

Harold Offeh - Specially commissioned essay | Luxonline

In 2001 the British Council sent Offeh to Brazil for an artist's residency sponsored by London's Gasworks Gallery and a Brazilian artist's run centre. But the Brazilian centre collapsed (figuratively, not literally), before Offeh and Lisa Cheung (another artist on the programme) arrived. Faced with no structure and no studio practice, Offeh spent much of the residency looking to the city and daily culture for influence and inspiration. Instead of spending time in a studio, he took samba lessons and perused carnival shops, while also watching regular daily events such as the work of labourers. Initially pointing the camera at those he was observing, Offeh decided the footage felt too exotic, too much him watching the other, and turned the camera on himself.

The result was *Haroldinho*, a performance to video camera (recorded by Cheung), where Offeh adopted emblematic elements of Brazilian culture to translate his own humorous grappling with his identity in Rio de Janeiro. Offeh, a Black British artist who was born in Ghana, was mistaken for Brazilian due to the colour of skin, and spent much of the trip apologising for not speaking Portuguese or being Brazilian. Dressed in a typical labourer's, dark blue uniform, but with carnival spangles of stars and watermelons sewn on, Offeh dances an amateurish samba in iconic locations around Rio. Gold letters spell out *Haroldinho* on his shirt. Captured on camera, his dancing is a video-postcard that plays on cultural cliches and assumptions.

But while performing *Haroldinho*, Offeh also became part of the local culture. Performed and shot in iconic locations around Rio, such as the football stadium, the statue of the Christ, and the beach, while some passers-by and unknowing audiences were bemused (which turns out to be a common response to his actions), others assumed him part of the

local culture. At the football stadium, a group of Argentinean tourists on a guided tour thought he was part of the entertainment and took photos; on the beach a (presumably) Brazilian woman comes up to the dancing Haroldinho and sambas with him, playfully caressing his legs while she dances in her bikini.

To audiences watching little Harold (the title and persona's name are phrased in a Brazilian term of affection) on video, the work serves as a document of an action with connotations of a holiday home movie. To those who experienced Offeh's actual performance in the moment, rather than via the video, it's a guerilla-style art event where the local and the exotic clash in a mess of spangles to the beat of a little portable CD player.