



Dominic Eichler: A Different Drum. In: Frieze, #84, London, June-August 2004.

A Different Drum

David Zink Yi



In the video of his performance *La Cumbia* (1999) David Zink Yi's reclining and manly, but by no means monstrous, naked body is a shrill shade of Chromakey, Incredible Hulk-like, green. Maybe the Berlin-based artist was feeling like a real alien the day he thought about doing this.

Only two of his fingers on one hand are left unpainted, like a poignant if coincidental inversion of Douglas Gordon's one black finger tattoo *Three Inches (Black)* (1997). All the action in the video involves Zink Yi giving his digits a life of their own. They become diminutive prancing legs that dance from the artist's green feet to his green face and back down again, occasionally stopping along the way to drum out a rhythm. The soundtrack for this finger dance is a catchy ditty in the popular Colombian music style that lends the work its title and which developed from a multicultural melding of Afro-Caribbean rhythm and sound with the folk music of Colombian farmers.

While green skin tends to be reserved in the Western collective cultural imagination for pop fantasy beings (Muppets, extraterrestrials, villains and superheroes), here the music hints that the artist's real intention was to evoke a Colombian landscape. In some ways it is as if the artist is treating his own body as a foreign territory, a fertile and undulating land that his finger doll explores on an expedition or reconnaissance trip. Although the body-as-a-landscape idea can evoke a dodgy kind of erotic photography that imagines buttocks as sand dunes or a cleavage as adjacent hills, here it's used matter-of-factly. Meanwhile all sorts of brightly coloured bodies from the history of Performance art come to mind. Bruce Nauman's film *Art Make-up No. 3 Green* (1967-8), for instance, or troubling classics such as Yves Klein's blue print nudes, Hermann Nitsch's blood-splattered volunteers or Joseph

Beuys' very own honey and gold-leaf po-face (*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, 1965), to name just a few male, ritualistic, minstrel-like or mystically tinged acts - although there are probably enough other examples to cover the entire colour spectrum.

In video, Chromakey colours connote and delineate a space or thing earmarked for removal or deletion. It's favoured because people come in many different shades but not green, a fact that allows videoed performers to be easily superimposed on entirely different backgrounds. Zink Yi doesn't use this kind of special effect, but his video work does nevertheless involve the conceptual superimpositions of diverse backgrounds. The artist, who emigrated to Germany as a teenager, has what he has described as a 'layered notion of identity' shaped by his family's Peruvian, Chinese and German cultural heritage. This needs mentioning because in a number of works he draws directly on this experience and places it in the thematic foreground. These layers (although perhaps we need a word that conjures up a less orderly, less graspable arrangement) include big topics such as nationality and race. In his split-screen video *Dedicated to Yi Yen Wu* (2000) cultural worlds rub shoulders rather than collide, in a domestic setting where good Creole cooking co-exists alongside good Chinese cuisine. The work also uses spoken and written text, including the recollections of the artist's Peruvian-born mother, who memorably describes her impressions of mainland China as 'the biggest Chinatown in the world', one where you can't just 'go across the street and go back to your own stuff'.

More recently Zink Yi has directed a video camera away from himself and towards other less familial Latin American others, with a keenly sensitive understanding of what he is doing. A good example of this is his most recent video installation, *6 x Yta Moreno* (2004), which consists of six different projected views of Brazilian musician Yta Moreno singing a samba in an apartment in Vienna - a place where the neighbours are more likely to complain than sing along. For Zink Yi the 'body is the space and the medium in which the process of questioning of identity takes place', and he has often chosen to demonstrate this through video based on music and dance performances. The viewer is given a choice of close-up shots of the musician's body that at the same time subvert or complicate the desire to view the entire filmed subject or performer. Moreno's face is never shown, and the projection screens in the room are placed in such a way that it's hard to take them all in at once - there is always something else going on at the edge of your peripheral vision.

Navigating the space, it becomes clear that each projection screen has its own sound-track, and that together these form a greater whole at an undefined point in the room. For the sound-track the musician mimicked the noise of the cuica and five percussion instruments - the chocalho, repinique, repique, pandeiro, and agogô. It was the artist's choice to film in the musician's home rather than a neutral environment. Anybody who knows any aspiring musician will recognize the room as a home studio, cluttered with a computer, guitars, Midi keyboards and other equipment. There must be thousands of rooms like it in Europe, all manifesting the dream of liberation from the everyday and of self-realization through music. The sung samba seems all the more incongruous because of the conventional mid-European setting. Here the entrancing polyrhythms - usually generated by a close-knit group of musicians who need say little and can lose themselves for hours in their group's sonic creation - are produced by a lone musician with only basic recording gear. The result is impressive, but

it's not the same, and perhaps it indicates the loneliness that is often a side-effect of cultural displacement. In the act of performing, the performer is mentally in two very different places at once.

While Zink Yi seems to be a serious music enthusiast, his works - often driven by Latino rhythms that give them a sense of insistency - are not about holding a musicology lecture or justifying a passionate hobby. Instead, for him making music demonstrates how the complexity of cultural identity is communicated through the body. *La Salsa* (1998), for example, shows the artist learning with some success to dance the salsa. A holiday to Cuba and a friendship forged there with some street musicians led to two new works: *De adentro y afuera* (From Within and Without, 2003), a multi-channel video installation that deals with the clave and salsa rhythms, whose development is intertwined with the history of slavery, colonization and Cuban isolation; and *Añejo Blanco* (Aged Rum, 2003), a split-screen video of the artist's Cuban band *Pierra Firme* performing a charming, slightly drunken cover version of the Cuban bolero song 'A mi manera' (My Way). The lyrics include such lines as 'They say it isn't life that I'm living, that what I'm feeling doesn't seem like love, that I am guilty of being too proud because I walk on indifferently in the face of grief', which take on new overtones when heard in an art context in the West. In comparison with the work of Santiago Sierra or Wim Wenders' film *Buena Vista Social Club* (1999) Zink Yi's cross-cultural engagement is based less on a brutal exposure of market forces than on an ethics of close personal ties.

Dominic Eichler