

Carpenter Center

**IN  
CONVERSATION**

**CAULEEN  
SMITH                      AND**

**AMBER  
ESSEIVA**

for the Visual Arts

IN CONVERSATION  
Cauleen Smith and Amber Esseiva  
September 10, 2020

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,  
Harvard University

This conversation took place over Zoom at 7:30 p.m. EST on Thursday, September 10, 2020. This publication is the second in a series of edited transcripts that record the Carpenter Center's public programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

\* \* \*

DAN BYERS : Hi, everyone. Thank you for joining us tonight. I'm Dan Byers, the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. The song you have been listening to is Alice Coltrane's "Om Supreme." We're really happy you could join us for our fall season of artist talks. Before we begin tonight's program, I want to thank my colleagues Liv Porte and Laura Preston for all of their work on this event and the upcoming series this semester.

Amber Esseiva is Associate Curator at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. She has curated shows featuring work by Corin Hewitt, Jonathas de Andrade, Julianne Swartz, Guadalupe Maravilla, and Martine Syms, among others. This past year, she curated *Great Force* at the ICA VCU, an exhibition featuring new commissions and recent work by an intergenerational group of twenty-four artists exploring how art can be used to envision new forms of race and representation freed from the bounds of historic racial constructs. Amber has been central and essential to the ICA VCU's

institution-building and the creation of both its curatorial program and, I would say, the affect and attitude of the museum as well—the way it faces artists, publics, and its academic community. I'm so happy that she has agreed to join Cauleen Smith in conversation tonight.

Cauleen Smith is an interdisciplinary artist whose work reflects on the everyday possibilities of the imagination. Operating in multiple materials and arenas, Smith roots her work firmly within the discourse of mid-twentieth-century experimental film. Drawing from structuralism, third-world cinema, and science fiction, she makes things that deploy the tactics of these disciplines while offering a phenomenological experience for spectators and participants. Cauleen's exhibition *Mutualities* is on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art right now, and her films, objects, and installations have been featured in group exhibitions, including at the Whitney Biennial, Prospect New Orleans, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the New Museum, and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art in the UK. She has had solo exhibitions at many institutions, including MASS MoCA, the Art Institute of Chicago, ICA Philadelphia, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, as well as upcoming exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and a two-person exhibition with Theaster Gates at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Smith is the recipient of numerous grants and

awards, including the inaugural Ellsworth Kelly Award from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, the Herb Alpert Award in the Arts for Film/Video, and a Robert Rauschenberg Foundation residency, among others. Smith lives in Los Angeles and is a professor at CalArts.

I did a studio visit with Cauleen in Chicago years ago, and I've admired her work ever since. She was back in my mind this summer when she started posting her "COVID Manifestos" on Instagram as a way to disrupt our dependency on social media and the ways in which it soothes us. I also looked to her work and thinking this summer around the uprising for racial justice.

In an interview with *ARTnews* in June, Cauleen said: "When the COVID-19 shelter-in-place policy began and exhibitions were shut down, I was in crisis. Why bother making art if it's only going to be experienced online? Yet people are out in the streets risking their lives to protest, and they need artwork that receives and shelters them. We can't have a revolution without the grounding of art and culture. The Black Lives Matter protests really changed my idea of what public space can do and how we can invite institutions to change the way their spaces are used."<sup>1</sup>

Cauleen's investment in movement's animation of many forms—music, reading, and networks of protest—along with her work's conjuring of community and invitation for introspection make her the perfect artist for us to hear from now. I'm so happy to have both Cauleen and Amber here tonight.

AMBER ESSEIVA : Hi, everyone. I want to start by expressing my gratitude for the opportunity to be in conversation with you, Cauleen, and to Dan for the invitation. I so greatly admire you and your work, Cauleen. I'm in awe of the vision, the creativity, and the generosity that you have been putting into the world for over two decades. I imagine you might be exhausted, but I also imagine your work gives you as much, or even more, than what it gives to me and the public.

I want to preface my questions for you by showing some clips and stills to ground some of the things I've been thinking about with your work. I recently had the opportunity of working with my team at the ICA VCU to receive your beautiful show *Give It or Leave It*, which came from ICA Philadelphia. It was this experience that drove me to reengage myself with your work—not only the work in the show but your practice in general. It reminded me of the power in the breaks that you introduce in your work, the detours that you introduce in your work, in face of the constant barrage of inhumanity that we either experience or witness. I also learned that breaks in your work can be ecstatic. They can be spiritual, they can be affectionate, and they can be otherworldly. That's a big takeaway for me in your work.

So, I want to start with a clip from the opening scene of your work *The Changing Same* (2001). The film is based around two figures. One of them is female and played by Cauleen. The other is a male protagonist. In the

opening credits of the film, the male protagonist is sending a dispatch to what one can assume is another planet, because these two agents have been sent to Earth to fulfill a mission. In his dispatch, the male protagonist asks for survival guides and expresses his exhaustion with the mission. I want to play this clip because I think his words resonate still.

[clip from *The Changing Same* (2001)]

Voice:	What have you learned?
Male Protagonist:	In order to be seen, I must speak very loud. In order to be praised, I must whisper softly.
Voice:	How have you survived?
Male Protagonist:	Every day, I decide which lies to tell and which lies to believe.
Voice:	What do they call you?
Male Protagonist:	They don't call me anything. I don't call them anything.
Voice:	You're resistant.
Male Protagonist:	I'm tired. This world is like all the others.
Voice:	We are feeling your disorientation. Your scuzzy downloads are fragmented.
Male Protagonist:	It's so cold here. And the incubators? The incubators here—



Cauleen Smith, *The Changing Same* (stills), 2001. Digitized 35 mm video (color, sound; 9:25 minutes). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

Voice: You have overcome these obstacles before.

Male Protagonist: I want to come home.

Voice: You are not finished there.

Male Protagonist: Oh, I am definitely finished here. I want to come home.

Voice: More data is required. You will stay.

Male Protagonist: Let me come home!

Voice: This transmission has been corrupted. You'll contact us in two of their days. Transmission over.

Male Protagonist: Transmission over.

I bring up this clip because—together with the title of the work, *The Changing Same*—it speaks to me about the cyclical nature of history, in which history is designed to repeat itself, to produce a sense of exhaustion, to produce a sense of confusion as to what the purpose of reliving certain events is. This is, sadly, still apt to our discussion today.

The second thing I want to bring to the table is a still from an incredible piece called *Elsewhere*, which you made in 2009. It's a 35 mm film and installation work that has not been shown enough. So, to all the curators in this Zoom discussion: Only *once* has this work been shown, which is insane to me. This piece depicts a man and a woman. The man, with his two hands, pulls a thread of the woman's sweater until all that is left is



Cauleen Smith, *Elsewhere* (still), 2009. Digitized 35 mm video (color, sound; 7:30-minute loop). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

herself, bare. At the end of the film, she confronts you with her bare chest and a pile of yarn on the floor. One of the things that is so beautiful to me in this piece and other works is the way you are able to find beauty in the unraveling. It happens quite literally in this film: there's beauty in the unraveling of her sweater, which bares the woman. I think we're seeing a collective moment of unraveling right now, and a lot of people are struggling to find the beauty that will allow them to deal with the current circumstances, which, in a way, are a repetition of a lot of things that we've seen.

Another important thing is the relationship between the man and woman in this film and the way you employ gender in your work. I want to show a few clips and stills from works that beautifully and interestingly play with gender. In a lot of your works, there are radios. For me, when thinking about this gender play—and the radio, and the knob, and the tuning in and out of stations—I see genders fading into one another. Men become women; women become men. It feels like you're balancing the scales, or playing with the weights in the scale, the weights of femininity and masculinity and how they relate to Blackness.

One of the works I want to bring up is an earlier film made in 1998, *Drylongso*. The title of this piece is also interesting. It connotes an idiom of everydayness, or "same old, same old," which makes me think of *The Changing Same*. That repetition.

This feature film features Pica, a young photography student who takes on the project of documenting the men and boys in her neighborhood. She explains to her teacher that her reasoning for this is to capture an endangered species.

Here is an image of Pica with a stack of Polaroids. There's an incredible poetry in both this work and in *The Changing Same* around capturing loss. In *Drylongso*, Pica loses her boyfriend, Malik, to violence; in *The Changing Same*, the male protagonist, who has been sent on a mission to Earth with the female protagonist, ends up dying as well. And so, loss of the male figure and the emergence of the female figure is a theme that I see throughout your work.

I also see it in the relationship between Pica and her friend Tobi. They meet in one of the earlier scenes. Tobi gets kicked out of a car, and she's being abused by her boyfriend. Pica brings her into her space; she comforts her, and they develop a friendship. Tobi then goes on to start fashioning herself like the men in the neighborhood as a sort of camouflage. She starts to shift from her feminine look to a masculine look, and she does this, she explains, to protect herself from the gaze and the harassment she has experienced. And one thing that Tobi and Pica maintain throughout the film is the way they get to express those different variations of gender between intimate and public settings. So this is just another example of that shift between the two genders.



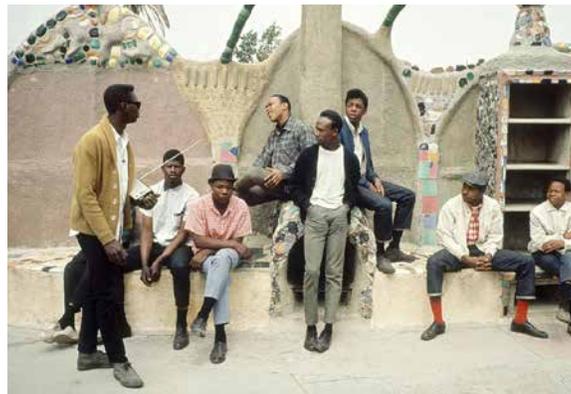
Cauleen Smith, *Drylongso* (still), 1998. 16 mm video (color, sound; 83 minutes).  
Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

Here is another beautiful example of that radio-tuning that I was speaking of. This is a photograph by Bill Ray, which he took in 1966 for *LIFE* magazine to document the environment in Watts after the 1965 riots. And Cauleen, you've reproduced this image, but you've replaced the men with a group of women. This is the closing scene of your incredible piece *Sojourner*, from 2018. The Alice Coltrane song that we heard at the start of this talk was included in this piece.

[clip from *Crow Requiem* (2015)]

Here is another example in which you play with the disappearance of the male figure, but you do this through the beautiful metaphor of the crow. The crow gets a bad rap. The crow is supposed to be thought of as an intelligent being, a being who is there for protection and for wisdom, but who most see as a bad omen, a forewarning of a potentially ill fate. And in this piece, you tie the superstition and fear around the crow to the superstition and fear around the Black body, particularly in public space.

There's one more clip I can play from a piece called *I Want to See My Skirt*, from 2006, in which this gendered capture comes up as well. I see it coming up with the photographer in this clip, and the beautiful woman and child. These are the ways I see you fading into one gender from the other. I want to hear more about that.



Bill Ray, *At the Watts Tower*, 1966. Courtesy of The LIFE Picture Collection / Getty Images.



Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner* (still), 2018. Digital video (color, sound; 22:41 minutes). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.



Cauleen Smith, *Crow Requiem* (still), 2015. Digital video (color, sound; 11:08 minutes). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.



Cauleen Smith, *I Want to See My Skirt* (still), 2006. Super 8 film transferred to video (color, sound; 17:17 minutes). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

[clip from *I Want to See My Skirt* (2006)]

CAULEEN SMITH : I need to start by thanking you for taking such a close look at so much of my work. It's such a pleasure to hear how you're thinking about it. This might be the first time anybody's asked me about some of the things that I consistently do in these films.

This question about gender is really exciting, Amber. It's been interesting to watch the way *Drylongso* has been read now versus how it was read in 1999. So, when I was thinking about this, I had to refer back to Hortense Spillers. I've spent a lot of time this summer rereading her. She walks you through the way in which everyone coming through the portal of slavery—or the apocalypse of slavery—to begin a new kind of life in a new kind of world was ungendered from the moment they were placed in the hold of a ship.

Whenever I've been thinking about any kind of gender discourse, I find that I'm profoundly troubled about how much is demanded of the Black male body. On the one hand, there is the consumption of a performance of virility and physical power. But then that moves very quickly into the realm of threats and danger. In that way, the projection that's being placed on them means that Black male bodies are actually not seen at all.

This idea is expressed really explicitly in *Drylongso*; it's what the character in *Drylongso* figures out. She's like, "If I just put on nineties hip-hop baggy clothes, I cease to be a

target. I cease to be vulnerable. I cease to be weak. I would prefer to have white people jumping off the sidewalk to get away from me clutching their purses than to be targeted in a sexual manner.” At the same time she is using that invisibility as a cloak, she’s very seen by the people in her community. That’s something I think about now more than ever in terms of what’s going on in the streets.

A E : With respect to the negative connotations of the Black male body, I’m wondering about your inspiration for the piece *I Want to See My Skirt*, which was Malick Sidibé and his photographs. There’s something so utterly cool about the way Sidibé depicts people, especially men of a certain era and habitude. It completely defies those stereotypes around the Black male body.

C S : Oh, those photographs, the first time I saw them—you’re so perceptive, because I would never have articulated it that way. There’s something that Sidibé does with his friends in those photographs where, in their desire to project their best selves, their most fantastical selves, they become pretty and feminine and sexy in ways that in Western culture are normally reserved for girls. I wouldn’t even say for women, I would say for girls. And also in his photographs, the women have an authority and agency that they’re taking for themselves and projecting into the camera. That is something they were conjuring for the lens.

I think I experienced this strange kind of nostalgia for Sidibé’s photographs, those party photographs of the groups of friends. I found them to be intensely cinematic without moving a frame. I was living in Austin, Texas, which along with Portland is a surreally white city. It’s not like there are only white people in the city, but they’re the only people that matter.

A E : I like that term, “surreally white.”

C S : You experience a kind of invisibility. And I looked at these groups of a dozen gorgeous young people with their James Brown records, and I thought there was something about the world that I was living in that made it impossible to experience *that*. So then I thought I would try to see if it was possible. Literally, I had to put out flyers—I still have the JPEG of the flyer, and I wish I had sent one to you. The flyer had one of the Sidibé boys in the full mask. And the flyer just said: “Are you black? Do you live in Austin? Will you please call me? I’m making a film and I need you.” It was desperate because that’s just how hard it was to gather up. The people who showed up literally showed up because they were like, “I just wanted to see who else would come.”

A E : It’s not surprising that his work would have been inspiring to you and would have pushed you to make a work like *I Want to See My Skirt*. His images are like an

ascension from capture. It's just utter coolness. I always say there are two places I would like to go: to Mali in the sixties or New York discos in the seventies. I haven't experienced either, so I can't tell you how cool they actually were, but they seem to have been a point of ascension that's really hard to get at these days.

C S : I'll see you there when the time-travel machine comes out.

I should mention A. Van Jordan, who was the poet I collaborated with on this film. It was interesting that there was a kind of conflict between us. Not a conflict, but this really different positioning. Van was looking at the same pictures I was looking at and feeling protectiveness, a desire to express a kind of gendered power struggle. I was seeing naked kids in the River Niger, everybody topless, everybody floating, everybody keeping everybody afloat. I love that tension between Van's inner voices and this intimacy he produces between parents or between lovers in his text, and the kind of cool that obliterates all of that drama in the images.

A E : I love that. So, speaking of ascension and inner voices, I want to talk about your inspiration with the Shakers. Rebecca Cox Jackson is someone you reference a lot in *Give It or Leave It*, as well as the Era of Manifestations from 1837 to about 1850 in which the Shakers were having ecstatic visions. I think of this period



Polly Collins, *Wreath brought by Mother's little dove*, date unknown. Ink and watercolor on paper. 20 × 19 in. Courtesy of the Hancock Shaker Village collection, Pittsfield, MA.

in the same way that I think of disco in the seventies. I like to think about the ways in which your work provides a detour in vision—a detour from the inhumane, from the captive, to something that seems out-of-a-fever-dream beautiful. There are instances in your work that remind me of what it feels like to look at something when I'm at my saddest. Which is when things look the most beautiful, right? They're really slow. They're really bright. Things are more vibrant when I'm sad—because when I have that vibrancy or happiness within me, I don't need for other things to be vibrant. I already have it within me.

The slide of work I'm showing now is a banner that reads "Conduct Your Blooming."<sup>2</sup> This banner is beautiful, like all your banners. It speaks to this idea that maybe your environment is constructed, maybe the systems that you live in are constructed, but you can conduct how you bloom within those systems. I love that. I love its connection to the vision or the epiphany. This is a connection I also see in your "COVID Manifesto" drawings.

Here's a Shaker drawing I found from the Era of Manifestations that I think is a beautiful follow-up to your *Conduct Your Blooming* banner. Maybe we can start there and think about vision-making. How do you find it? How do you cultivate it in your work?

C S : I've been obsessed with these Shaker drawings for a decade, even before I found a way to speak about them in my work. For a long time, I couldn't even figure out

what about them had me so enthralled. Young teenage girls made these drawings based on visions they claimed were coming from ancestral sources. And these ancestral sources would tell them who the drawing was for, and they would make the drawing and then gift it to that person. And this happened in a culture in which visual culture was not permitted at all. A culture in which there was nothing decorative, there was only function. And by doing this, they actually revived the Shakers for another fifty or sixty years.

What I learned from these girls is the idea of an incredibly willful—and even absurd, whimsical, and aggressive—resistance against the things that are enclosing you. So even if you're practicing a particular faith that's really austere, and even if that faith has clear, explicit dogmas against this kind of individual expression, you find the means of expression inside of your own devotion, and you just do it, and do it, and do it, and it cannot be repressed. Not only that, but it becomes infectious. That's the thing about art-making that is so attractive to me. You know what I mean? Why would anybody do such a ludicrous thing? So that was what I learned from them. Also, these are incredibly intricate drawings and would require so much resourcefulness to get the paper, get the inks, and find the time to make them in private. When you think about what they had to do just to make them, I think about radical generosity, a particular kind of love that is about ecstatic-ness. I feel like I'm equating that

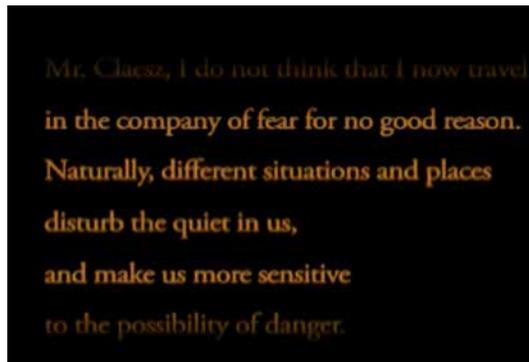
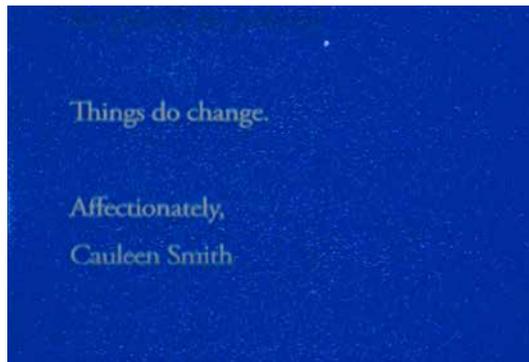
ecstatic expression with a certain kind of resistance, the removal of boundaries or enclosures.

A E : Beautiful. That kind of manifesting of beauty and that resistance within stillness is something you do a lot in your work. I was so thrilled to experience the piece I'm about to show. It's a silent video called *Entitled*, and it just took my breath away. It made me remember that kind of grief-seeing, and that beauty I forgot I could see, in the way that you use color and language in the letters that you write.

The film has a series of still lifes and a series of letters—to whom, I don't know—but with this affectionate instruction on how to make someone feel welcome. So this still is one that I loved—this notion of the break in your work, that there are things you can see differently despite seeing so much ugliness.

I love this still, too, which expresses this idea of holding onto fear for reason, for use, as a way of disturbing something within you to make you more sensitive and aware of danger, but also to beauty.

Your gifting, and these trinkets, come up again in *Epistrophy*. This installation was in *Give It or Leave It*, the show that came to the ICA VCU. The crow comes up again in this work, beautifully. I'm amazed at the way you are able to convey those epiphanies. I can't understand what it's like being a teenage Shaker girl having an ecstatic experience. It's one of the things that I admire in your work. It's the thing that allows your work to



Cauleen Smith, *Entitled* (stills), 2008. Single-channel video (color, sound; 7 minutes). Courtesy of the artist and Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.



Installation view, *Cauleen Smith: Give It or Leave It*, Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, Sept 14–Dec 23, 2018. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Constance Mensh.

transcend the limits of the ordinary. I don't know what those inspirations are for you. How you get at them, how you find them, how you see them.

C S : It's nice to look at a picture of this piece, *Epistrophy*. I haven't looked at it in a while. The work is an accumulation of objects over some time. The only real thing linking the objects is the idea that everybody has a relationship to these things. It's sort of like photography now, where anybody can take a picture or find an image of something. These are the images that make the images in our heads. There's something about mundane objects. They do so much work for you in terms of thinking about making. Sometimes I'm really undone by how much a glass does, how much a bowl does, how much some flowers in a vase can do. You can offer a simple thing, like a glass of water, and it extends possibilities of associations, memories. It can arrest you. So, in this installation, it's kind of a sensory overload, right? There are projections, the colors are hot, there are these seemingly random objects scattered across this table. There's just a *lot*. My hope is always that a single odd object actually arrests you long enough for a moment of recognition, and that it's next to an object that you don't recognize, or an object whose narrative you don't have access to. But there's enough of that object to make you understand, "Oh, this plastic doll is a little girl, and she's holding a bunny." You don't need to know that it's from Ghana. You don't need to know that

it is the first mass-produced toy made in a decolonized African country, but you can recognize there's something reflected back at you. I just want people to have space for that destabilization so that they can make their own time and make their own way. I'm not really trying to produce moments of awe. I love that you talk about it as an ecstatic moment as opposed to awe or reverence. I'm interested in that moment when you encounter a work of art and you breathe differently. To me, that doesn't happen when I'm awed. When I'm looking at something really big, shiny, and expensive, it usually happens because of some trace the artist has left. To me, there's some kind of tenderness or humility in that trace that just stops me. You know what I mean?

A E : I really like this difference between awe and having an ecstatic encounter with something. For me, being in awe of something reminds me of the work that I need to do. I'm like, "Oh, this is so great, I got to keep up," as opposed to seeing something that allows me to have inspiration or the drive to find my way into something in whatever way I need to access it. That's really beautiful.

C S : These women are sort of these pure, devout, untouchable women. What they do for me—their dreams, what Rebecca Cox Jackson wrote about, or Alice Coltrane's music—it actually spins me off into something else that isn't a sanctified space. It is much more like the

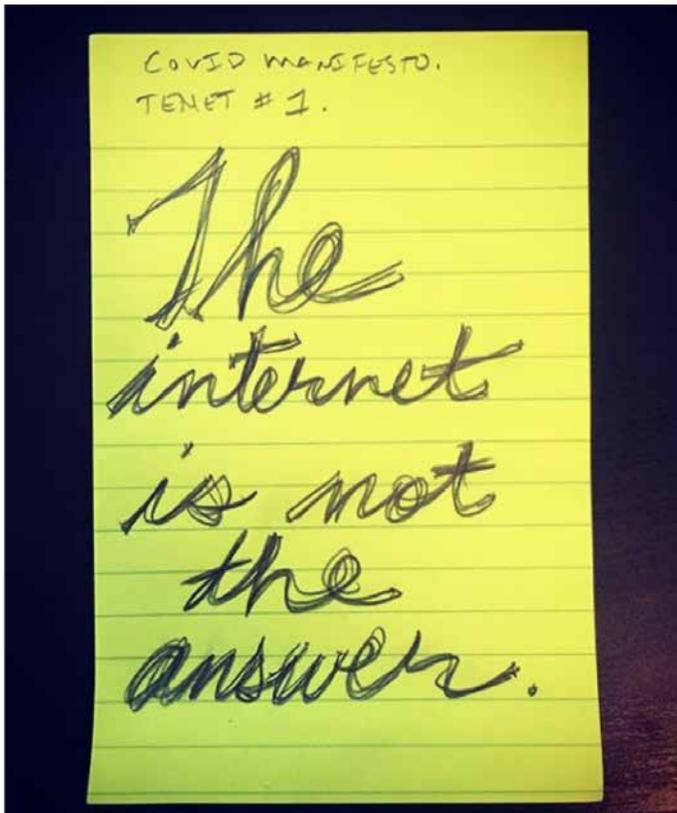
ecstatic experience you have in a disco or in a bar or at any of the backyard barbecues with your friends at three in the morning when someone's blowing off fireworks and there's a full moon and someone picks an orange off a tree. I don't know how to make that. But I have a sense of how it occurs. Like an equation.

This is a total digression, but I spent a lot of time researching West African divination, like sorcerers and shamans, because I was confused about whether or not the things they did were magic, which is a trick we can't explain—or was it a procedure that arrived at certain results? I think it's a combination of things, but I love the idea that there could be a procedure combining this, and this, and this, and then it produces this moment, this portal, this opening.

I think that's technically what I'm interested in. And because these women built these radically hospitable spaces, they produced a structure and a form. I thought, "Oh, that's actually a procedure you can reproduce." Anybody can reproduce it.

A E : Which makes me think of what Dan said in his introduction about your comment on the potential of public space.

This is a good segue to your incredible "COVID Manifestos" on Instagram. These manifestos offer a necessary reimagining of how we use space and how we aren't in space, especially spaces of intimacy. Like Dan, I



Cauleen Smith, *COVID Manifesto #1*, 2020. Graphite on Post-it. Courtesy of the artist.

was so refreshed by these. I was refreshed because they gave me an allowance to take it slow, to not feel like you have to find the answer or the proxy for reproducing the indoor museum experience. In fact, you can just sit back and recalibrate, appreciate, and figure out what it is that the next use of space might be.

I would love to hear a little bit about what you're thinking with regard to that. You might not have the answer, and it's not about having an answer. I'd just like to know about the process of making these and why you decided to share them.

C S : It really came out of fatigue, and a strong reaction to a moment in late March, early April, when institutions were confronted with closing their doors and were feeling a need to justify their currency in the social and cultural landscape. Their instant solution was like, "Let's just put shit online." It was without any consideration, as far as I could tell. Things have gotten much better since, but there wasn't any consideration as to what they were asking of the artists they were approaching and what they wanted to do with the work. I didn't have any answers either. I had three shows up and they were all closed. These were things I'd worked on for years, and it meant so much to me that they were up and open. I felt as lost as anybody else. But I didn't feel like this online space was the solution for our problems. Every day, I think about the fact that we can't go outside and

wander around and touch each other and hug each other, because we have been destroying the habitats of animals on this planet and the viruses that live on them are now trying to live on us. We did this! I think about that. I'm horrified by our inability to realize how beaten and broken we are by our own bad behavior.

A E : Instead of looking at COVID as something that we produced by mass consumption, excessive travel, and the diminishment of wild space that we have no business being in, the rhetoric is around an invasion, right? It's something that is being done to us. In one of your manifestos, you write, "We deserve better than 'back to normal.'" There has been this insistence that we are being victimized by this, and the solution is to retrofit what we were doing before in a not-so-satisfying way.

C S : It's an opera. We are literally watching the fall of an empire, and it's silenced me. Scribbling and opining on Post-its is all I can do right now because I'm watching the world change. I'm not sure it's gonna be pretty; I'm a little bit scared. It's happening. This empire that we live in is crumbling. It doesn't matter if Trump is reelected, it's crumbling. If he isn't, it's crumbling. How do you respond? I'm completely silenced by that. I really feel like the only answers are out in this scary world that's trying to kill us right now. And the answers are in the people out on the street who are willing to risk their lives just to be in the street. I know a

lot of them are twenty-five and are just going to get a little fever and bounce back. That's fabulous. But we don't know enough about this virus to understand what an acceptable risk is, and there they are in the street regardless.

A E : Right.

C S : The thing about trying to change the world is you have to believe you're right, and that's a problem.

A E : Right.

C S : And that's where artists come in, because our kind of agitation doesn't stop, even if we win. You know what I mean?

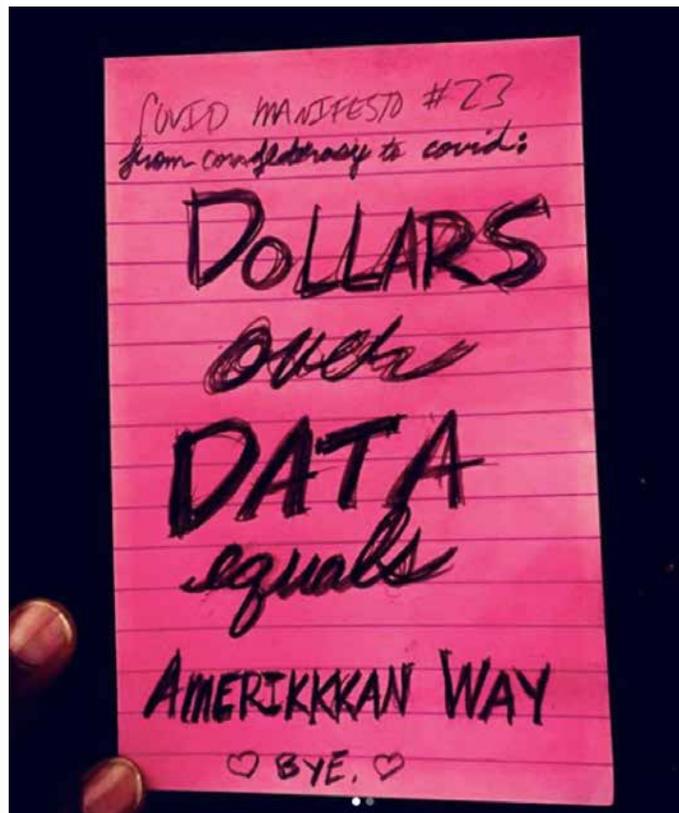
A E : That's a beautiful way to put it. It's amazing to me that I haven't shown a lot of your drawings in this talk because drawing is one of my favorite aspects of your work. I love the way that the drawings and banners become either precursors to or aspects of your videos. When I think about these "COVID Manifesto" drawings, I know you're probably just making them to make them and, because of the situation that we're in, maybe it's all that you feel you can do. Do you also see them as the precursor to something else? A kind of storyboard for another work?

C S : In a way. Each manifesto is something I'm trying to test on myself. *COVID Manifesto #23*, is about capitalism and neoliberalism. I'm not sure if the work is going to explicitly talk about these things, but the way I work is changing.

A E : The way we're all working is beginning to change.

C S : Right. We're in these little rooms talking into little screens. There's something about graphite and paper that's different than looking through a lens for me. It's really grounding. It restores the social part of me that gets depleted when I make a film. When you make a film, you have to talk to everybody, you have to have an answer for everything, and you have to boss people around. It's just so much. I'm not an extrovert in that way. It's been great to have these doodles received by people and accepted in the way that I want them to be, which is as proposals for a brief shift in our perspective. And I'm looking backwards too, and I'm looking forwards. And I'm still angry about these things. So, a lot of them are really beeyatchy because I'm just so pissed.

A E : Well, something I can say about these is that, as you've said, filmmaking is an exhaustive practice. You have to give people the directions to do the things they need to do to produce the film with you. And what these manifestos did for me was to give me the direction that I



Cauleen Smith, *COVID Manifesto #23*, 2020. Graphite on Post-it. Courtesy of the artist.

didn't really have to have the answers. It was so needed. I thank you for that. I'm really excited to see what these become, if they become anything after this. As they are, they are plenty for me, but I have a feeling they might unfold into other things that really excite me.

LIV PORTE : I'm silenced with gratitude for this conversation, Cauleen and Amber. I'd now like to invite the audience to write in their questions. I'll read the first from an anonymous attendee who is curious, Cauleen, if there is a way to review the films that Amber cited tonight.

C S : I posted almost all of them on Instagram, which is something I would never do if it weren't for COVID. But because so much of the work we put into the world at MASS MoCA, the Whitney, and the San Diego Museum of Art was shut down, I just started putting my films on Instagram for people to watch if they wanted to. So if you follow me, they're all just there. For now.<sup>3</sup>

L P : Our second question is not addressed to anyone in particular: "How are you filling up in these moments, if at all? Are there replenishing moments in the current chaos, big or small?"

C S : I like to garden. I like listening to music. I've been watching stuff grow. I'm obsessed with some birds in my backyard. I have this fantasy relationship with some

hummingbirds right now. I'm not sure if it's really reciprocated. It's like what everybody else is trying to do. Do what you can.

A E : Yeah, gardening seems to be something that everyone is turning to. I've been thinking about this a lot in relation to our big show with Kandis Williams about the implications of horticulture. In a time when you feel like you have no control, to cultivate something is meaningful.

C S : It's also about transplantation. I've been thinking a lot about this in terms of land acknowledgments, and that captive Africans had to re-understand themselves through the actual land here. So, I always think of myself and my Black identity as being kind of like, "I don't have any land. I don't have any land here or any land to go to." Land is not something that Africans in the diaspora have if they really think about it. But then Spillers talks about this process by which we transplanted ourselves here and literally cultivated the wealth of this country through the land. So it's problematic. And it's also a real survival strategy. It's not just metaphorical. It is actually a way of understanding where I am.

L P : The next question is "How do you envision the use of public space for art going forward?" Again, this question is not addressed to anyone in particular.

C S : I have been thinking about what to make and where to make it. I understand that we have to go outside. We have to find ways of being together outside, and I feel a great deal of concern for activists right now in particular. I was just watching the news last night and this *New York Times* columnist, who has apparently won Pulitzers, was wildly condescending. I realized that this is the problem with liberalism. This is someone with a great deal of intelligence and smarts but who is actually fundamentally racist. He starts saying that if these activists keep talking about defunding the police, "It's not gonna really work out well for them." And I just thought, "Oh my god, I want to punch you in your face." How dare you! Like, you wouldn't even be talking about defunding the police if it weren't for those same people to which you are condescending right now on CNN. How dare you! I have an intense protectiveness for people who are literally making us confront the impossible and think the impossible. If I could make anything as powerful as what this movement has become in the past seven years, I would. But I can't. So I'm trying to make something for that, you know?

A E : There is also a really beautiful thing happening with the reclamation of public space. Public space that has been given monuments for the wrong aspects of history; public space that has not been accessible to people, and people willfully taking it back. You can sit on committees to remove things for years and years and years, but

there's an efficiency and no-bullshit tactic to just taking it down yourself.

C S : The thing that really worries me is with the speed at which it occurs, there's also a desire to put something else there. And I wish we could pause on that. I love the empty plinths so much. In New Orleans, when all those monuments came down a few years ago, I was like, "This is the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen. This empty, fifty-foot plinth. This is fantastic." Maybe cover it with chewed bubble gum. Maybe that would be the only improvement I could think of. I think the idea of monumentality is something we've really got to think about. This desire to render a figure and freeze them in time as a marker and a reminder.

A E : I think this stems from the insistence on needing to have an answer, which means having a hero or having an icon. And it's not necessary.

C S : And now we have new movements in which no one can even track where the leadership is coming from and flowing through. I find it alarming that there's a desire to create iconography in this moment, and that there are people in the movement who desire that for themselves. Because we've already done that, and it didn't work. I would love to have a plinth to keep empty. That would be an amazing fantasy plan. Constantly empty, constantly augmented.

L P : Cauleen, another attendee was struck by your use of the term “radical generosity.” Do you mind expanding on it?

C S : I was thinking about this idea of accumulation and coercion versus dispersal, generosity, and free will. I was looking at people who not only made space for themselves to live and thrive but who made that space for others, and how in this way they started to understand themselves as people who required others in order to make that space. So, for example, Sun Ra and his orchestra: You couldn't just play in the orchestra, you had to put on some sequins of some kind, even if it was just a beret, because you were in the Ark and you were from Saturn, and that was the way this music had to be made. I'm really interested in making that space so that other people can arrive at the place they want to be.

L P : I think the next three questions will be for you, Cauleen, so brace yourself. The first question is “What do you miss the most about presenting work in a public space? Do you think the online platforms afford something that wasn't available before?”

C S : I think conversations like the one I get to have right now with Amber are wonderful things that I get to be a part of now, because I can tune in to anything, anywhere in the world. Most of visual art is completely dependent

upon people being able to approach it. I think that's the reason so many people make. The things we make are like heat seekers. We're looking for others like ourselves to come towards these things, like objects of desire. I think maybe it was Dave Hickey who said that or something like that.

A E : I haven't heard that name in a while.

C S : *[laughing]* I know, right? Just trying to attribute!

L P : The next question is for Cauleen: “How does your use of analog cameras transcend your work versus digital cameras? Does either form carry a particular resonance for you?”

C S : They're wonderful tools. In the experimental film world, there were decades of arguing about analog versus digital, which one was better. “Blah, blah, blah, we must preserve the analog.” I agree that we must preserve the analog because it's an amazing tool. It does things that digital still cannot do, and it produces affective moments that digital really struggles to imitate. Whereas with analog film, I can do something like film a bunch of horses in a pasture in Philadelphia in the year 2017, and you can't tell exactly when I shot it. Except for maybe in the models of cars, or you recognize the particular fit of a man's T-shirt, and you understand it to be early aughts

instead of mid-nineties. I feel like that grain is disorienting in this really fantastic way. It allows me to move through time. I struggle with digital because I feel like it captures everything. And that's what it's designed to do. It's for the military. It's designed to see more than the human eye can see. I find that a little bit revolting, so I'm struggling against it, but it's an amazing tool as well.

The military really drives all camera technology. So anything filmmakers get to use, they get to use because it was used in a war a generation before.

L P : That's an important reminder. We're approaching the anniversary of 9/11, which feels weird to not name. I feel like it should be named so that we can have a moment to think about the history leading up to it, and thereafter.

The next question is a bit tricky. I'm going to embody this writer for a moment. He writes: "For me, a big part of Cauleen's work is about the relationships between women, between people and environment, between the artist and the audience, etc. In our digital/COVID world, have you been able to find inspiration in these spaces between us?"

C S : I love that question. Thank you for experiencing my work that way. I think it's all about relations. Maybe that's why I'm so resistant to the screen. I'm supposed to be making some films right now, and I'm not sure what I can add to this. I'd rather look at Amber, I'd rather look at you, Liv, than to look at some image I've manufactured. It's all

about relations, right? And about who we acknowledge. I'm not sure about inspiration. I'm so grateful to be alive. A lot of people aren't. So, I think about that a lot.

L P : The following question starts, "Thank you for such an amazing talk. I was really intrigued by your use of the term 'the fall of an empire.' It makes me think of the way Arundhati Roy described this pandemic as a portal. I'm also thinking of Ariella Azoulay's work on imperialism, and how she traces the connection between well-documented looted art objects and undocumented migrants, and how archive and preservation are modes of imperialist thinking. I'm wondering how you see your art evolving through this portal, and how the art museum and the art world at large can move forward."

C S : Well, I don't have any intention of doing the work of the institutions for them. I'm definitely not one of those people who think you can decolonize a colonial project. I do think that colonial projects can shift their power and wealth towards new projects, and I hope they do. If they want to ask me more about that, there's a consultancy fee I'm happy to send you the invoice for. What I think about in terms of my own relationship to objects has something to do with being such a science fiction head. I'm thinking about how when you go into the Met, there's a broken shard of a pot. I can stare at that for an hour. I'm often thinking about what, in two thousand years, someone will be staring at. Will it be

the pull tab from a box of soy milk? What will it be? I think about the way these objects are moving, how we're handling them, and what it is we are making as people. Like I said, I will not help these institutions with this problem they have. I just have to make my work.

A E : I want to say something about this metaphor of the portal, which has been used to talk about the moment that we're in. There is an exciting aspect to this notion of the portal. There's a suggestion of another side, that there's something beyond this, but then there's this terrifying reality that a select few get to go through. Who is left behind? The dispossessed, the Black and Brown. So it's a troubling metaphor. It suggests another side, but more so for me it suggests leaving people behind. That's really frightening.

C S : So true, Amber. Any more questions?

L P : Yeah. I'll pose this last question before we sign off: "Amber and Cauleen, can you mention one specific thing that you learned from each other in the process of collaboration? One of the gifts of museum work is that it is fundamentally collaborative. I'm inspired by your mutual affection, and eager to know what you would credit to each other as something you gained or learned through your process of collaborating." This question is signed, "Your friend Victoria."

A E : That's really sweet. I'll say this. The one thing I've learned through you and your work, Cauleen, is that there's always a way to find beauty in things that are terrible, whether it be through looking away or finding another source of inspiration. You have instilled in me a positivity that is so necessary and is hard to come by when it's easy to be negative.

C S : Wow, Amber. Thank you. I think the importance of institutions is the power of a certain kind of space, and the way in which they can be refuges. "Collaborative" is an interesting word to describe the relationship between an artist and an institution. I'm not sure if artists would call it "collaborative." I think "negotiation" is the term. That's the way I experience it. As an artist, ensuring that the space I've been given to work in is doing the work it needs to do is not always in the interest of the institution. Actually, I feel like I'm losing battles in that regard. Whether it's where a light is placed, or how much light there is, to what people can sit on, the vinyl on the wall . . . it could be anything. These are negotiations because there are so many people at play who are just trying to do their jobs to keep the institution going. And then you're the feral guest. Sometimes I think of my role as more like a domestic servant. I just come in and do my work, then flatly, politely, bow out. I hope that isn't too dark of an answer. I think the difference in how people experience or understand the same transaction is so interesting.

L P : Thank you for opening us up to an alternative perspective. It is 8:53 p.m., and I'd like to invite Dan to close us out. Are there last thoughts?

A E : Thank you to everyone for being here.

C S : Yeah, thank you. I wish I could see you.

A E : Me too.

D B : I'm just going to be really brief. I want to thank you both so much, Cauleen and Amber, for your generosity. I want to thank Liv Porte, our Curatorial and Public Programs Assistant, for moderating the questions, and for all of their work making this evening appear seamless when there's actually a ton that goes into these digital programs. Finally, I want to invite you to attend our next program on October 8th, with artist Ja'Tovia Gary in conversation with Frank B. Wilderson III.

C S : Thanks so much for having us here. Thank you, Amber. Thank you, Dan. Thank you, Liv.

A E : Thank you, guys.

## AMBER ESSEIVA

Amber Esseiva is the Associate Curator at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University (ICA VCU). As a VCUarts alumna, Esseiva has been essential to the ICA's programming since joining the institution. Esseiva curated select commissions from the ICA's inaugural exhibition, *Declaration* (2018), and curated shows featuring work by Corin Hewitt, Jonathas de Andrade, Julianne Swartz, and others. Most recently, she curated *Great Force* (October 5, 2019–January 5, 2020), the ICA exhibition featuring new commissions and recent work by an intergenerational group of twenty-four artists exploring how art can be used to envision new forms of race and representation freed from the bounds of historic racial constructs. Esseiva also curated *Provocations: Guadalupe Maravilla* (November 9, 2019–August 9, 2020), the second iteration of the ICA's annual commission series, which debuted new work by the Salvadoran-born multidisciplinary artist, and a solo exhibition by Martine Syms (February 16, 2019–May 12, 2019). Her forthcoming project is a solo exhibition with LA-based artist Kandis Williams titled *A Field*.

Esseiva received an MA in 2015 from the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. At CCS Bard, she curated and co-curated numerous exhibitions featuring works by artists such as David Altmejd, Louisa Chase, Roe Ethridge, Gabriel Orozco, Jason Rhoades, Mika Rottenberg, Kenny Scharf, and Avery K. Singer. She

also co-founded the interdisciplinary curatorial journal *aCCeSsions* and was appointed curator of the 2014 MFA graduate thesis exhibition at the Bard MFA Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts in Hudson, New York. In addition to thesis exhibitions, she has worked closely with MFA and BFA students through professional development and mentorships.

From 2015 to 2016, she worked extensively curating exhibitions by emerging and mid-career artists. Highlights include *Anything on a Surface Has Space*, a discursive event at The Judd Foundation, and a solo exhibition by artist and VCU alumna Alina Tenser at the A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, New York. After her stay at CCS Bard, Esseiva was appointed director of Retrospective gallery and curator at SEPTEMBER, both in Hudson, New York.

## CAULEEN SMITH

Cauleen Smith (b. Riverside, California, 1967) is an interdisciplinary artist whose work reflects upon the everyday possibilities of the imagination. Operating in multiple materials and arenas, Smith roots her work firmly within the discourse of mid-twentieth-century experimental film. Drawing from structuralism, third-world cinema, and science fiction, she makes things that deploy the tactics of these disciplines while offering a phenomenological experience for spectators and participants.

Her films, objects, and installations have been featured in group exhibitions, including at the Whitney Biennial (2017), Prospect.4, New Orleans (2017), the Studio Museum in Harlem, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, the New Museum, and BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK. She has had solo exhibitions at MASS MoCA, the Art Institute of Chicago, ICA Philadelphia, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and upcoming at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and a two-person exhibition with Theaster Gates at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Smith is the recipient of numerous grants and awards including the inaugural Ellsworth Kelly Award in 2016 from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts, the 2016 Herb Alpert Award in the Arts for Film/Video, the Rockefeller Media Arts Fellowship, the Creative Capital Award for Film/Video, and the Chicago 3Arts

Grant, as well as support from the Foundation for Contemporary Arts and Artadia. Smith received a Robert Rauschenberg Foundation residency in 2015 and was an International Artist-in-Residence at Artpace, San Antonio, in 2019. Smith grew up in Sacramento and earned a BA in Cinema from San Francisco State University in 1991 and an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 1998. She studied with Trinh T. Minh-ha, Angela Davis, and Lynn Hershman Leeson at San Francisco State University. She attended the Skowhegan School of Painting & Sculpture in 2007. Smith lives in Los Angeles and is a professor at CalArts School of Art.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Cauleen Smith, "Cauleen Smith on How Art Facilitates Protest and Introspection," *ARTnews/ Art in America*, June 19, 2020, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/interviews/cauleen-smith-interview-art-facilitates-protest-and-introspection-1202691811/>.
- 2 The text from Smith's work *Conduct Your Blooming* is adapted from Gwendolyn Brooks's poem "The Second Sermon on the Warpland," in *In the Mecca* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).
- 3 See [https://www.instagram.com/cauleen\\_smith/](https://www.instagram.com/cauleen_smith/).

## COLOPHON

In Conversation:  
Cauleen Smith and Amber Esseiva

Published by the Carpenter  
Center for the Visual Arts,  
Harvard University

Editor: Laura Preston  
Copy Editor: John Ewing  
Program Coordinator: Liv Porte  
Designer: Chad Kloepfer

Staff:  
Gabrielle Banks, Gallery and  
Bookshop Attendant  
Dan Byers, John R. and Barbara  
Robinson Family Director  
Laura Preston, Administrative and  
Outreach Coordinator  
Liv Porte, Curatorial and Public  
Programs Assistant  
Katie Soule, Exhibitions Production  
Assistant

© 2020 the authors, the artists,  
Carpenter Center for the  
Visual Arts, and the President and  
Fellows of Harvard College

All rights reserved. No part of  
this book may be reproduced  
without written permission by the  
publishers.

Generous support for Carpenter  
Center programming is provided  
by The Andy Warhol Foundation  
for the Visual Arts.



Carpenter Center for the  
Visual Arts, Harvard University  
24 Quincy Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
carpenter.center



Cauleen Smith, *Sojourner* (still), 2018.  
Digital video (color, sound; 22:41  
minutes). Courtesy of the artist and  
Corbett vs. Dempsey, Chicago.

**Cc**