

NAME AND BREAK THE BLOCKS

A Performative Lecture by Preach R Sun

Transcribed by Francesca Carol Rolla and Preach R Sun

Duration: 60'

Given at the European Cultural Centre / Palazzo Mora, Venice (IT), on December 12, 2017. In the context of Co-Creation Live Factory Prologue 1, the new project of the VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK, curated by VestAndPage and Francesca Carol Rolla.

The lecture has been given to 75 international artists from 27 countries selected through an open call to articulate, develop and explore their individual performance praxis within an independent temporary autonomous zone of co-creation, under the tuition of the artists Marilyn Arsem, VestAndPage and Andriago&Aliprandi.

FIRST STATION

(Preach R Sun opens the lecture reciting Public Enemy, Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos.)

"I got a letter from the government / the other day / I opened and read it and said they were suckers

They wanted me for their army or whatever / picture me giving a damn I said never

Here's a land that never gave a damn / about a brother like me and myself because they never did

I wasn't with it but just that very minute it / occurred to me / the suckers have authority....".

One of my mantras. It guides me. Inspired me, in my journey, in my process, in my actions.

Is a quote by Albert Camus: "The only way to live in an unfree world, is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion."

For me, seeing you here, being a part of this workshop.

First of all, I'd like to thank VestAndPage, Francesca Carol Rolla, curating this beautiful event.

I'd like to thank Giorgio, Giovanni of WeExhibit, and I'd like to thank all of you, for inspiring me.

And I'd like to spend a little bit of time just talking to you.

This is not a lecture. I don't like lectures.

(Laughter)

And it's not going to be perfect or anything like that.

If you want to cut in, if you want to jump in, if you want to get upset, if you want to curse me out, it's all good, ok?

For me it's about realness. Umm, I can't be any other way.

You know, I am not all into the philosophical idea and things, I think there is a spiritual element that comes out, there is a natural thing. I do get into philosophical things but, really it's about just trying to cut through to what's real.

As I said to you before, and I know you have heard me when I introduced myself, I'm not an artist. I don't really believe in art in that way, that everyone else does.

My work is a commitment. It's a life process.
My praxis is freedom, simple.
When I started off I said, I want to become free, I want to get free.

The portal to my freedom came – which a lot of people are annoyed by that and they don't want to hear it often – through umm, race. Racialized existence.
Immediate racialized existence creates the condition for self-activity, as Fanon would say.
So, for me it was important to – and not even important, it was necessary or just happened – that I knew from a very young age...

Umm, I don't know how many of you know about, I'm skipping around, W. E. B. Du Bois?

When he talked about double consciousness, and he talks about, as that, it's like that, that that moment, and Fanon talked about this as well, but that moment when you realize that you are an, Other, and you realize that you are black, in this context, and that your blackness is a problem.

For me it was at the age of 8.

Me and my best friend running across the streets in Kansas City, Missouri, playing with toy guns. We were probably around, at that time I was probably about the same age, as I don't know if any of you know in America Tamir Rice, young boy that got shot down and killed by the police, while playing in a park with a toy gun. This was more recent. I'm going back, and I don't want to age myself, don't want to think about that... It happened when I was around 8, as well.

At that time, I used to look at the police and we would call them, I don't know if they call them that now, Officer Friendly. And they would give us candy and things.
So, needless to say, when this incident took place, that I'm about to explain to you, I was shocked.

Me and my best friend were playing toy guns, and we were just walking, you know with our toy guns – as kids have their toy guns – and the police pulled up, stopped us in the middle of the street, drew their guns on us, and told us to get down.

Had it not been for my best friend's father, who came out and screamed: "They're just children and told us to just get down."

I probably wouldn't be here to tell the story because my first inclination was just to hand them the gun to – it's just a toy.
They would have shot me.

That was the first time I realized that I was different.

That was also the first time I realized that, the police showed me that, there was this sort of passage that I had transcended, that I had crossed over.
I was no longer an innocent child. I was a threat.

Next time something like that happened I was in high school, coming from a store. Just hanging out, had done nothing wrong. Police pulled me over.

They threw me in the back of the car, and they asked me – and they were just driving me around like you know, they were just driving me around – and I asked them what did I do, and they wouldn't tell me.

I have a bit of a mouth as many of you know, so even then it was true.

So, I was like: "You need to tell me what the hell did I do, because this is not, you don't have the right to do this. I didn't do anything wrong, you don't have a right."

And they told me: "Shut up boy. We can do whatever the fuck we want to do to you. We can take you somewhere and you disappear, and nobody would care. And who would believe you? We're the police. You're a nigger."

So, needless to say when I came here, and I've had discussions, and when people hear me talking about blackness or whiteness, or when my friends hear me talking about blackness or whiteness, they don't understand that I am saying. When you look at my work and the only thing you see is black or white or race, you do not understand.

That is my portal. That was my cause. That was what triggered me. I had to get free.

As Frederick Douglass would once say: "Those who claim to [want] freedom and deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. [...] Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has and it never will. Find out what any people will quietly submit to and you have found the exact measure of wrong and injustice that will be imposed upon them. [...] The limit of tyrants is prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress."

So, when I came to you, I've spoken to many of you in groups, what I try to get you to understand is you have to find your place in the pain. For me it's race.

But for me what I understood by trying to get free, trying to free myself of this racial objectification, trying to prove myself to be or become the man that I knew I had to be, that I knew I was.

In this process in saying, my whole praxis, when I said my whole – everything I would do in performance – would be geared towards freedom.

It's not about performing. It's not about being in the galleries.

I HAVE GOT TO GET FUCKING FREE.

So, I live my work. It's not a game for me.

Somebody would say to me the other day: Art, we understand, we're all artists.

But as artists, we're not on the frontline, we're not the activists, we're not there, we do the work so that the activists can take from us – that's bullshit with me.

People wanted to tell me I wasn't an artist, then they want to tell me I'm not an activist.

I am on the fucking frontlines. I live on the frontlines.

I go right out there by myself and I put my body on the line, and that's when I say for any of you here who are questioning or saying, how do I use this work to further, to get out and make a

change? And people tell you: That's not your job. You are just an artist, that's bullshit. That is your job.

Now, I am not saying everybody has to agree with me.

If you want to just do work about flowers, or if you want to just do, and I'm not being funny, I'm being real. If you want to just do what you do and be all in, you know conceptual and all this, that's your right, but that's the beauty of this thing you call art. It has many functions.

But for me and as I'm saying to you, and I want you to understand, this is some shaman shit, you have.

I don't call myself an artist, what I call it is conjuring.

We conjure. And the name I put on it is also 'fugitivism'.

Because I am a fugitive, I am a fugitive because my crime is freedom.

And everybody in here is a victim of that crime.

Maybe you understand, or not, you too are slaves the same way I am.

We all are slaves to the system.

Mine might be race as the first place I saw, but it's sex, it's gender, it's class.

This system keeps us all from our humanity. It's the blocks.

The reason why we're living the way we are and there's so much suffering is because our humanity is in crisis.

We've used the word humanity, we say we are human, but we don't know what humanity is. You can't have humanity – the essence of humanity is FREEDOM – and you are not free.

You cannot be free if you have to obey these sorts of blocks, these sorts of, these places that you are put. I cannot be free as a black racialized being, because by the very nature of race, it alienates us from our humanity.

It says I have to obey this, I have to be black, you have to be white.

And there's conditions, even when you don't see, even when people say: I don't want to hear it, I am tired of it, I don't see black, I don't see race. That's bullshit.

In the same way, you have to be a woman, you have to be a man.

You have to be gay or straight. You're rich or poor.

Those are the blocks.

In order to get free, we have to break through the blocks.

In order to, I remember people talking to me about the universal humanity, being universal, and they say my message is not universal.

But I ask you, what is universal? Who dictates or arbitrates universality?

It certainly isn't the philosophers, that y'all read about and y'all tell me about in your art history books and whatnot, or whatever ... everyone talks about, oh Hegel this and that. No, because in fact, philosophy has also attributed to the very condition that I'm fighting against, because philosophy and history it says I don't exist.

I didn't exist in your world. And you don't know that.

In the very nature that when I bring up race, and it makes some of you so tense, and then you say, what about the environment? What about oh, what about the people over here Preach? What about, I don't want to hear.... You are playing into the very thing that I am saying, you think that I am trying to separate, no! I'm trying to bring us together!

But you're defensive, because you've been conditioned to obey and hold on to your block. And you don't want to let it go. And I challenge you, because I'M UP IN YOUR FUCKING FACE! And I'm saying, I'm going to get free rather you like it or not. You're going to see me.

Now blackness is not where it stops. And that's the problem that so many of us don't understand. That's just the, that's the initial phase and I had to learn that. That's a necessary phase.

Struggle is necessary just like if you're gay, or if you're bi, or if you're a woman and want to survive....

Your struggle is necessary. The first thing you want to say, I'm going to assert myself, as gay, or as a bisexual or as a woman. I'm going to demand that you see me as that, but that's not the final destination.

The final destination is the universal element that we're talking about, and it is through those portals that we all share the same struggle. Oppression and exploitation, it's all the same thing for everybody, because it's all geared against one object – and that is man.

It denies us of our right to be men.
And I am not saying men versus man/ woman.
I am saying human beings.

We have a responsibility to each other.

So, when people tell me, Oh, what about the starving people in India? Have you been to India, Preach? You don't know what it is to starve. You don't know when I've starved – starving. Hunger is hunger. You ain't gotta go to some other country to know what fucking hunger, hunger is. If you, if you're starved. Your stomach growling. You, crying.

That's me, my mother and my sister, when we had run from my father and had to hide out in a hotel. And my mother had to trick me into thinking we were having a vacation because she didn't have no money to get food. And all we had is Flintstone fucking vitamins. And I'm thinking: Oh, this is the best shit ever. I get to eat candy. All day. I didn't realize till later – naw, we didn't have no food.

So, when we try to separate and say, this cause is more important than this cause, is more important than that cause, you're missing 'THE' cause.

The whole purpose of me saying, and I am screaming to you, I want to get free, all I'm saying is this is my experience. What's your experience? Let's share, let's talk to each other. When we

confront each other, then we break through the difference, in order to understand that we have a common goal together. That's freedom.

So, for me, this work is larger than art.
It's larger than these walls.
I do my conjuring in the street.

It's not about making money. It's not about getting accolades.
It's not about – so many people say – Oh, but did you see my last piece I ... I stood on a grapefruit for six hours and farted and everybody was (*Laughter*)... That ain't me. I mean, but I'm real, that's, that might be you. That ain't me.

I think there is a larger purpose to this and like I said, it's shaman work.

I think as the artists that you are, and I have met many of you, and I've talked to many of you, there's a deeper, there's an urgency inside of you that goes beyond just creating objects and putting them in museums. Everybody in here has a desire to get free.
That's why the artist is so dangerous to society.

But just like I've been caught and labeled, and trapped in the cage of my race, you have been caught and labeled, and trapped in the cage of art.

They know how to get you.

Think about how the art world operates.

"Oh, I'm an artist, I'm a curator, I'm this and that, I've done this great stuff, I need this, I need, I need, I need" – and that's how they get us with need.
I see it firsthand. And them shackles they introduced us to, that was far worse than slavery, was need. Because need they can spread, and it can apply to everybody.

"I need money to survive. I need my title. I need my prestige. I need my job, I need this, I need that." – But all you need is your commitment, your fight, the immediacy of existence.
Whatever that thing is that you realize, when you realize: I am not free.
That is what should drive you.

As John Henrik Clarke once said: "Whatever your passion is, whatever your passion is, it should be the tool for your liberation."

So, no matter what you do, James Baldwin used to say that too, it's all about being political, it is all about reflecting the times. Nina Simone said the same thing.
And when people tell you that you don't have the responsibility as artists to reflect the times and to challenge, it's because they are trying to protect the status quo.

You do have a responsibility. You might not like what I say, you might not like what I do. I don't give a damn. But I am here to tell you, you do have a responsibility.
If we're saying the world has to change, it begins with us.
And you have power. It runs through you.

Inside the thousand miles of arteries, capillaries and veins that make up that territory that is your body. There's a map. It's the underground railroad.

If I line every last one of you up, in your actions, and your performance, no matter how different it is, I guarantee you, I see, it goes towards the North Star.
Everybody, all of us together.

Marilyn's time, she would mark the time for us.
I ain't joking with you. You don't hear me. These are the works.
VestAndPage would give us intimacy, while we travel through, bring us closer together. When we're cold, come together, come together. Aldo and Marianna would show us how to move through those waters. How to get real, how to go through it, how to flow through it, how to move.

We conjure. We're shaman. It starts with you. It's your language.

As Fanon would once say about language, I used to realize, you know, because there's another thing in our culture that black people often said that they robbed us of our god, and our language. They took everything from us, in order to strip us of our humanity.
We were made racialized beings, so that we could be seen as inferior beings, so that you don't have to see us as human.

And again, like I said, history and philosophy has played a part in that too.
Because you go through philosophy, it says, there was nothing in Africa, there was no history before Europe.

So, when you hear me getting angry, when you hear me, when I hear some of you talk, and you see that grit in the back of my teeth, and I might look at you a certain way when you come quoting me some philosophical bullshits about, well this is what freedom is, and this is what universality is, Preach, and you need to be more universal. And I'm, have to fight from screaming on your ass. Then you know why.

Because what you trying to tell me is that I don't exist.
Because I didn't write the shit that you wrote. Because I didn't create the beautiful things that you created.

And I am supposed to honor that.
I'm supposed to honor your culture.
I'm supposed to honor your standards.

When you find me in debates, or we're in bars or something, and I get loud because I get angry and then you try to say: "Shut up, Preach," and I say: "YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP!" Then you know why.

There's a history to this. You will not deny my existence. And I can love you. I love all of you.
But you will not deny me, because I will not deny you.

We are better than the blocks.
We are better than the blocks.

We, have to learn to see each other. We have to fight to see each other.
And like I said, this is the language. You have your body.

What you do with your body is magnificent. And Malcolm X, what was Malcolm X term? By what? You get free by what? Anybody know that term?

By any means necessary.

Francesca Carol Rolla said one time in her letter to La Pocha Nostra, in her letter from an independent curator, it's this beautiful letter, and she talked about what if we lived our existence.

What was it, Francesca? I'm putting you on the spot, what was it?

Francesca Carol Rolla: *"To live your life as a work of art."*

So, if your art becomes about your freedom, becomes about your existence, every day you can live that way. We negate the reality. We negate the system. We negate the structures. We tear down the wall by the very nature of being who we are. We introduce the new world into this world.

We don't cower away. We don't hide behind walls, we don't keep it to ourselves. This is beautiful. But you gotta take it out, in order to, change for real. You have to believe that we can change. The world has to see you standing, it has to see you doing, what you do out there. You have to paint those streets, with your truth.

You have to become what you see inside. You can't just internalize it. You can't just cower inside yourself and say, "But I have this thing, that I am scared to express. I have this thing that I'm ashamed of. And I just don't know what to do. I just, I hide..." No, you have to bring it out. And that's how you free yourself. And that's how you, free other people.

So, that's what we are here for, I think. That's what I wanted to share with you. I wanted to talk to you about freedom. And that's what I have been talking about, freedom – and your language that you create through your work.

As Fanon had said: "He who speaks (language) is in a position to grasp a certain syntax or to use a certain syntax and grasp a morphology of this or that particular language. But to speak is also to assume a culture and to support the weight of a civilization. He goes on to say, a man who possesses, who has a language, who has his own language, consequently possesses the world that, that language expresses and implies."

When I realized, when I thought about it for a long time, that we were stripped of our language. The first thing I used to think about in doing work, I was like: Oh, I'm going to create my own language in writing.

So, I started off doing it, I started off, I'm going to do this gibberish thing and I'll make it, and it's going to turn into... I thought of language being like this, and I couldn't do it. I was like, well, this is not working. I was trying to study linguistics. I was looking at stuff and say, how do you? And I couldn't do it because it was already going back to that root. And it's not until I thought about that, that quote, that I realized the language – that I – is already being created, it's my work.

Those who see that language, that may not understand what you're doing fully at first, and that's ok, that's the whole thing.

But I am not, some of us, we want to go over everybody's head, I'm not trying to go over your head, I am trying to reach you. So, my language is direct.

But I know in time the people that get the language they understand it, they come to it. It's just like any other language. It takes time.

But you have to have the courage, to use your body, to express your language, to get free.

(Applause)

SECOND STATION

(Preach R Sun, holding a Mason jar, approaches and questions various individuals in the circle.)

Preach R Sun: I can't see you. Are you man or woman? Are you man or woman?

Fenia Kotsopoulou: *"It's me."*

I can't see you.

Sara Kostic: *"I see you."*

Are you man or woman?

Sara Kostic: **unintelligible response**

I can't see you. Are you gay or straight?

Ivana Ranisavljevic: *"I'm everything."*

I can't see you. Are you man or woman?

Ria Hartley: *"A woman."*

Blow into it.

(Preach R Sun instructs them to blow into the jar.)

I can't see you. Are you man or woman?

Marisa Garreffa: *"I don't know."*

I can't see you. Are you gay or straight?

James Bullimore: *"Straight."*

Blow into it.

I can't see you. Are you rich or poor?

Marie Künne: *"I don't know."*

I can't see you. Are you gay or straight?

Samira Engel: *"I'm here, and I am whatever I want to be."*

I can't see you. Are you black or white?

Shola Cole: *"I am black."*

Blow into this, please.

I can't see you. Are you black or white?

Yagmur Tacar: *"I am white."*

Blow into this, please.

I can't see you. Are you male or female?
Alexandra Talamo: "*I am female.*"
Blow into this, please.

I can't see you. Are you man or woman?
Alex Spyke: "*A man.*"
Blow into this, please.

(Preach R Sun collects their breath and then closes the lid on the Mason jar.)

THIRD STATION

(Preach R Sun leads the audience members outside into the garden of the palazzo. In the garden, sitting beside a large wooden palate, there's a stack of concrete slabs and a hammer.)

Preach R Sun: Follow me outside!

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Come children.

Welcome to the auction block.

Welcome to the auction block.

The blocks that separate us and keep us from our humanity.

Name the blocks. You can repeat. Name blocks for me.

(As the audience names their blocks, Preach R Sun places concrete slabs, one by one, onto the wooden palate where he then commences to smash them with the hammer.)

Name some blocks. What are the blocks?

Greed!

Female!

Name the blocks. What are the blocks?

Prison!

....

What are the blocks?

Racism!

What are the blocks?

Sexism!

Money!

Name the blocks, keep going.

Misogyny!

Name the blocks.

War!

...

What are the blocks?

Disease!

Boundaries!

Name the blocks.

History!

Abortion!

Society!

...

I can't hear you. The blocks.

Capitalism!

Limits!

...

I don't believe you. Name the blocks.

I said, name the blocks.

Name the blocks.

Name the blocks.

Name the blocks.

Name the blocks.

Name the blocks.

Name the blocks.

Name the blocks.

I said name the blocks.

I said name the blocks

I said, name the blocks.

Let's destroy the blocks.

I said, name the blocks.

I said, name the blocks.

I said, name the blocks.

I said, name the blocks.

Religion!

Gender!

System!

My body!

I said name the blocks....

FORTH STATION

(Preach R Sun collects and gathers the broken concrete pieces into a plastic bin. He then picks up the bin and instructs the audience to follow him outside the gates of the palazzo – and into the streets. Once outside he empties the contents of the bin onto the streets.)

Who is without sin, cast the first stone.

Who is without sin, cast the first stone.

Who is without sin, cast the first stone.

(A passerby enters the circle and angrily kicks the pile of rocks.)

My blocks or your blocks!

My blocks or your blocks!

My humanity is your humanity.

My freedom is your freedom.

Yes! Yes!

My freedom is your freedom!

Yes!

MY FREEDOM IS YOUR FREEDOM!

Yes!

Say it: My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

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My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

La mia libertà è la tua libertà.

My freedom is your freedom.

La mia libertà è la tua libertà.

My freedom is your freedom.

La mia libertà è la tua libertà.

My freedom is your freedom.

My freedom is your freedom.

It's not written in the books yet. The humanity I'm talking about, the freedom I'm talking about, is not existing now. That's why I fight for it out here.

We define it. We create it.

Now, you can pick up the blocks, or you can leave them. But you'll recognize that these blocks now, they're light. They have nothing in them.

There's no need for us to hold on to them.

They do not define us. They're not a threat to us. They're nothing.

This is now. Thank you.

Let's get free.