

Who no know gon know.

South African proverb

“Would you wear my eyes?”

Bob Kaufman

You got to go there to know there

The Affective Reenactments of Cauleen Smith’s *Remote Viewing: Other Ways of Seeing*

Tisa Bryant

Our understanding of African diasporic history often benefits from the critical inquiry and creative work of visual artists. Their efforts give us valuable information, but also provide crucial opportunities to imagine undocumented realities, witness unspeakable truths, and answer unasked questions about how we see, think and feel. What emotions are stirred from the seemingly banal act of digging an enormous hole? *What’s happening here?* Or from the sight of two Black people marking out something under the wide branches of a tree? Cauleen Smith collaborates with space and language to invent a visual language for the hidden histories of these places. She trains her lens on the unacknowledged and erased atrocities endured by African American people, then reenacts them. She goes there to know there. Still, these radical and visionary interventions can only attempt to shrink the distance between past and present, between being (invisibly) marked by history and the illusion of being separate from it. Smith addresses the problem through her willingness to be implicated and affected by our shared histories, and by her commitment to an artistic practice rooted in empathy.

Who gets to tell the story of a land? *Of the* land? How does it tell itself? If one can dowse for water, what else can be divined of the soil? From the roots of a living thing. How might its memory speak? Do I inhabit this place, its history, or does it inhabit me, like *déjà vu*, the trace of a very old dream from another time. *Something happened here.* Part of the strength of Smith’s reenactments lies in her choice to withhold the origin, the inspiration for it, from the frames of her films. Her influences are evoked and referred to, recast and interrogated, located and identified in time and space. She gives us room to ask, “Why have you brought us here, to this soil, these sounds,” and encourages us to dig into our own archives of lineage, place, experience and feeling, and come to our own conclusions. Our presence, then, as witness, plays a role, creates a new memory of land that we then carry and pass on and integrate into our personal and shared histories.

Sheridan, Arkansas, 1959. The place where a church, a house, a town used to be. Where people were free to read and know their letters. So much is missing. So much about to be seen. Stadium lights of an unknown spectacle, beyond the magic scrim of the green screen, the unnatural color standing out against all that does not seem to want to grow here. Red dirtbombs and little rocks. *What do we know of this place?* A big yellow machine appears, but it is not a school bus. A woman paces back and forth; we see only her legs, but the feeling is worry. Then we see her, head and shoulders, standing firm. *We shall not be moved.* The lens connecting the past with this present moment. The woman's arm is around a boy. The feeling is family, the heart of the place that is, still, the town. The boy pulls a spyglass from his back pocket and holds it in front of his face. His eye grows big with seeing. The only voices are of the birds. Sound reminiscent of thunder and rain, though we see sun and large machines. Force of wind, though the green growth in the foreground remains still. Birds, sound of claw, scraping skin of the earth, the machines stand in for something, someone else, a human arm, a flexing bicep, perhaps, digging, driven by a collective agreement, a single thought, a feeling. The driver is anonymous, an outline we could fill with anyone, someone specific. A shadow, a force.

The expanse of stillness, the spread of noise, on the heap of dirt extracted from the land the boy is above it all, king for a moment, a sweep of perspective, a future glimpsed. Gone. He is at the edge, peering into the trench. Deep, with sheer, unscalable sides, perfectly square, inescapable. The scene is almost familiar, everyday, its elements a part of a daily landscape: houses, construction, empty lots as children's playground, and like any neighborhood bystander, we wait, and watch, wrapped in the sound of heavy machinery. The school bell rings. The mood is grave, funereal. The bell rings into the crypt. Faint metallic cry. Then is still. Mother sister. Mother teacher. Boy in clean school clothes. We don't see them witness this. We are them now. No crowd gathers. No prayer is offered. The people are gone. *Who would do such a thing? Why?* Smith's reenactment defies denial, and demands we look. The inhumanity of the act is compounded, made palpable, by the cold enormity of the machines. The shovel's maw eats at the soil, throws it back down into the grave, over the school. The tractor rolls over the burial site, tamps it down, erasing the trace, the seam. The machines, the witnesses, disappear. To whom, now, does this trauma belong? And these are the questions, of context, people, time and space, of whose lives are rooted to the soil we disrupt or compress, make deals with for public art, that are not often asked. Questions of affect and consequence. What happens to this space after Cauleen Smith leaves? Will the boy return after

school, while his mother is at work, awaiting the next move, a giant beanstalk, a whisper from beyond. This lesson is indelible. Site specific.

Every place has a feeling. Ancient ancestor tree. And giant oaks walk at night. This we know. What we don't know is what it is to *be* that feeling. To inhabit it. To be the one doing the thing that makes the memory of the site and, in turn, spawns the quest to know the soil, the memory, the feeling, the action, intimately, again. To experience it. We are a species of actors, yet few among us will risk being changed irreparably by the act. Smith allows herself to get this close to where history is made, in moments and actions, among people, often undocumented, erased down to the merest, or most obvious trace. Shine of hands in amber light, soundless mallets. Sepia winds bowing grasses. Muted sky whispering. *This is so old.* Red tape. Bureaucracy. Surveying land, signs, markers of reality made visible to eyes willing to see. Trained to see. Raised and required to see. All the things a tree can mean. A shelter for students or lovers. *Carve your name.* Stakes tied with red bows. *Here's where you begin and end, according to the law.* Throw a rope. Hang a body. Pick a bit as a souvenir, a toe or perhaps an ear. Smell the kerosene. Send a postcard. *Wish you were here.* Lay a blanket under the leafy arms and dream.

A tree is never just a tree. Yet because of this, or in spite of it, the landscape of *Grid* is tactile, lyrical, peopled. We the artists at work, making something happen above the surface of the land. We watch them move down the field before the tree with red tape and stakes, weaving a grid of geometric precision. The elements, again, make their presence known, as if moving from the burial site and through to this moment, perhaps angry, perhaps playful, but certainly spirited. The wind disrupts the grid, making it waver and slacken. The artists, a bit dejected, gather blown tape, leaving it in a tangled red pool both vibrant and sad. The stakes create a pattern of holes in the soil we cannot see, and that the wind cannot disturb. Something unintentional has occurred and the land, aerated, has been given a kind of care. The artists gather, laugh, touch, and transform the sobriety the sobriety of the moment with a new energy, whistling through the leaves.

Glossolalia is the culmination of the video installation, making new language from the spyglass eye, the blinking image, wrapped in a soundscape most untethered, expansive. As snatches of sky telegraph across the screens then disappear, we reach for sounds in the darkness. Might one's tongue, throat and noise be changed from being architect and witness of these reenactments? Might one

chatter, stutter? Blink. *Catch the spirit.* The continuum of sound between *Remote Viewing*, *Grid*, and *Glossolalia*, elicits a sense of time passing, and of a changing same: wind through trees or through grasses, clouds shifting, diffusing the light, as if the elements are the connective, empathic tissue, the voice of land, nature, atmosphere. Memorial and immemorial. Like the mystics who study ley lines, measures of energy emanating from the earth's ancient totems, Cauleen Smith goes seeking, calling out in a new tongue, shrinking the distance between then and now, original and reenactment, trauma and healing.