

15 Potential afterlives

Cauleen Smith on the relation of film to performance—A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling and Jules Pelta Feldman

Cauleen Smith is a filmmaker and multimedia artist who produces street performances, flash mobs, installations, drawings and art objects. Smith holds a BA degree in Cinema from San Francisco State University and an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles and is a professor in the School of Art and Architecture at the University of California, Los Angeles. In the conversation below, Smith discusses films such as the highly acclaimed *Drylongso* (1998), *Sojourner* (2019) and *Space is the Place (A March for Sun Ra)* (2011), the last of which documents the *Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band*, a “flash mob” Smith organized in Chicago, for which a high school marching band played the music of Sun Ra. She also speaks about *Black Love Procession*, a collective performance—part celebratory parade, part political protest—that she organized in Chicago in 2015. Throughout the conversation, Smith reflects on the possible afterlives of her works, the relation between film and performance, and the importance of contingency in her process. As Smith explains, revisiting the past has the potential to resurrect old traumas but also to improve the future.

Hanna Hölling: I am interested in knowing whether the preservation of your work has influenced your artistic practice, both in its early stage and as it has developed over time?

Cauleen Smith: More so now. In the process of developing a practice, I think practice is the most important part. I’m not sure if the artist themselves is the best person to preserve their work. I used to make drawings and storyboards all the time, and then just throw them away. Finally, my gallery saw them and said, “Just don’t throw anything away, give it to us.” They ended up selling some of my drawings. It never occurred to me that what for me was just the way to think through a project could be understood as something of value for anybody else. These are things I’ve learned over the years, but I still think more about what I’m going to make than how to take care of what I have made. Because of my upbringing, my understanding both of my work and of art is that they take place in public places. I never really thought of art as something that you would own and collect just for yourself. Because I only experienced it in museums. When I’m making a work, that’s the way I think. I’m grateful to institutions and museums if they collect my work because that means that it’s cared for. If I get it back, there’s a good chance that I’m going to cannibalize aspects of it. I

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have a bunch of hard drives with film and raw footage, and I don't know if they'll ever turn on again. I haven't checked. If it's gone, it's gone.

The Academy of Motion Picture Sciences approached me maybe 14 years ago and said, "Hey, we just want all of your negatives—anything you have, can we have it?" That was just a profound gift. I'd been humping around boxes of negatives and A-B rolls. I understood their value because of my own relationship to finding old films. The filmmakers who made them may not have been well received and may not have valued their own work. But to me, it means everything. So, I understood that I should just keep this stuff, that there might be a filmmaker in the future who needs it. But I didn't know how to care for it, and so it means a lot to me when institutions come and rescue this stuff because I'm not one of those artists who's going to have an amazing archive when I die. It's going to have to be up to other people. I'm just thinking about the things I want to make.

Jules Pelta Feldman: How do you see the role of performance in your work generally? I don't necessarily just mean human performance, but also the performance of animals or objects or places.

CS: In film school you're trained to pay a lot of attention to performance and acting and the construction of an illusion. And I found that fascinating in terms of the craft of what actors do. But I didn't find it interesting in terms of a director, or of what I wanted to do. Oftentimes, even in *Drylongso* (1998), which is a traditional narrative film, I would allow things to happen because they were interesting to me, like casting a woman who does community theater.¹ She has this big theatrical style. And instead of trying to get her to hone it down, I would allow her to do that and to improvise, and that would be better than anything I had written. And even though it wasn't in balance with these other classically trained styles of film acting, I thought it had a kind of verisimilitude to the community of people using performance to navigate their way through life. I thought it was truthful, even though it was bombastic.

As I moved into more conceptual films, I discovered that I thrive when I can create conditions where there's just the possibility for everyone to improvise or for whatever is happening in that place to happen. Just producing the conditions that allow people or even the place to do what it does. *Drylongso* has a scene with an ice cream truck, which just happened to be rolling down the street while we were shooting dialogue. All the kids who were hanging out on our set wanted ice cream. So we just set up the camera and shot the ice cream truck. I didn't even know how to use it, but I thought, we're done until all these kids get ice cream, and we can get them settled down again, so we might as well just film this. And that became a crucial little hinge or a connective tissue in the film that I had not written or storyboarded or predicted.

I've taken those lessons into projects like the *Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band* (2010–12).² All I could do is set up the conditions for this event, which I called a flash mob, to happen. I didn't implement any real choreography, though the band director did. I explored getting permission to have us descend on the site, but no one would speak with me.³ So after trying, I gave up and I

thought, “Well, it is kind of a public square, so we’ll just occupy this public space.” I explained to the marching band that I don’t have a permit, so if they tell us to stop, we have to stop. I wanted to make the conditions that we were working under transparent and explicit.

The band director took it on as an educational opportunity, so I had to talk to the band about who Sun Ra was, and then I got to witness them rehearsing the music, which was an amazing experience. But there was also a lot that I wasn’t involved in, in terms of how marching bands function and how they were going to arrive. They made decisions about their arrangement, how they would appear and what they would wear. I had an idea about the music, but I didn’t know what it was going to sound like. All I could do is to set up conditions and then everybody had to show up and decide if they’re going to perform.

It was pouring that day, so if you had been there, you would’ve been under that awning with all the other people or just in your car missing the whole thing, which happened. People showed up and then sat in their car waiting for the rain to end, thinking that we weren’t going to do it if it was raining. But I didn’t have a say. The marching band was ready to go. This is a Chicago marching band, so they function under all conditions—snow, blizzards. It never occurred to me that they would just keep performing while it’s pouring down rain. They just started singing, I didn’t have anything to do with that. That’s the beauty of collaboration when you have wonderful collaborators like that marching band and the band director. The ethics that he was teaching to those young people as a band, as a community was about how to show up and how to do what they do. That’s what that film reveals. More than anything, I think more than any idea I have, is that every time I watch it, I just get so emotional about those kids. There’s one kid who is having doubts. He’s playing a bass drum and he looks up at the weather and he’s like, “What are we doing?” But everybody else just doubles down. It’s like, “This is what we do.” I wouldn’t have even asked anybody to do that. I love creating these really unstable conditions. Sometimes you get a wonderful gift and sometimes it fails. That’s the risk. It’s 50/50. That’s just the nature of the way that I set things up.

JPF: Is that part of what performance means to you, something that you can’t control?

CS: Probably so, I haven’t really thought about it in those terms. I did this procession in Chicago that we ended up calling the *Black Love Procession* (2015). It was an idea I had, but then I needed help, so I asked other artists that I was friends with if they were interested to take part in the procession. It was a kind of protest that I wanted to do. I had an idea about how to do the procession as a protest, but my friends had other ideas. They wanted to make a procession that celebrated love. But there was a lot of anarchy. It almost didn’t happen because we showed up and people became afraid, “Oh my God, what are we doing?” We almost cancelled it, and then suddenly rallied. And then it was a really beautiful experience—an event that has minimal documentation, maybe seven photographs (Figure 15.1). And I wish the photographs were a little better, but there wouldn’t have been a way to document the process.



Figure 15.1 Cauleen Smith, *Black Love Procession* (2015), image courtesy of the Artist and Morán Morán. Photo Credit: Kate Sierzputowski.

There was no plan. There was so little planning, the idea was just mainly to make something that you can carry down the street and show up, and we're going to follow this ice cream truck because ice cream trucks—again the ice cream truck!—they get to go very slow down the street. If you just follow one, then you're not breaking any laws. It's like an urban hack of how to have a parade without getting a permit. Just hire the ice cream truck and tell them where to go. Police don't bother ice cream trucks, so you can do what you want as long as you're behind them. It's what we did, and it worked. In fact, the police came to tell us that we were in the ice cream truck's way at one point.

That project exists in anecdotes amongst all of us, the eight or nine people who were at the core of planning it. Then there are seven or eight photographs that tell a story. Then there's ephemera; I still have some fliers that someone handed out. And the banners that I carried are in a museum now, so they're preserved, which is shocking because they were made as disposable objects. It's embarrassing.

HH: In *Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band*, you mentioned setting up conditions for a work to happen. Given that one approach to keeping a performance alive is to allow it to be reperformed, have you ever considered establishing conditions for the reperformance of this work? Since many of your performative works—*Black Love Procession* and the *Solar Flare Arkestra*—are highly improvisational and spontaneous, the idea of reperformance might be complicated. With this in mind, do you view reperformance as a necessary condition for the continuity of these works, and what role does your film play in relation to these performances?

CS: It depends on the piece. Something like the *Black Love Procession* could easily happen every year, annually, and it could be done by any artists who want to do it. It was an artist-produced procession, and I think it would have

been beautiful if we'd done it every year. It never occurred to us to institutionalize it in that way. But if someone in Chicago said, "Let's do that again," I'd say, "Absolutely, let's do that again," because it would be like a parade, different every year, something like the *Solar Flare Arkestra*. I actually did that flash mob four times, and the only documentation that turned into a finished film is the one that took place in Chinatown Square (Figures 15.2 and 15.3). For



Figure 15.2 Cauleen Smith, *Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band* (2011), film still courtesy of the Artist and Morán Morán.



Figure 15.3 Cauleen Smith, *Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band* (2011), film still courtesy of the Artist and Morán Morán.

another one, I didn't like the documentation on film so much, so I turned it into a slide show as part of *Black Utopia LA (2010–2023)*. And so it appears in this work as 35 millimeter slides.⁴ I did the flash mob with that same band two other times, and I just didn't like the photographs and video I got out of it. I couldn't use what the camera person I hired gave me.

I was invited to do the *Solar Flare Arkestra* again in Mexico, in Oaxaca. I thought about it and I tried to find a way to make it work. But I couldn't, because that piece was so site-specific and it was also responding to a particular time. And the culture of the city itself—I was interested in doing something that was like a protest, but that was also like a celebration for a particular group of people and a particular political climate and a particular place. That piece is so site specific to me and so temporally specific, I couldn't energize myself to do it again elsewhere. It didn't make sense.

There was also so a lot of research, conversations, meetings with people and trips to the library to learn the history of marching bands involved in leading up to making the *Solar Flare Arkestra* work. A lot of things happened then. When I was talking to composers about making the arrangements, I learned about the relationship between these Chicago high school marching bands and the southern, historically black colleges that they often get scholarships to. There's a whole ecosystem that I was trying to celebrate and amplify. It didn't make sense to redo it, and I'm not even sure I would do it now. But there's other kinds of processions that I would happily do again.

HH: In your film, *Space is the Place (A March for Sun Ra)* (2011), you capture the spontaneous performance of the *Solar Flare Arkestra* and preserve it for posterity. I am curious whether you view film as a deliberate method of preserving performance, and how a documentary film differs from a video documentation, which performance artists frequently commission?

CS: I was always thinking of the march for Sun Ra as a film. I was manufacturing this event so that I could make a film. The flash mob in Chicago was the first one that we did, and then it was just fun and it produced interesting reverberations in the surrounding area. So we just kept doing it. And those iterations of the march were honestly just for fun—as long as someone was willing to pay for the marching band, their buses and food, then I was like, “Yeah,” and the marching band was like, “Yeah, let's do it.” They loved doing it. I may have five photographs of their performance, but a lot of random people took photographs because the band was performing for them. This encouragement also facilitated the marching band doing what that marching band does so well, getting them some money because public schools have no money and giving them exposure, which they really loved having. The march made them visible to an art world that wouldn't even know they existed. But I had already made my film, which is what I had intended to make.

HH: What would be the ideal afterlife for the *Solar Flare Arkestra*? How would you envision this work existing in the future, when we are no longer around? Would its afterlife take the form of a film, an installation, or manifest in props and projections, as we have seen in your previous works?

CS: Really that moment only exists as the film, the film is the work. I wish I had another way of preserving or hanging on to the collaboration with that marching band, because it entailed so many aspects. It was, among others, the parents thinking I was really weird and not wanting their kids to talk to me at first; it was the band director. There's a lot that isn't in the film that I wish I had a way to preserve.

My work *Black Utopia* is the only work that I think of as a performance, and it has a record. It's not a film, and it can't be a film. It comes from all the research that I did about Chicago and Sun Ra, including the *Solar Flare Arkestra* piece. At the beginning, it was just a mass of photos in my iPhone from archives, his personal papers, and then the books he read. I would go and find that book and then find other books, and there are things I learned—like the Dogon and the Egyptian pyramids—that I thought, if Sun Ra were alive now, he would be interested in. I studied all of that because Sun Ra studied it, and I ended up with this mass archive of my own. I then turned this research into a slide show that I perform, and the soundtrack to the slideshow is the sound ephemera of Sun Ra and his business partner. The soundtrack entails everything from their answering machine tapes to rehearsals, conversations and lectures that I edited in and that were from the same area or were speaking to Sun Ra. As I was editing that sound ephemera, I was thinking of it as a soundtrack to a film without knowing what the images would be. And then I realized that I'm not allowed to reproduce this archival material—the University of Chicago, which holds the Sun Ra papers, has very strict rules, so I couldn't print these materials or use them in a film. But if I make a 35 millimeter slide of this and show it as a lecture, it's completely legal. So I shared all of this research via 35 millimeter slides. I drop the needle on the record and start putting slide carousels on. It's always a disaster because the slides jam. I have to time the presentation and remember what's coming. Every time I perform it in a different city, I add slides about Sun Ra related to that city. The last time I did it was in Rotterdam, and I was supposed to do it in San Francisco. And then COVID happened. But while the sonic archive is fixed, my visual archive grows as I do more research on Sun Ra and his practices.

To speak about a different way of dealing with these materials is my attempt to preserve or conserve. All of this knowledge that I accumulated in the process of making that 10-minute marching band movie is now in this other performance. I'm not a performer, so it's really depleting to do and it's very anxiety-producing. But now I have the slides and the record, and it can't be turned into a film because I don't have the rights to any of the images. So someone has to perform it.

HH: As a filmmaker, you approach your work differently from a performer which is evident in how you use filmic language to describe your work, e.g. you speak of props, rather than performance relics.

CS: You know, my painter friends ask me about this, because I would make an object with the intent of using it in a film and they'd say, "So is this a prop or is this an art object?" They wanted to know—how are they supposed to

engage it? Basically, they were suggesting that I had just made an art object, so what do I need to make the film for? I have frequently come to that conclusion myself, that I've made these objects and they're doing the job that the film was going to do. For instance I learned how to do ceramics so that I could use porcelain to look like crumpled sheets of paper. My idea was to have an actor write some stuff, dislike it, and then crumple up the paper and throw it away. A trick of photography would have the crumbled paper land and shatter into porcelain shards. I really liked my porcelain paper crumples—I still have them—but I never bothered making that film.

Then there was *In the Wake, a Procession* (April 11, 2017). That was also supposed to be a film, but cinematically, it was a disaster. I made these textile banners with the express purpose of filming people marching with them in a snowstorm in Chicago, like a dirge, like a requiem. But they had to go to the 2017 Whitney Biennial, and there was no snow during the winter when I worked on them.⁵ As a result, I couldn't make the film that I wanted to make with these objects before they got hung up in the museum. Then, ironically, on the opening of that biennial, there was a blizzard in New York, and I said, "This is the weather that I needed to make the film." I asked, "Can I take them down and just shoot the film real quick and then we can hang them back up?" And miraculously, they didn't say no. It took them six weeks, but they said, "Yeah, we'll take these down for you and you can do the thing and then we'll hang them up," which is insanely generous. Most institutions would not do that. I just have a fealty to the Whitney Museum for the generosity that they extended to me. But by the time we did it, it was sunny and springtime in New York—probably better, honestly, for everybody involved. We marched around the High Line several times. But now I think I would make more banners in the same mode and not feel compelled to use them in a procession. Because I learned that the banners have a presence and mobility (within the mind of the spectator) of their own.

I'm not from New York, it's not a city I have any affinity with. I feel like I see New York in movies so much that I'm not interested in filming it myself. So that could have also been part of the problem with how I was directing the film and why the footage was terrible. But the sound from that performance was amazing, so I made a record. I made this little 10-inch EP, *Pigeons are Black Doves* (2017). To me, this is the best document because it was the most important aspect of the performance. It was a collaboration with a composer, Avery R. Young, who took the text off of the banners, and all these words became the lyrics to the song that he arranged vocally. He made a recording for me because he couldn't be in New York to teach people how to sing it. He made a recording where he and his collaborator, Tina M. Howell, sang all the parts and harmonies. One side of the record is Avery and Tina teaching you how to sing the song, which is hilarious because they're very funny. Avery's recording of the song is just devastating because he's amazing. And then the other side is the live procession. I had a teenage chorus and then four professional singers doing the procession. The sound person I hired was fantastic and the sound was really good, so we mixed that into this composition.

This became, to me, the perfect document of the piece. I'm happy with it. I wasn't happy with how any of the images looked. I do have a 30-second clip that shows the teenagers, the amazing vocalists, and us on the street and that's enough. You don't need to see us performing for three hours. Because I am working so unstably, this was my response to the material. What is good is that, before I even start with performances, I accept that they could fail. A performance must succeed, but whether I set up the conditions of filming well enough is an open question. So then I'm left with, well "What do I have here?" And in this case, the sound was really moving and incredible.

HH: Can a film serve as a visual script or instruction for a future reperformance or reenactment? If you establish conditions for a performance that you plan to film from the outset, the performance serves as a starting point for the film. However, can a film in turn serve as a starting point for a future performance and be interpreted as a visual script or a set of instructions?

CS: Yes, definitely. To me, that's what a screenplay is—it's something you're going to turn into a performance that you're then going to film. So much of what I make has to do with how I was trained as a filmmaker. I think of everything I write as a proposal for a film. And I think you could reverse engineer some of the films. I don't think of the work I create as performance in the visual arts sense. Even when I'm performing, I'm always thinking of my works as films, even when they don't turn into a film.

JPF: You've emphasized not just the fact of instability, but the meaning and significance of instability in the situations that you set up—your openness to the fact that you don't really know how things are going to go. With something like a reenactment or a reperformance, there's always the danger that something previously open and contingent becomes fixed. So I wonder whether you could imagine a recreation of the *Black Love Procession*, for example?

CS: No. It would just be like, "We're going to do another *Black Love Procession*." We should do it on Memorial Day. It's one of the first sunny, warm days in Chicago. People just set up barbecues on the sidewalk and are so excited. It was a perfect day to do a procession because people were out on the streets. To my mind, the only conditions of reenacting the *Black Love Procession* are the ice cream truck, and that you have to give things away. All of us did, except for me. One person gave away love poems. Another person gave away flowers. If you wanted an ice cream from the ice cream truck, we would buy it. We just paid the ice cream tab at the end of the day. Those would be the conditions: You need an ice cream truck, and anybody who wants ice cream can have it; you have to give some things away; you have to do it on a day when people are on the street. But to reenact it, to drag those banners out of the museum... First of all, I think I would make different banners now. The banners I had were quotations from a Gwendolyn Brooks poem, she's a Chicago writer, and she lived in the neighborhood where the procession took place. For me, Brooks was a window into understanding the community when I arrived there. So now maybe I would quote someone else, like Lorraine Hansberry or Chance the Rapper, who knows?

I think the oral history of that process would be interesting. One of the participants, Ayana Contreras, has a book out now that's about optimism in Chicago, *Energy Never Dies: Afro-Optimism and Creativity in Chicago* (2021), in which she talked about the procession. I feel like the oral histories of that event, even from people who received flowers or got ice cream, could be very interesting. It was like a clunky little parade. There wasn't really anything to see. What mattered was the encounter. That's also why *Pigeons are Black Doves* is the documentation of the other procession. I don't know if we need to keep everything.

This is a thorn in my side as a maker because I like working with materials that will not last forever, like plastics and fabrics. The Whitney conservators told me that I shouldn't use red felt on my banners because red felt fades. And I was like, "So what? Let it fade." If this thing lasts a hundred years and the red felt has faded, that's a win. Or replace the felt. They bought five of the banners, but they didn't buy any of the banners that had red felt. I thought that was completely idiotic.

Reenactment is something I've tinkered with. I did a reenactment of a very traumatic event, and what I learned from that was that by reenacting it, I was reenacting trauma. I thought, this is not a good strategy for art making because I'm not interested in traumatizing people. It's a film called *Remote Viewing* (2011), where I bury a house underground, and so we had to build the house and then destroy it.⁶ And it was just as terrible as the initial event we were trying to reenact and understand. I stopped doing it until recently. The film *Sojourner* (2018), which is about Alice Coltrane and Rebecca Cox Jackson, crystallized around an image that a photographer named Bill Ray took in 1966 of some kids, all these young men, at the Watts Towers in Los Angeles.⁷ When I saw that image, I thought it was just magical. But I also noticed that this photographer did not picture young women really at all. I thought it might make sense to reenact the picture with women, and that became sort of the anchor for the whole film. I could say that if I reenact something, it will be revisionist.

JPF: I wanted to ask about *Sojourner* because I know you've said, talking about that film, that "it is possible to build a better world."⁸ In regard to *Remote Viewing*, you were just saying that reenactment can bring back the trauma of the past. But in *Sojourner*, it seems to me that you're performing events—and places, words and music—from the past as a way of building that better world, which also connects to the role of Afrofuturism in your work. So I'm wondering, do you think that performing the past might also help us change the future?

CS: Absolutely. That's what I think. Maybe it's not quite that linear, but for me, what I learned from the past are all these different modes and tactics and strategies for survival, liberation, justice. These things happened. Maybe they don't happen on the scale of the violences of our world, but they did happen. I'm very interested in using what can be learned of the past to insist on a different kind of future or to suggest it—and suggest it publicly, but insist upon it in my films.

I've been making films for about 30 years, and when I first started making particularly the Afrofuturist films, no one wanted to play them and no one

cared about them. I couldn't get them into any film festival. And now, this very emotional thing happened in 2019 at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam. In a retrospective, I was showing a bunch of early, short films, several of which had been rejected by this very festival. I mentioned that, and I said, "What I've learned is that sometimes you're making your work for a future audience, sometimes you're making work for people who don't exist yet." And I felt that about these films—that even though they weren't popular, and no one wanted to screen them at that time, I thought, I know that there's something in these because I'm making them based on what other people have taught me. I'm drawing on another path. The reward of that patience is that then in Rotterdam, after the screening, about a half dozen young black women from Brazil surrounded me—literally surrounded me—"We're the people your films are waiting for. We are the audience." I practically cry every time I tell the story. I did cry then because that's the point. That's the point of hanging on to things, right? I could not have predicted them, but I had a sense that maybe my film would find its way to whoever needed it.

This conversation was conducted by Hanna B. Hölling and Jules Pelta Feldman in January 2022. Questions contributed by Emilie Magnin.

Notes

- 1 With *Drylongso* (1998), which follows a young African American woman on her quest to photograph the endangered species of African American men, Smith gained the attention and esteem of critics, as well as popular audiences.
- 2 Experimental composer, musician, and bandleader Sun Ra (born in Alabama in 1914), a pioneer of Afrofuturism, led a shifting ensemble called The Sun Ra Arkestra from the 1950s until his death in 1993. Chicago was the site of some of his most formative work. The Arkestra continues today under the leadership of Marshall Allen.
- 3 The performance or "flash mob" shown in Smith's film took place on a public plaza in Chicago's Chinatown. The marching band also performed at other sites in Chicago.
- 4 The other work Smith refers to is *Black Utopia LA* (2010–23).
- 5 During the Whitney Biennial 2017, Smith's banners were hung from the ceiling of the museum's main gallery and lobby—a memorable arrangement registered by many visitors to the show. See Siddhartha Mitter, "Waking Life: Siddhartha Mitter on the Art of Cauleen Smith," *Artforum* 57, no. 9 (May 2019): 244–251.
- 6 *Remote Viewing* relates the story of a town that tried to erase all evidence of the Black community that once lived there by burying a former schoolhouse.
- 7 Simon Rodia built what are called the Watts Towers in Watts, Los Angeles between 1921 and 1954. They are celebrated today as a masterpiece of outsider art. In 1965, Watts was the site of the "Watts Rebellion" (then referred to as the "Watts Riot"), in which Black residents, resisting arrest, expressed long-simmering resentment of their abuse by police and poor municipal services. The California Army National Guard was called in to suppress the uprising. 34 people were killed.
- 8 "Cauleen Smith Imagines a Black, Feminist Utopia," film interview with Cauleen Smith, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2020, <https://www.sfmoma.org/watch/cauleen-smith-imagines-a-black-feminist-utopia-2/>.

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