Cauleen Smith Catalogue Essay

H-E-L-L-O: Five Letters and A Salutation

"Just saying hello from Cali." The multimedia artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith closed an Instagram post on March 17, 2020 with a tender salutation, informing her followers that she would be posting her films featured in public exhibitions that had unexpectedly and rapidly closed until further notice at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.[1] The artist began this impromptu online program with *H-E-L-L-O*–a 2014 short film that embodies a search for connection amid crisis in both title and content.

Originally commissioned for the exhibition *EN MAS'Carnival and Performance Art of the Caribbean* (Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, 2015), *H-E-L-L-O,* represents the performance traditions of the New Orleans second line during the Carnival Season. The city, still recovering from the physical and psychological damage of Hurricane Katrina, emerges as a site of creative recuperation through Smith's formal cathexis on the charged public spaces that punctuate the urban landscape.

Combining the artist's repertoire of source material—a critical transposition of the subcultural ravines of science fiction, third world cinema, and New Orleans jazz—the film imagines a surreal imaginary within the material reality of the city. By conjuring forth the wondrous dimensions of film and music, Smith allows her rigorous rumination on New Orleans to turn in on itself. More than a documentarian representation of the city's contested histories, she foregrounds the possibility of rejuvenation and recovery through creative practice. Occupying varied public spaces with her dispersed orchestra of nine bass-clef musicians, Smith undertakes a dualistic operation. By emphasizing the city as a traumatic site, she enables its transformative possibility. In essence, through looking squarely at the wound, rather than avoiding confrontation, does Smith contrive civic healing. The dialectics of perceptual visibility/invisibility and corporeal presence/absence construct the critical tensions suspended by the filmic devices and methods of *H-E-L-L-O*. Rather than offer a "third term"—the traditional resolution of the dialectic's opposition—to offer escape from the parabola, the artist figures a means of reengagement with the city.

Articulating the instability of the city through her sweeping formal apparatus, Smith centers the repressed tensions of regional trauma through a visual rhetoric of heightened estrangement. Opening on a dark, unpopulated screen, with a rising crescendo of machinic whirring that breaks with the familiar sound of a bird chirping, the initial spectral ambiguity reproduces the critique of cinema's "spaceless darkness." Described by art and media historian Noam Elcott as a spatio-filmic force that impinges on the spectator's body through "radical" disembodiment, "spaceless darkness" produces a dissociative ambiguity mediated by the intrusion of the birdsong.[2] Relief is immediately extended by a rapid cut to an oppositional scene—*H-E-L-L-O*, here both conventional title and sky-born salutation, hovers over a blue sky. Written in Handel Gothic, the recognizable font of the science fiction genre, the greeting is registered as belonging to the extraterrestrial or unknown realm of the cosmos. Then lowering her lens from the boundless sky

[1] CS Instagram post.
[2] Noam Elcott citation.

down to the terrestrial, it is pierced by a crane in a New Orleans shipyard–a symbol of the city's industrial history and continued quest for regrowth after natural devastation. Simultaneous with this visual descent begins the bass-clef score that accompanies the film. The rich five-note sequence, sourced from the sci-fi 1977 cult masterpiece *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (Smith's title font also a nod to its Spielberg predecessor), is riffed throughout the film as a constant but contingent score. The nine musicians introduce their own vital interpretations of the set score, forging sonic as well as scenic movement.

With the apparition of the first musician, we confront the dissonance of a Black body occupying and transforming a shipyard along the Mississippi River, an example of what Smith has termed a "spaceway."[3] For the artist, these spaces represent the physical environments ("the city street, gladiator sports, fashion, public transport, whatever!") that structure the navigation of the Black body through public spaces. In *H-E-L-L-O*, the tool for suturing the estrangement produced by the occupation of white space, the device that effectively creates an alternate spaceway, is jazz.

Quite literally, from the moment films could sync to sound, jazz helped construct the racist imaginaries of Black communities. In the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer* (1952), the synchronization of sound with moving pictures marks its landmark status in film history, but it is the consumption of jazz as a Black-originating musical genre within the overarching specter of whiteness, that forged the systematic expropriation of the genre as an identity shifter. Following Jack Robin (formerly Jakie Rabinowitz) in his pursuit of a career singing jazz despite strong resistance from his father, the film charts Jewish assimilation through identification with Blackness—what Cherise Smith has described in her studies of Jewish appropriation of Black culture as the ultimate marker of difference. The climax of the film, Robin's performance of the Kol Nidre, is a recognition of the prophetic and salvatory capacity of ritual sound. In its triangulation of music, Jewish identity, and racial Blackness, *The Jazz Singer* discloses the early and persistent tensions between jazz's positionality as a distinctly Black cultural phenomena and its chameleonic facilitation of transcending racial categorization for other marginalized ethnic and racial groups.

Cauleen Smith's decision to unwind the racial identity of the genre by forming an ensemble of Black and non-Black musicians, functions in direct opposition to *The Jazz Singer*'s racially stunted and narratively-driven representation of the jazz musician. Instead, the musicians in *H-E-L-L-O* register and reverberate a present day haunting of New Orleans that charts imagined futures of regeneration. By simultaneously reflecting the legacy of New Orleans jazz, its origination in Creole and Black communities in the city, as well as its co-optation by white performance and tourism, Smith carries the precariously built racial realities of the city that stem from colonial occupation.

The five-note tonal phrase performed by the bass-clef musicians in *H-E-L-L-O* was penned by composer John Williams for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, there serving as a communication system between earthlings and extraterrestrials. The scientists originally blare out G-A-F-F-C in attempts to get the attention of the spaceships, and, when they attempt communication upon physical encounter, play the sequence B-C-A-A-E. Beyond merely symbolizing communication with extraterrestrial life, the string of notes becomes an avenue for a

[3] CS quote citation.

collective experience—predicated on the foreignness of alien ships and the potential threat (and excitement) of foreign bodies. Jazz performance in New Orleans serves a similar function: operating as a cultural mediator between local communities and foreign interlopers (simply put, locals and tourists).

And though the term "close encounters" was coined by scientist Joseph Allen Hynek to describe sightings of UFOs at night, it also comes to represent more holistic humanist experiences—those shadowy brushes where unknown bodies collide.[4] Smouldering under the surface of Smith's crisp filmic rhetoric is an incisive cultural criticism of the nature of touristic encounters, manufactured musical performance, and the notion of a consumptive Black entertainment writ large. These motifs resound in the artist's interrogation of specific sites in the city, such as Preservation Hall. The venue, serving up traditional jazz in the French Quarter, is a regular destination for tourists visiting New Orleans, desiring supposedly authentic exposure to the city's cultural forms. It is precisely these contained and commodified configurations of cultural interchange that delimit and reformulate the commonplace understanding of close encounters with chimeric others.

In *H-E-L-L-O*, close encounters are offered by unexpected apparitions of musicians in traditional spaces that subvert their anticipated occupation and activation. The five-note score becomes a repetitive and hypnotic meditation positioned in distinctive locations across some of the city's most historic neighborhoods situating each musician within a hyper-racialized built environment. In this way, Smith's utilization of jazz musicians becomes tethered to other formulations of Black musical life including blues and techno, all of which were partially born as responses to the use of Black bodies as machines rather than humans, in which spectacles of entertainment give way to operations of consumption and possession. This value transferral exposed the Black body to those same forces of labor commodification found in other arenas of industry. In the way that the Black body was both dematerialized, as Eric Lott observes in postbellum minstrel performances, and reified through forms of Black entertainment, musical performance became a splintered site that enabled the dissolution of the Black body and later asserted its reconstitution through reclamatory practices.[5] These logics of bodily absence and presence drive the haunting tension at the core of *H-E-L-L-O*: the city drained of collectives and masses, we are confronted with the image of autonomous musicians playing and replaying the same sequence of notes with their own distinct interpretations and in locations (or stages) of their choosing.

A related sculptural work, *The Score*, presented in 2014 at The Studio Museum in Harlem's group exhibition *The Shadows Took Shape* features a fired porcelain tablet imitating sheet music on which the artist scrawled in her gestural script "You Are from OUTER SPACE." The conflation of the musical score with extraterrestrial life registers the infiltration of the themes of *H-E-L-L-O* into other media and projects, and further articulates the communicative capacity of music to speak to foreign or unknown entities. The distillation of the film's key ideological belief (that near improbable communication is rendered possible through creative enterprises) in *The*

[4] Joseph Allen Hynek quotation.
[5] For a full discussion, see Eric Lott, "Love and Theft: 'Racial Production and the Social Unconscious of Blackface,' in Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 38-62.

Score demonstrates the artist's multidisciplinary reach. Moreover, this form of repetition and the score as an artistic device accrue activist potential in Smith's structural lexicon.

In structuralist theory, to which Smith is an adherent, repetition serves to solidify the sign. Under Saussurean semiotics, the repetition of linguistic units structures difference, the basis of language formation. That is to say, the underlying pattern of linguistic sequences allows for comprehension of the signifying system, in this case, of the *Close Encounters* five-note score. For other scholars, repetition has been interpreted as evidence of trauma—where obsessive recursion to a single motif or image signals what Freud described as the formation of a protective shield against distress that could not initially be evaded. Additionally, Éduoard Glissant posits repetition as "an acknowledged form of consciousness both here and elsewhere. Relentlessly resuming something you have already said."[6] The notion of existing simultaneously here and elsewhere is germaine to Smith's focus on a specific geographic domain as mythically American, while tethered to a wider Antellian archipelago impacted by histories of enslavement. The trauma derived from plantation slavery and its ramifications directly induce Hurricane Katrina's impact, leaving New Orleaneans wading in water and becoming a repeating offense against vulnerable Black bodies. These various discursive analyses of repetition lend insight into Smith's deployment of this strategy in *H-E-L-L-O*. It is equally apposite, though, to consider the repeated scores in relation to modernist musical traditions.

The employment of repetition is also integral to avant-garde composer John Cage's *The Unavailable Memory Of* (1944), a bass-clef waltz consisting of five repeating arpeggios composed for a collaboration with dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham. The performance manifested as a solo (subverting the genre's traditional duet format), which intensified the structured motion of the isolated dancer moving to redundant notes. Pulling its fragmented title from a sentence in *Finnegans Wake* (1939), the composition retroactively exhumes James Joyce's congealing of inaccessible memory, dream associations, and skewed recollections of reality. The resulting latency of Joyce's literary strategies is recodified in Cage's score, as its "static and contemplative" register ruminates on musical and bodily memory, drawing attention to the agitated absence of the waltz partner.[7]

Similarly, *H-E-L-L-O* presents the jazz musicians performing John Williams's famed five notes stripped from their orchestral collective, as a set of solo pieces that emphasize the call to be seen and understood. The questions of visibility and presence charted through the phantasmagoric performances across nine locations in New Orleans motions towards an acknowledgement and consideration of the marginalized in New Orleans—most urgently displaced and disenfranchised Black communities. Although the tragic and wide-sweeping devastation of Hurricane Katrina was witnessed by millions in real time, the socio-historic preconditions that exacerbated the storm's impact as well as its long-term ramifications across industry and culture remain unseen by many. Described as a "natural disaster," the supposed organic or natural occurrence is a construction that functions similarly to the assumed naturalness of urban topographies—regional devastation in a predominantly black metropolis, like Smith's conception of the space ways, are constructions that structure racial inequity, in this case, conditioning unequal distributions of resources and national concern.

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[6] Poetics of Relation citation
[7] John Cage estate website.

Yet, in *H-E-L-L-O*, through strategies of repetition and the emphatic (near immutable) presence of performers, we are impelled to look. Moreover, the audience is made to listen, numerous times, to the same injunction of the five-note sequence. Repeatedly saying hello through song and sight, presence is inescapable, and a confrontation with the material realities and devastation of the city are not to be ignored. It seems eerily paradigmatic that the t-shirt of the first performer XX declares: "Listen to your city." Here, a written verse by Lauren, the hyper-empathetic protagonist of Octavia Butler's seminal novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993), becomes helpful:

All struggles
are essentially
power struggles.
Who will rule,
Who will lead,
Who will define,
refine,
confine,
design.
Who will dominate.[8]

When we deeply consider the nuanced power dynamics of racialized geographies, as *H-E-L-L-O* urges, the struggles Lauren describes are uncovered. Yet, as Octavia Butler's title originates, and The Gospel of Matthew's "Parable of the Sower," asserts, "[T]hough seeing, they do not see."

This begs the question: while we see each musician's corporeal presence, can we *see* them? Just as jazz has been displaced by touristic audiences as a shallow consumption of a markedly Black art form, for mainstream (read: hegemonic) American audiences, so too has the engagement with Hurricane Katrina's impact become shallow: avoiding if not ignoring the long-standing gubernatorial neglect of local and federal government agencies. And perhaps more dangerously, when direct interaction with the tragedies of Katrina are sustained, they result in the appropriation of Black suffering. In the way Janis Joplin's rendition of Erma Franklin's moving lovesong "Piece of My Heart" (1967) supplanted the original commercially, it also histrionically mimed the strains and pains of Franklin's suffering. Such instances of appropriation become mere sites of existential suffering or solipsistic stages: they do not ameliorate the material conditions of Black realities.

Constrastingly, in *H-E-L-L-O*, the musicians confidently occupy the urban locations, sharply diverging from consumerist performances of New Orleans jazz life. Standing behind gates, in the middle of the street, on medians as traffic passes, on grassy patches of an overgrown sidewalk, outside of closed music venues like Tipitina's and Preservation Jazz Hall, the musicians claim space in the city, even against the rules and regulations of urban planning. Emotionally distant from the celebratory parades of Mardi Gras, the performances in Smith's film align more closely with jazz funerals. The elegiac marches of brass bands that would move across the city to the cemetery is perhaps rearticulated in Smith's own durational traverse of the urban haunts that ends with a silent scan of the Saint Louis Cemetery, where a number of notable jazz musicians

[8] Parable of the Sower, p. 92 citation

are buried, before returning to a liminal boundary along Mississippi River. Though Smith's camera surveys expanses of the city while music sounds without a clarified source, the artist invariably returns to the source of the music. Each unmoored string of notes is reunited with and attached to the body of the performer. In this way, the musicians' presences are reaffirmed by jarringly disappearances and compensatory reidentifications.

The pertinent attribute of Afrofuturist discourse—the simultaneity of past, present, and future—is plumbed in *H-E-L-L-O*'s revaluation of the historical positionality of jazz and points towards a regenerative future in which these bodies are endowed with visual recognition and corporeal presence. Disparate temporalities emerging at once the recent histories of regional devastation, the trauma of memory, the traditions of the Second Line, and the present manifestations of these realities, engagement with the historical positionality of jazz, the present state of crisis for New Orleans, and concurrent presence of imagined, generative future. This tension rests at the heart of *H-E-L-L-O*, positioning the musicians' call and response throughout New Orleans' urban reality marked by raced and classed organization.[9]

Uniting various formal and ideological threads, Smith constellates a possibility for regeneration in post-Katrina New Orleans only if the city's calls are listened to with care. By surveying and intervening in the city's urban landscape through film and musical performance, Smith makes the imbrication of the built environment, natural disaster, and musical appropriation legible. Writing in the wake of the hurricane Bench Ansfield has endeavored that "Katrina's water figured as a substance of sojourn, alienation, and death in a space whose bedrock was cast out of black bodies as slaves."[10] Whereas Smith acknowledges these logics of sojourns in her own traverse of the city that hinges on the dynamics of dispersed creative performances, she introduces a new formulation for witnessing the city. In this way, she reoccupies touristic locations, places of public communion and worship, liminal spaces, and burial grounds. With an interrogative lens that confronts the hauntological trace of Katrina across the city as the musicians interact with the histories of jazz performance and visibility, the artist suggests a reclamation of space and bodily presence. Pushing against the overdetermination of New Orleans as a mythic commodity of the voracious American imaginary—simultaneously exuberant and morbid, authentic and hybrid—Smith calls back to the real through the integration of science fiction, unexpected bass-clef performances, and a sensitive lurch across spaces and places.

[9] The musicians who appeared onscreen in *H-E-L-L-O* (2014) are Roger Lewis, Steve Glenn, Michael Watson, Dan Oestreicher, Kirk M. Joseph, Janine Waters, Monica E. McIntyre, Benjamin Atherholt, Isaac Moore, and Desmond Provost.

[10] Footnote from Sylvia Wynter book edited by Katherine McKittrick.