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Visitor From Another World

Lee “Scratch” Perry’s entire persona and output comprise a complex *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a vast collage with roots dating back to 1958.

By Mickael Marman 15.10.21 Essay Artikel på norsk




Work by Lee “Scratch” Perry at the 34th Bienal de São Paulo. Photo: Levi Fanan / Fundação Bienal de São Paulo

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After many decades of recognition for his tremendous contribution to modern music, Jamaican-born Lee “Scratch” Perry has in recent years received a great deal of attention and acclaim for his visual art, with exhibitions at international galleries and institutions. Rainford Hugh Perry, as he was born, died on 29 August 2021, aged 85, but his work is currently on view at the São Paulo Biennale and there will be a solo show at the London gallery Cabinet next spring.

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I believe it was in Banjul in the winter of 1990 that I, as a 7-year-old boy, first became acquainted with Perry’s art. My aunt let me watch movies that my dear mother would never have allowed me to see, and this night the film *Countryman* (directed by Dickie Jobson, 1982) was to serve as the evening’s entertainment. The film is a kind of mix of a Jamaican Rambo and an adventure film with major dollops of Rastafarian culture and, of course, reggae. Perry contributed the classic ‘Dreadlocks in Moonlight’ and produced several of the songs featured on the soundtrack. The film struck a chord with me, and I have watched it again many times over the years. An important reference point for reggae music, the film constantly pops up in conversations I have with reggae fans. The same can certainly be said about my relationship with Perry, an artist whose body of work has always, through many different scenes, settings, and life periods, found its way back into my head and my world.

My excitement was great when, around 2018, I discovered that he had also begun exhibiting his visual art in prominent settings and was on his way to forging a new career in contemporary art thanks in great part to his gallerist and friend Lorenzo Bernet, the man behind *suns.works*, an artist-run commercial gallery in Zurich that has distinguished itself in recent years by showcasing practices which fall outside the scope of the hip Swiss art scene, such as a solo exhibition last year featuring the highly acclaimed German DJ Wolfgang Voigt, to mention just one example.

Perry launched his musical career back in 1958. He was extremely prolific, producing for a wide array of artists ranging from Bob Marley to Paul McCartney and The Beastie Boys, and many will agree that he is one of the most influential musicians in modern music. Many compare him to Phil Spector (the latter's better aspects, of course), and Keith Richards describes him as a kind of Salvador Dalí of music and a shaman. Much of his success came from his ability to constantly find new and radical ways of creating sound collages (hence the nickname "Scratch"). The song "People Funny Boy" (1968) is one of the earliest examples of sampling in history, an invention to which hip-hop is greatly indebted. The song is also a diss aimed at his former partner, producer Joe Gibbs from Amalgamated Records.

It would be no exaggeration to say that he was among those who invented dub music (another name that merits mention in this regard is, of course, King Tubby), a subgenre of classic reggae music that emerged in the early 1970s and changed the sound of reggae. Looking back, dub also had a huge influence on electronic music and on modern music in general. The themes addressed in his world of sound are often revolutionary, anti-capitalist, and Pro-Black in nature, but always playfully experimental and surprising.

Collage is something I think about a lot in relation to my own art. I view collage as a way of looking at the world in general; this is where Perry's art really comes into play. His entire persona and output forms a vast and complex *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a gigantic collage that extends all the way back to 1958. His completely unique style and way of talking were a big part of this. Perry's unique clothing style and appearance attracted plenty of attention throughout his career, including in the fashion industry, and in recent years he modelled for Supreme and Gucci, among others.

For someone who has always been concerned with the twisted link between the Western canon and non-Western art (the term “primitive art” is a no-no in my house), Perry is a blast of fresh air in an otherwise very white and masculine tradition, neo-Expressionism. It is great to see how someone with no professional education as a visual artist has so much material to work with. Perry did his work without the affected – and, by now, rather tired – bad-boy attitude often associated with painting-based installation art. His installations encompass everything from paintings (featuring countless images of himself in various constellations) to religious objects, clothes, and a whole bunch of other things often associated with pan-Africanism and the Rastafarian religion. Perry often talked about the Rastafarian religion, but was generally sceptical of people with dreadlocks – an interesting contradiction.

This summer I was invited to arrange an exhibition at Conceptual Fine Arts in Milan, where all the participants were artists with an Afropean background (artists with various connections to the African diaspora in Europe, rather than the ubiquitous African-American narrative that the art market and curators have become so fond of). The exhibition’s title, *Having*

a party (hope you will be there), was taken from Perry’s 2008 song of the same name. Perry, who lived in Switzerland for the last thirty years of his life, contributed several works to the exhibition. Covid-19 made it difficult for him to travel from Jamaica, where he stayed during his final months, but I had hoped to meet him this fall in connection with his presentation at Art Basel. Sadly, this was not to be. But, as one of his most famous quotes goes:

“I am an alien from the other world, from outer space, I don’t have no land, no estate, no property, no house. Not on this earth. I live in space – I’m only a visitor here.”