Wonderment*, 1995. 'Flow co-ordinators'. Photographed at an original live performance. Photograph © Julia Cody.

sensuousness of visual, auditory and olfactory experiences, set off against the disrupted identities generated by the artifice of the masquerade, the piece offers opportunities for a creative exploration of identity formation as a performative act. The use of performance as the medium with which to enact this particular set of issues is peculiarly appropriate to the ideas that the company wish to explore. Performance work facilitates dialogue and opens up the possibilities for interrogating the participants' cultural assumptions in a non-threatening (because knowingly artificial and theatrical) environment. In her groundbreaking proposition for a destabilization of hegemonic ideas concerning fixed gendered identities and sexual identifications, *Gender Trouble*, first published in 1990, the same year in which moti roti was founded, Judith Butler introduced a radical new agenda for interpretive change within the sphere of (white heterosexual) identity politics which, although only focused on gender opened up ways of rethinking 'the experience of subjectivity and identity in the postmodern world' through notions of performance.<sup>9</sup>

Colliding with Butler's incisive questions concerning gendered identities and embodied subjectivities, post-colonial criticism and theory has also provided a cohesive set of analytical tools for interrogating Western hegemonic structures of race, class and gender, prompted by Homi Bhabha's earlier observations that 'an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of otherness.'<sup>10</sup> Dislodging fixed epistemological frameworks of subjectivity and identity formation has been a key activity for feminist and post-colonial theorists alike. Recent theorists of performativity have clearly laid to rest the notion of the existence of stable signifying practices of meaning generation in which notions of 'truth' might be said to reside in objects that simply await 'correct' interpretation. 'Fixity' has given way to fluidity, intersubjectivity and open-endedness, in which both artist and interpreter 'are caught up within the complex and fraught operations of representation – entangled in intersubjective spaces of desire, projection, and identification.'<sup>11</sup>

One of the pivotal ways in which meanings are generated by *Wigs of Wonderment* in its various live manifestations (as well as through the filmed sequences of the electronic version) is via an initial emphasis on a one-to-one dialogue between the individual performer and participant in front of a mirror, with no other audience present. The presence of the mirror as crucial to the effects of the performance offers a cogent reminder of Lacan's account of subjectivity, in which the founding moment of recognition of the self via the mirror is a *mis*-recognition that belies the fragmentary nature of the subject whose identity it is being used to secure (for Lacan this uninterrupted dualism, either between self and mirror or self and mother, is the Imaginary). The subject's entry into the Symbolic upon the acquisition of language is a traumatic moment that is founded upon a primary loss of connection to the maternal body and the concomitant repression of the desire for reunification as a result of the subject's acceptance of the law of the father, or the phallus.<sup>12</sup> The phallus as both sign and signifier of order and language is, according to Lacan, predicated upon its visibility, its presence, which, as he recognizes, makes it both fragile and arbitrary and in constant need of

reiteration in order securely to produce its effects.<sup>13</sup> The entry into the Symbolic and the acquisition of language then, is the point at which gendered sexual identity is constructed via the figuration of the visible presence of anatomical difference (those in possession of the phallus and those without). However, as Jacqueline Rose observes, 'the phallus needs to be placed on the axis of desire before it can be understood, and questioned, as the differential mark of sexual identification.'<sup>14</sup> Once understood in these terms, the visual field of Symbolic signification is shown to be one that is fraught with repressed desires, signified through the structuring presence of the phallus, in which feminine sexuality can only be formulated as an imitative masquerade in reference to the phallic sign.

The mirror offers its viewers a fantasy of wholeness in which signs of identity can be as easily constructed as they can be dismantled and re-created. The effects of the *Wigs* performances, as I outline below, demonstrate that whilst identity can be temporarily secured through visible external manifestation and appearance, subjectivity remains elusive, fragmentary, ephemeral and contingent. It is this dialectic between visible identity constructions and embodied subjectivities that forms the pivotal point of exploration for performers and participants of *Wigs of Wonderment*. It is the field of vision as the site of the objectifying 'phallogocular' gaze that has been most open to contestation, resistance, reclamation and critique in feminist and post-colonial theory over the past few decades.<sup>15</sup> Judith Butler, in particular, has done much to highlight the problems inherent in Lacan's psychoanalytic economy in which the formation of 'the feminine' is predicated as one of masquerade structured through loss, desire, absence and lack of signification. It is Butler's critique, amongst others, that has opened up new spaces for flexible explorations of gendered, racial and sexual identities such as the ones that are intelligently and knowingly staged in the creative formation of *Wigs of Wonderment*. Both Butler and Marjorie Garber have problematized Lacan's structural framework of binary identity formation through the introduction of what Garber describes as the 'category crisis' evoked by a disruptive 'third term' embodied in the figure of the androgyne, the transvestite, the transsexual and the cross-dresser.<sup>16</sup> As Butler notes, 'the notion of an original or primary gender identity is often parodied within the cultural practices of drag, cross-dressing and the sexual stylization of butch/femme identities.'<sup>17</sup> Such parodic imitation, although often confused as a misogynistic device designed to threaten the supposed existence of an 'essential' or originary feminine identity, actually exposes the very idea of the existence of an originary feminine identity. As Butler explains:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. As

much as drag creates a unified picture of woman (what its critics often oppose), it reveals the distinctness of those aspects of gendered experience which are falsely naturalized in a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency ...*<sup>18</sup>

Although this extended passage implies a singular focus on male-to-female cross-dressing, and indeed, within *Wigs of Wonderment*, it is male-to-female transgender that receives specific attention through the 'Stance' sequence, it would be a mistake to assume that transgender is only a male prerogative within the context of gender identity exploration as performed through *Wigs*. Although perhaps not explicit in the way that 'Stance' is, certainly in the 'Hair' sequence possibilities for transgendered identity are explored by both male and female participants to varying degrees. In both the original performance and in the electronic staging the provision of the five different 'rooms' individually and collectively offer sites of exploration of the implications of Butler's radical reassessment of the performativity of identity, in racial as well as gendered terms (plate 8.4). Viewers are constructed both actively and passively, depending on which part of the performance space they choose to enter. As onlookers, the audience are invited to make choices – do they want to witness the visual and speech effects of an Afro wig on a white European female, a long, blonde wig on a black British male or a ginger crop on an Asian girl, for example? Or what heady mix of exotic perfume or dazzling make-up would they like to consume – as well as be consumed by? Within certain structural parameters, the choice becomes theirs and the project absorbs its audience through a seductive dynamic of identification, desire, disrupted expectations and frequent laughter. The power of play and of identity formation rests partially with the audience and partially with the reactions that their matching of wigs and make-overs with participant-performers generate.

Within the electronic version of the performance, a full range of ethnic and gendered participants are present to enable the audience to make their choices and have fun with the results. Frequent laughter, shock and discomfort are just some of the emotions that are generated by this gentle probing of identity construction which cuts beyond categories of ethnicity and colour and exposes the cultural assumptions that accrue to such basic 'facts' as hair and skin. Interestingly, it is the long, blonde wig and the Afro wig that cause some of the most forceful responses, because both are so heavily caught up in Western constructions of race and beauty. As metonymic signifiers for the dialectical tension between the West and its 'Others', these markers of gendered, racial and sexual identity have a long tradition within Western traditions of representation and still exert powerful effects within mythical narrative constructions of beauty and power. Whilst the Afro wig is symbolic for some of the participants of the Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly for the younger black generation for whom the memory is a significant reminder of respect for the struggles of their parents' and grandparents' generation, it is also caught up within a white Western myth of 'primitivism'. For one white participant it is the



8.4 moti roti, *Wigs of Wonderment*, 1995. 'Wigs'. Photographed at an original live performance. Photograph © Julia Cody.

perfect vehicle for ‘dressing up’ for a fancy dress party; it is a wig that she would wear with a wooden animal necklace to construct an outfit so that she can pretend to belong ‘to an African tribe’. For the same participant, the short ginger crop has powerful associations with childhood memories, as well as reminding her of a gay male friend. Such diverse reactions expose interesting issues of internal stereotyping and cultural assumptions. However, because of the way in which the performance is orchestrated, no sooner has one set of assumptions been aired than a totally opposing one is also available, thus exposing the instability of racial and cultural stereotypes and emphasizing instead issues of diversity, hybridity and the fragility of individual identifications. The long, blonde wig also produces interesting cultural effects. For some it is reminiscent of the Hollywood starlet, whilst it reminds others of black session singers of the 1970s; for virtually all the participants it is the most potent sign of artifice and masquerade. It signifies Western constructions of glamorous femininity at its most extreme, artificial and performative and it becomes a potent marker of identity that can be put on or taken off at will.<sup>19</sup>

The hegemonic signifying circuit of stereotypical behaviour patterns and identity formations is interrupted as performers encourage their participants to explore, affirm, confront or deny the fragility of their own gendered, racial and sexualized assumptions. The emphasis on the visual effects that are engendered by the performative practices played out across multiple registers of ‘spectatorial identifications’ are supplemented through recourse to a range of other sensory experiences, lest the audience become too enmeshed in the scopic dangers of the phallogocular visual field.<sup>20</sup>

A crucial issue at stake in this reading of the supplementarity to the visual that is provided by the sensual, is one that Peggy Phelan identifies as the ‘contradiction between “identity politics” with its accent on visibility, and the psychoanalytic/deconstructionist mistrust of visibility’.<sup>21</sup> As she deftly goes on to explore, the investment in the visible as a sign of the real, a sign of presence, that has underpinned the philosophy of much of the identity politics practised by sexual and racial minorities over the past few decades, is tactically problematic because it relies for its effects on the very system of representation that it seeks to undermine. As Phelan indicates, such tactics assume that ‘what one sees is who one is’ but as both psychoanalysis and performance theory have demonstrated, what one sees is an unreliable mis-recognition structured through the phallogocentrism of the Symbolic. Thus, if the visible is unreliable, recourse to the other senses becomes a further mode of de-articulating stable visual signifying practices. In the ‘Perfume’ room and the ‘Garden’ room, although in the electronic re-staging the audience cannot actually experience the scents that are concocted, or the tastes and smells that they are told about, their auditory evocation through vocal presence is powerful enough to titillate the olfactory senses with the desire for experience of them. Furthermore, this recourse to an extended sensual field as a means of disrupting the dominance of the visual within Western metaphysics as a recent strategy of much aesthetic and cultural discourse, is prompted by the desire to dislodge what Martin Jay has described as ‘the scopic régimes of modernity’.<sup>22</sup> French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray has also been particularly instrumental in opening up discourses around

the senses by pointing out that ‘investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men’:

More than any other sense, the eye objectifies and it masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations ...<sup>23</sup>

Irigaray’s philosophical project seeks to formulate a role for the subjective feminine within radically different structures of European thought to those dominated by the transcendental universalism of Western metaphysics and Cartesian dualism. Her writing does not seek to oppose existing epistemologies so much as to dismantle them in order completely to rebuild them, offering new structures for the envisioning of embodied subjectivities in which feminine subjectivity can be presenced. For Irigaray, it is touch that is brought into play with vision and conceived in terms of vision – the two become entwined within the textures of light that give them coherence.<sup>24</sup> The physicality and concomitant eroticism of massage played a key role in the sensual experience engendered in the live performances of *Wigs*, where touch, smell and voice were combined to evoke a sense of the ‘exotic Other’, a site of relaxation, pleasure and desire. Significantly, however, for Jacques Derrida and Jonathan Rée, it is hearing and the power of the voice as much as touch that provides a compelling mode for resisting the trap of ocularcentrism, and it is the capacity of the audience and interpreters for hearing voices and music that also plays a crucial role in the effects produced through the language and sounds of *Wigs of Wonderment* in both its live and its electronic forms.<sup>25</sup>

Sound, vision, performance and mimicry all combine in Anand’s spectacular ‘Stance’ in which the concept of a ‘cultural make-over’ explored in the first two spaces (‘Hair’ and ‘Make-up’) is enacted in a third space via a short film of an Indian male cross-dresser, Anand Kumar, adorned in a red sari and performing Bollywood-style Indian dance movements to music on a main public shopping street in East London to the delight, bemusement and embarrassment of on-lookers and passers-by. In the privileged space of voyeuristic removal, the home-viewer can choose to watch the movements and listen to the music whilst simultaneously observing isolated close-up camera shots of the reactions of the filmed audience of shoppers, market traders and locals. The spaces of identification for both the home-audience and the on-site observers remains deliberately ambivalent and open ended, playing upon the ambiguities of this politically charged urban area.

This intervention by Anand into the public space of Green Street, Upton Park in East London, provokes a variety of intriguing speculations on the performative nature of cultural identity and racial stereotyping in the post-colonial era. As a physical location, Green Street is one of those many urban spaces in Britain that offers a nexus of contradictions, marked and re-marked by the conflicting histories that animate the area. Whilst West Ham football stadium is located near to one end of the street, along the rest of the street is an eclectic mixture of shops, many of which are run by and cater specifically to the

Asian communities of the area. In the past this area, like many other multicultural neighbourhoods in East London, has been a target for racially motivated attacks: the football terraces at West Ham are notorious seedbeds of recruitment for the British National Party. The area is a lively blend of multicultural urbanism, typical of many metropolitan spaces within contemporary post-colonial Britain. Art projects performed or enacted in public spaces often have an interesting way of teasing out such tensions, giving them a focus and contextualizing them within larger political terrains. Rachel Whiteread's 1993 controversial concrete casting of the interior of 193 Grove Road in Bow, *House* (plates 1.1 and 1.2, pages 318 and 320) is a cogent reminder of how art works in public spaces can animate and give focus to a host of subliminal politicized and historically deeply rooted tensions, eliciting graffiti, demonstrations and a media furore concerning property rights, ownership and concepts of 'home', homelessness and community issues. As Doreen Massey has observed:

The East End is an area which oozes meaning as a place, both locally and in the national psyche. The meanings are, however, varied and much contested. This is the home both of Alf Garnett and of a constantly-added-to ethnic mix; of the battle of Cable Street, Brick Lane and dockers marching against immigration. It is a locality in which notions of community ... are at the very heart of politics and of daily life. A reference to 'tradition' in the East End can bring to mind radicalism and ethnic diversity or racism and community closure ...<sup>26</sup>

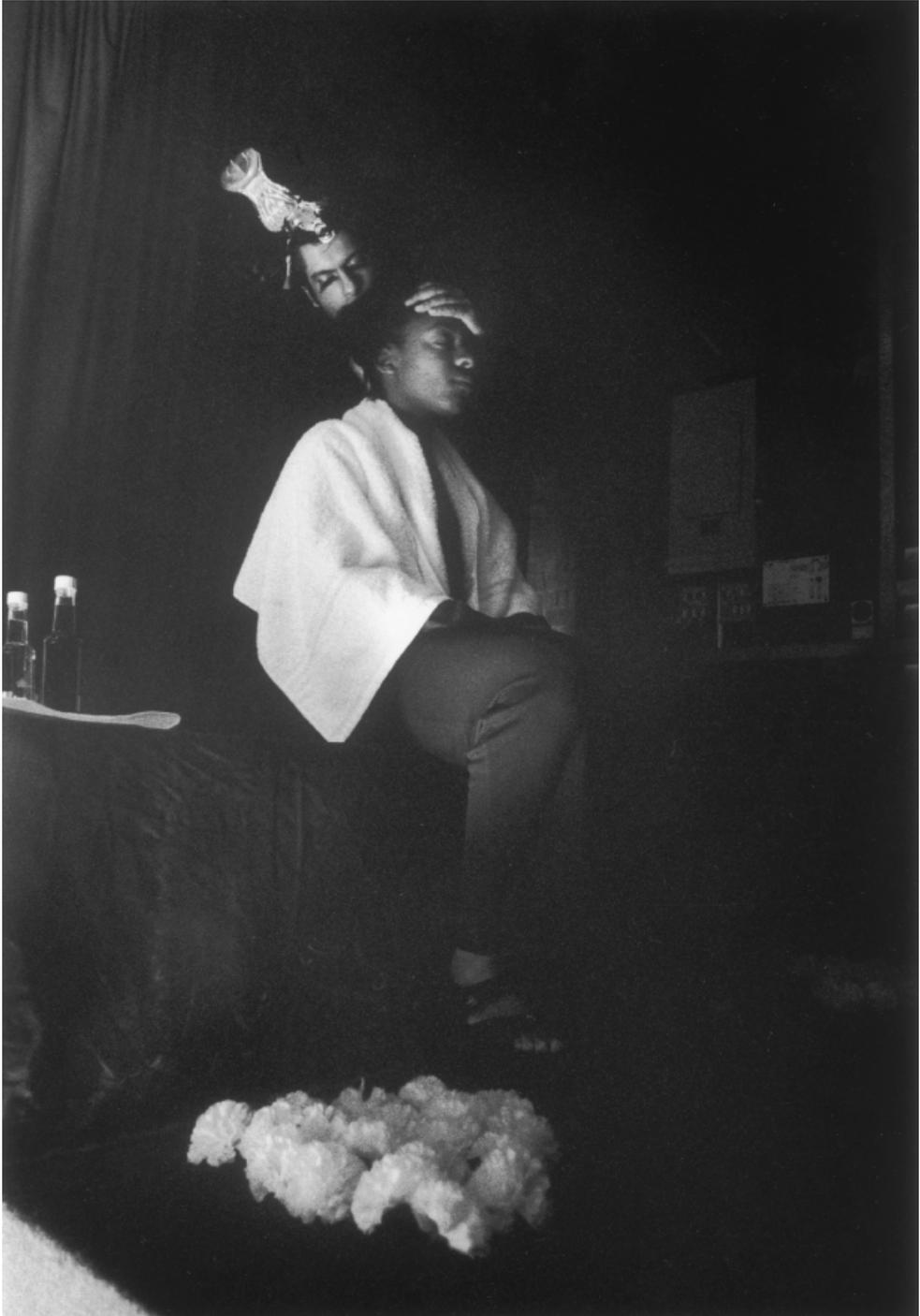
By choosing Green Street as the location for this particular performance, moti roti have identified and acted upon an interesting set of cultural and racial tensions and have animated them in a humorous and appealing way. By using humour and parody to draw attention to ugly issues of racism and homophobia, heavy-handed moral judgements are avoided, yet the point is made effectively and does not impair the aesthetic enjoyment of the sequence.

The choice of an Indian male-to-female cross-dresser for this particular aspect of the project continues the theme of destabilization of the norms of cultural expectation that runs right through *Wigs of Wonderment*. In his fascinating study of Indian masculinity under Empire, *Effeminacy: The Economy of Colonial Desire*, Revathi Krishnaswamy traces the history of a concept of 'effeminism' in colonial India in which masculine colonial subjects were dominated through the British colonizers' insistence on their innate effeminacy.<sup>27</sup> Yet, as he argues, the category of effeminacy was also a performative strategy that was recuperated by the educated Hindu elite in the eventual subversion of colonial authority through Gandhian nationalism:

Effeminacy was simultaneously a mimicry of subversion that successfully disrupted colonial authority in certain contexts as well as a mimicry of subjugation that kept lower castes, religious minorities and women under elite male control ...<sup>28</sup>

Krishnaswamy demonstrates that Indian male androgyny, as constructed through and by Empire, operated on multiple political registers of colonial politics and desire, as both mimetic and contingent. Such mimicry, resonant of both Butler's and Garber's analyses of drag as a potentially subversive strategy that can operate to destabilize fixed gender categories, also elicits an interesting commentary from Homi Bhabha, that contextualizes Butler's analysis of parodic repetition within the paradigms of post-colonial critique. Bhabha observes that 'colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference.'<sup>29</sup> The structures of colonial identity are deconstructed by Bhabha along the same axes as those of gendered identity by Butler and it is the introduction of the 'hybrid' (Bhabha) or the 'third term' (Garber) that enables the parodic repetition performed by the androgynous Anand to effect its subversion of the hegemonic stereotypes of popular Indian culture and ethnic gendered identity. As a performance, *Wigs of Wonderment* exposes the lack of a stable field of representation for materializing Asian sexual identities. As B.J. Wray has astutely observed, 'clearly resignifications of lack can only occur within the paradoxical situation of inhabiting a construction in order to critique it' but Wray also argues that there are 'multivalent ways in which parodic provocation unsettles viewers'.<sup>30</sup> This is clearly evidenced not just by Anand's performance, but also across the entire conception of the *Wigs of Wonderment* project where viewers' assumptions about racial, sexual and gendered identities become the point not so much of unsettlement as of frequently humorous and always empathetic inquiry.

An overriding impression that the viewer/participant is left with after viewing/participating in *Wigs of Wonderment* is the sensuousness of the piece in all its aspects. It is a visual and auditory feast and whilst olfactory and haptic sensations of taste, smell and touch cannot be recreated through the electronic version, touch and smell at least are an integral part of the live performances and the second-hand experience of their effects is cleverly restaged electronically in sequences four and five, the 'Perfume' and the 'Garden' rooms. In its site-specific performances, different artists played different roles within the staging of the piece. Whilst the first artist discusses plants and their perfumes with initial entrants to the piece, the fifth artist is engaged in the task of discussing and choosing 'ittar' (perfumes) with the participant (after they have tried out their wig and had their make-over). The final artist, number six, is then engaged in giving the participant a head massage, using both hair oils and the ittar that the person has brought in with them from the previous stage of the performance (plate 8.5). In the CD-ROM, this aspect of the performance is given its own sequence and it occurs after Anand's dance. It is perhaps the most direct interaction that the viewer has with the piece in terms of being implicated in the choices of scent that s/he makes. Visually this sequence is stunning: a deep velvety black background provides the setting for a jewel-like array of ittar or perfume vials that are suspended in mid-air above a small, delicate silver cauldron. Each vial contains a dazzling coloured 'liquid' that is the scent. With one click of the mouse, the viewer chooses their scent and triggers an erotic commentary narrated by Ali Zaidi's deep and languid voice. Zaidi gently, sensuously and seductively explains what the scent is, what its origins are and



8.5 moti roti, *Wigs of Wonderment*, 1995. Head Massage with hair oils and perfume (ittar). Photographed at an original live performance. Photograph © Julia Cody.

what its sensual properties are believed to be, before the delicate vial plunges into the silver cauldron and the viewer is enticed to choose again. Each vial is combined with another, mixed in the cauldron and produces a 'scent' which Zaidi explains. The visual and sensory effects of this sequence are breathtaking and the interaction is intimate and compelling. Again, the emphasis on the realm of the senses could be read as part of moti roti's more general attempts to explore different strategies of identity subversion.

The narrative tone of Ali Zaidi's voice in the 'Perfume' room constructs an exotic and erotic mood, whilst the engaging monologue performed by Nina Edge in the 'Garden' room mixes the informative with personal and anecdotal cultural references that weave a set of stories about the healing and/or magical properties of particular flowers, herbs and spices. Stories, fables, myths and anecdotes ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous are proffered for our entertainment, education and amusement in the final sequence of the performance. The power of these stories often rests in their long history of oral tradition in which healing properties of plants or their powers of emotional effect are aspects of discourse that can neither be proved nor refuted, thus taking a place within our cultural heritage and subtly enriching it. Quite often, such stories disclose their foundational moments in 'Other' spaces – both historical and geographic; such locations are conjured as distant and 'exotic', providing them with the power and authority of 'difference' whilst at the same time introducing an element of scepticism and doubt in the 'excess' of their construction and invention. The history of storytelling and the oral tradition in both Eastern and Western cultures is a powerful one that betrays double-edged characteristics. Whilst myth-making and storytelling are a fundamental part of the processes of social, cultural and individual identity formation, they are also nebulous activities that can perpetuate misunderstanding, stereotyping and superstition. Within the context of the performance as a whole, I would suggest that whilst sequence five invites its audience to learn and enjoy the fables that have accrued to the plants, spices and flowers that they pick, it may also suggest that they should be cautious about their identifications with – and beliefs in – all the stories that they are told.

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### Notes

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1 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York, 1990, p. 139.

2 moti roti, 'Mission Statement', 'Artistic Policy: Aims and Objectives', 'Aesthetic Ethos' and 'Wigs of Wonderment', London, September 2002.

3 For more discussion on issues of 'difference' in relation to black and Asian women artists, see Dorothy Rowe, 'Differencing the City: urban identities and the spatial imagination', in Malcolm Miles and Tim Hall (eds), *Urban Futures: critical commentaries on shaping the city*, London and New York, 2003, pp. 27–43.

- 4 Samena Rama took part in moti roti's *Colours of Asia* mixed media exhibition curated by Ali Zaidi in 1992 and subsequently died tragically in the same year. For further information about this artist, see Samena Rana, 'The Flow of Water' in Sunil Gupta (ed.), *Disrupted Borders: an intervention in definitions of boundaries*, London, 1993, pp. 166–73.
- 5 Kobena Mercer, 'Busy in the Ruins of Wretched Fantasia', in *Mirage Enigmas of Race, Difference and Desire*, an ICA/inIVA season, London, 1995, pp. 18–19. The Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) is based in London and directed by Gilane Tawadros. As an organization it 'creates exhibitions, publications, multimedia, education and research projects designed to bring the work of artists from culturally-diverse backgrounds to the attentions of the widest possible public.' For further details, see the website at [www.iniva.org](http://www.iniva.org)
- 6 Moti roti, 'Mission Statement', 'Artistic Policy: Aims and Objectives', 'Aesthetic Ethos' and 'Wigs of Wonderment', London, September 2002.
- 7 I use the distinction of 'physical site-specificity' in the sense put forward by Miwon Kwon in her recent attempts to recuperate the political aspects of the term from its otherwise overdetermined use as a general label for all non-studio art practice. Kwon's distinction between physical, phenomenological and discursive types of site-specificity helps to reinvigorate the critical language and conceptual understanding of the genre: Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another. Site-specific art and locational identity*, Massachusetts, 2002, pp. 1–32.
- 8 Correspondence between the author, Sonia Boyce and David A. Bailey, July 2002.
- 9 Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (eds), *Performing the Body: Performing the Text*, London and New York, 1999, p. 2.
- 10 Homi K. Bhabha, 'The Other Question – The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 4, November 1983, p. 18.
- 11 Jones and Stephenson (eds), *Performing the Body*, p. 1.
- 12 The moment of the subject's entry into the Symbolic is also a point of rupture and as Jacqueline Rose, amongst others, observes, 'in Lacan's account, the phallus stands for that moment of rupture.' Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London and New York, 1986, pp. 61–2.
- 13 For further details, see Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, New York, 1977, pp. 285–7.
- 14 Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, p. 63.
- 15 I adapt the term 'phallogocular' from Martin Jay's discussion of 'Phallogocularcentrism: Derrida and Irigaray', in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*, Berkeley, California, 1993, pp. 493–542.
- 16 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, London and New York, 1992, pp. 11–13
- 17 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 137.
- 18 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 137.
- 19 As is by now well rehearsed within the history of psychoanalysis, Joan Rivière, in her groundbreaking essay 'Womanliness as Masquerade', published in 1929, argues that feminine subjective identity is necessarily constructed as artificial since there is no place open to the position of the 'feminine' within existing models of psychoanalysis that formulate identity difference as being structured through the visible presence of the male phallus and its concomitant lack or absence in the female; see Rivière in Victor Burgin *et al.* (eds), *Formations of Fantasy*, London and New York, 1986, pp. 35–44. Psychoanalytic theory is useful in this context because its main concern is the analysis of subjective identity formation, precisely the topic that moti roti seeks to explore in *Wigs of Wonderment*. As already indicated, psychoanalytic theory derived from Lacan offers an explanation of the founding moment of the recognition of the self via the mirror as a *mis*-recognition that belies the fragmentary nature of the subject whose identity it is being used to secure. As individuals, our identities and our sense of ourselves and who we are are shaky constructions cobbled together out of a host of life experiences and circumstances of birth. It is this contingency that *Wigs of Wonderment* exquisitely, elegantly and humorously foregrounds.
- 20 Jones and Stephenson (eds), *Performing the Body*, p. 7.
- 21 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London and New York, 1993, p. 6.
- 22 Martin Jay, 'Scopic Régimes of Modernity', in Hal Foster (ed.), *Postmodern Culture*, Seattle, 1988, pp. 3–7.
- 23 Luce Irigaray interviewed in Marie-Françoise Hans and Gilles Lapouge (eds), *Les femmes, la pornographie et l'erotisme*, Paris, 1978, cited in Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 493.
- 24 As Cathryn Vasselau comments in her reading of Irigaray's thought, 'an elaboration of light in terms of texture stands as a challenge to the representation of sight as a sense which guarantees the subject of vision an independence, or, in which the seer is distanced from an object': Vasselau, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merlau-Ponty*, London and New York, 1998, pp. 12–13.
- 25 For further details on Derrida's position in relation to both ocularcentrism and hearing, see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 1993, in particular pp. 511–16. See also Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: A Philosophical History of Language, Deafness and the Senses*, London, 1999.
- 26 Doreen Massey, 'Space-time and the Politics of Location', in James Lingwood (ed.), *Rachel Whiteread: House*, London and Oxford, 1995, p. 46.
- 27 Revathi Krishnaswamy, *Effeminism: The Economy of Colonial Desire*, Michigan, 1998, reprinted in

- Rachel Adams and David Savran (eds), *The Masculinity Studies Reader*, Oxford and Mass., 2002, pp. 292–317.
- 28 Krishnaswamy, *Effeminism: The Economy of Colonial Desire*, p. 304.
- 29 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, 1994, p. 107.
- 30 B.J. Wray 'Performing Clits and Other Lesbian Tricks', in Jones and Stephenson (eds), *Performing the Body*, pp. 189 and 192.