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TEJU COLE PERFORMS THE TRUMP NIGHTMARE

By Orit Gat, November 8, 2017



One January night, bedeviled by nightmares, writer and photographer Teju Cole dreamed up the title of a work: Black Paper.

"I thought, 'OK, well, that will lead to a novel,'" Cole tells me as he prepares for the first in a series of Performa-commissioned presentations, "but I quickly realized that that this energy actually needed to start moving in a much more visual direction."

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Black Paper is a second iteration of this project, preceded by an exhibition of photographs at Steven Kasher Gallery last summer. It's an attempt to sum up the past year, beginning with the US general election last November. At Steven Kasher, it took the form of a suite of fifty photographs. The performance version of the work includes a much larger number of photos and a soundtrack, all collected by Cole over the past year and brought together onstage for four nights.

"If I say I want to present an hour-long, immersive experience about the past year, what are the elements of this presentation? What will they be?" Cole remembers asking himself. "Clearly the impetus for framing this work over the last twelve months has everything to do with the election, even though the final expression of the work itself does not take the direction of partisan politics. It occupied a middle ground between the one extreme of really global concerns and the other extreme of some very personal, close-to-the-skin experiences, like the voice of my grandmother."

The overarching narrative of the performance is a night of dreams. The theater, BKLYN Studios at City Point in Downtown Brooklyn, was arranged in four groups of folding seats all directed toward a twin bed in the middle of the space. Cole walked over to the bed wearing a suit, changed into sweatpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt, then crawled into the black sheets on the bed. As he slept in the middle of the audience, the photographs he took and selected were projected on two sets of three screens surrounding the audience. On the left screen was an image of a room overlooking a lake or an ocean; on the right end was the front page of the New York Times from November 9, 2016: "Trump Triumphs."

That screen slowly faded into other New York Times pages all reflecting on social turmoil in the US post-election. On the middle screen appeared a succession of the images Cole collected over the year. Overnight flights, walks in foreign cities, portraits, landscapes, demonstrations, a car with bullet holes, a shattered iPhone, an eclipse—the images shift between nighttime scenes and daylight shots. The pace is hectic and the sound a dynamic patchwork of loud and soft that incorporates Cole's voiceover to music alongside field recordings.

What ties it all together is the montage itself and a sense of rhythm: "Putting things side by side, images or sensations or narratives that may not seem to be directly connected to each other, is key to me," Cole says. "Through the juxtaposition, a kind of poetic meaning emerges. I believe that the key to a montage is a kind of psychological precision that's very hard to write down, very hard to give an account of, but when it works, you know." The rapid pace and hypnotic rhythm is remarkably personal, but also reflects Cole's sensibility to the people around him: "each human being is a collection of rhythms; we walk to a certain rhythm, we breathe in a certain rhythm, our nervous fire at a certain rhythm, we talk at a certain speed that is ours and our hearts beat at a certain resting rate. All these rhythms together make the person that you are. My resting heart rate is 70 beats a minute. There's nothing remarkable about my heart rate except that it's mine. The doctor measured my heart rate it comes to slightly more than one beat per second. So the pulse of the entire sound design of this show is 70 beats per minute."

This is the first performance by Cole, author of the novel *Open City* and critic for the New York Times. While his work in photography has appeared in books and galleries, the invitation from Performa curator Adrienne Edwards pushed him in a new direction: "I have never experimented with performance," he admits. "I've done onstage things with musicians. A bit of it is improvised but not a lot; usually I'm reading from a prepared text. But what we might recognize as an artist doing a work before a public, no this is my first. It's a language that I feel very excited about."

What interests Cole in this new form is immediacy. "I wanted to convey both the global nature of what's going on and then the highly personal nature of the same experience of time," he says. What's in a year? Cole's nightmares and their causes, personal experiences and the events surrounding them. "What really interests me in *Black Paper* is the possibility

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of rapid response," he explains, then asks, "Is work that is made rapidly and intensely necessarily shallow, or does it have the opportunity to actually be thick in texture, and difficult: Does it have the ability to draw blood?"

Teju Cole, *Black Paper* was presented at BKLYN Studios at City Point, Brooklyn, on November 2, 3, and 4 as part of Performa 17.