

The Importance of Pandas

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“There is no preparation for art that is not already art.”¹
Stanley Cavell

We all inevitably imagine performances we did not witness. And, as far as Austyn Rich’s recent dance piece “STAY SANE” is concerned, most of us have no other option but imagine. This effort of conjuring gains in depth and complexity for someone who was actively involved in the planning and preparation of an artwork they did not get to experience. I am that rare kind of non-viewer that had the opportunity to brainstorm with the artist, scout locations with them, and sustain an active conversation throughout the whole process. What follows is an account of most of what I saw and some of what I did not.

On March 24, Austyn and I drove to Venice Beach and bought five packages of stick-on rhinestones from a 99 Cents Only store. They would be used, possibly, to cover a basketball. As a prop in the dance piece Austyn was envisioning, the rhinestone-covered basketball would trace his movements while reflecting and dispersing the gaze of multiple headlights. I managed to grab a coffee and, on a lark, we beat that night’s quarantine sunset to the punch. We later drove into a public parking structure in West Adams to check if it was freely accessible and unsupervised. Austyn’s idea was to stage a drive-in dance performance away from law enforcement and its law enfeeblement wiles. As it turned out, the indefinitely empty parking structure was still guarded by a person in a corner booth—another unnecessary metaphor for the futility of security.



On April 3, Austyn and I drove to the Arts District of Downtown Los Angeles to look at a location he had been considering. The sunset this time was not accidental. Austyn had been thinking of having audience members drive up to the area and park right before dusk settled in. He would direct the convoy of cars from the initial parking location to the performance site. We were aiming to walk the alleys just south of 7th Street on the lookout for a large open space with minimum street visibility. We agreed that police patrols were most likely to cruise along the main neighborhood arteries. This kind of preemptive logic seemed a reliable antidote to the

¹Stanley Cavell. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979). Pp. 145–146.

illogical behaviors a policeperson might engage in if they discovered a small fleet of vehicles with their headlights fixated on a moving black body.

As we were turning the corner of Wilson and Violet, we noticed the sign for “Panda Produce” above the door of what looked like a small office building. Austyn had just started telling me about the significance pandas held for him when we discovered the “Panda Produce” loading docks just down Violet Street—a square space that could easily fit twenty vehicles. We walked back to my car and drove down the alley that connects 7th Place with Violet, then over to the loading dock. We parked and Austyn walked to the corner of Violet and Mateo. That was the only place we imagined a police patrol would pass through. On his way back Austyn gave me the thumbs up—we were in the blind spot.

We still walked a couple of blocks around the area to make sure we did not miss an even better space for the performance. We found nothing, but were saluted by an eerie old show tune a PSA speaker played for us after an invisible security officer’s voice had assured us that they had seen us approaching a warehouse building. Back at the original site, we spent a half hour parking at different angles to test sightlines and mise en scène possibilities. In the serene afterglow we discovered that the car’s lights cut Austyn’s body into two, the bottom half much brighter against the red of his Adidas sweatpants.



On April 14, Austyn and I drove back to the “Panda Produce” loading docks. He wanted to revisit the site before the performance. He was pensive behind his Phlemuns mask—a snatch of perfectly contoured fabric that patterned the lower half of his face in fluffy clouds against an unperturbable sky. We linked Austyn’s phone to the car stereo so he could play the soundtrack he intended to dance to. He walked fitfully ahead as I drove slowly, music blasting, the first vehicle in an imaginary convoy. As he led the way down a service alley, a homeless man approached him and they walked together ahead of me. A bit later, after Austyn was done blocking out some ideas in the “Panda Produce” space, the man approached us again offering to show us some graffiti work in the area. It turned out that he had authored the Nipsey Hussle mural we had been admiring earlier. After a quick walking tour, Austyn promised the man to be back with clothes and provisions for him.



“STAY SANE” was performed at 7:30 pm on April 16 for a car-bound audience. Since public gatherings of any kind had been outlawed due to the global pandemic, the performance was illegal to stage or attend. The words “sane” and “sanitary” share a root—health. But while the first is associated with one’s mental state, the second refers to physical cleanliness. The title “STAY SANE” captures the crisp schizophrenia of our moment between the two poles of private mental health and public physical health. But why are these divided? Because the state apparatus dwells in the pocket between them. As Foucault reminds us in his *Discipline and Punish*, the policing of bodies for the sake of “public health” emerged during the plague as an opportunity for the government to assume unprecedented power.² If matters of mental import—be they cognitive, moral, or emotional—were taken as seriously by the state as our value-producing bodies, a quarantine would look like a system of heightened mutual support rather than a cold sanitation ordinance.

On April 16, 2020, a public space could witness nothing more daring, more poetic and more viscerally human than a black man’s dancing body. Austyn’s performance defied not just a quarantine interdiction, but also the histories of surveillance, policing, and carceral violence that gave such interdictions teeth. The word “quarantine” etymologically refers to the forty days Jesus Christ fasted, the forty days a 1520’s English widow was allowed to remain in her deceased husband’s home, or the forty days a ship from a disease-stricken country was kept off the Venetian port in the 17th century.³

On the fortieth day after Austyn performed “STAY SANE” in Los Angeles, in Minneapolis a black man by the name of George Floyd was brutally murdered on camera by white police officer Derek Chauvin. Counting backwards, around the time Austyn danced his way down the back alley between 7th Place and Violet, Floyd’s girlfriend Courtney Ross had unwittingly

²Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Tr. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Pp. 197-199.

³*Online Etymology Dictionary*. Accessed June 1, 2020. Url: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/quarantine>

commenced her last forty days of having her lover by her side. The burden of quarantine is always in the future tense, counting from the moment Jesus entered the desert, an English woman was widowed, or a freighter dropped anchor. But if one lived every moment on the edge of precarity, as black people in the United States have always done, every next forty-day period is a potential quarantine.

Early on in his “Toward a Monumental Black Body,” black scholar TK Smith offers a confessional intimation:

I disassociate from my physical body often. I have come to conceptualize my body as something I carry around, not as something that carries me. I understand my body as an object that I use to navigate and interrupt space.⁴

This is the same separation between the mental and the physical that governments sanction and exploit in their pursuit of “public health.” To sanitize is not to render sane but, on the contrary, to rend mind and body asunder. But who in the United States is more visible in their physicality and less visible in their humanity than a black person?⁵ No wonder that Smith feels as if his body is both a living organism and a monument to its very act of living.⁶

I cannot describe “STAY SANE” because I was not there. Words cannot describe it because they were not there either. Austyn wanted no publicity, no announcement and no documentation shared. The main and only event was a moving black male body gracefully pushing against the *danse macabre* of American consumption. It took me three days to get Austyn on the phone after the performance. He sounded exhausted. He also sounded like a man together, united with himself in a fist of existential resolve. I keep forgetting to ask him why pandas were so important to him.



⁴TK Smith. “Toward a Monumental Black Body.” *Art Papers* Vol. 43, No. 4. 2020. P. 42.

⁵This rhetorical question is superbly contextualized by philosopher Paul C. Taylor. See: Paul C. Taylor. *Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2016). Pp. 36-51.

⁶Contemporary artist Arthur Jafa addresses the same feeling in his essay “My Black Death.” See Arthur Jafa. “My Black Death.” In *On the Blackness of BLACKNUSS* (Hudson: Publication Studio Hudson, 2015).