



Maxwell Williams, "Bearing Wit(h)ness: The Art of Kandis Williams", KCET, November 18, 2016.

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"Affect: Network: Territory" was performed at Human Resources L.A. in August 2016. | Photo: John Tain

Inside the darkened gallery at Chinatown art space Human Resources Los Angeles, a dancer lays underneath a sheet of mirror hanging from the ceiling. Laser lights shoot through the darkness as the mirror dangles over his neck like a guillotine. From the front, the mirror erases his head, creating a double of his body, laid prone on the ground. He slides out from underneath, and performs a complicated panoply of moves, striding and leaping around the room in sometimes ferocious, sometimes delicate motions. It has been hinted on the invitation to the performance that viewers are encouraged to, at their own discretion, capture the performance on their camera phones.

The performance by artist Kandis Williams and dancer Josh Johnson, titled "Affect: Network:

Territory," was an experiment based on the scene that plays out across America on what seems like a daily basis. A black man — his body — moves through the world, is surveilled, violence is enacted upon him, images are taken and distributed, and then viewed by millions across the internet. A few weeks after the performance at a restaurant near her apartment in Skid Row, Williams tells *Artbound* that the interactions were based on the concept of "aesthetic wit(h)nessing," a neologism coined by Israel-born painter and psychoanalytical theorist Bracha Ettinger.

What exactly is wit(h)nessing? In an academic paper titled "Aesthetic Wit(h)nessing in the Era of Trauma," University of Leeds' Griselda Pollock defines it as such: "[Ettinger] expands a word's conceptual range



from the legal and testimonial meaning of bearing witness to the crime against the other, to being with, but not assimilated to, and to being beside the other in a gesture that is much more than mere ethical solidarity. There is risk; but there is also a sharing.”

Williams takes Ettinger’s idea — giving a psychological closeness to the viewers during the performance — and adds another psychoanalytic model to draw the audience into the scene of a police shooting of a black man, e.g. the shooting of Philando Castile, in which his fiancée Diamond Reynolds, filmed the aftermath. Williams held a workshop at Human Resources prior to the performance in which the wit(h)nessing was amplified by “threeing,” a psycho-therapeutic role playing model used in group therapies.

“For our purposes, one person was a ‘perpetrator,’ one person was a ‘victim,’ and one person was a ‘witness,’” Williams says. “So, [it took on] the model of the shooting videos, but we built into the rules a dissonance, because we were talking about, in America, there are so many operatives that are obscured, so many identities that are formed out of dissonance. We had each of the participants use their own camera to record their movements throughout the space, and what we ended up with was a weird psycho-geographic tagging, of the space — where people were hiding, where people felt safe, where it was comfortable to be, where it was not comfortable to be.”



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The mix of Ettinger’s wit(h)nessing and Williams’ own stylistic developments is a fine example of the way she effortlessly blends psychoanalytical theory and personal experience. I first came across Williams’ work in a group show at the Underground Museum in 2014, where she presented a series of black-and-white photo collages, a medium she continues to investigate. In one noteworthy image, Williams collages four young girls — Sigmund Freud’s daughters Sophie and Anna spliced into a photograph of Williams and her sister — smiling on an Easter Sunday.

“It was interesting to see that overlap of these doctor’s daughters — and one future doctor, [Anna Freud] — and compare and contrast those life stories instead of using the actual model of analysis,” Williams says.

The collages, Williams explains, have roots in psychoanalysis, but in what she describes as an anthropological way.

“That whole series is about the question of therapy and who therapy is for,” she says. “Life events end up becoming theoretical. Freud is a crazy example, because his theories are so embedded in how we understand media, literature, and ourselves. But then, he was a psycho. And a lot of his personal hang-ups come out of inter-personal dynamics with his contemporaries and his family. It’s really funny. There’s [intellectual scholar] Hortense Spillers, who has an essay called ‘Psychoanalysis and Race,’ and Ettinger, who has a book called ‘The Matrixial Borderspace,’ which is kind of an interruption of the psychoanalytic model where the phallus is the first confrontation that you have, or the realization that you have with phallus or the fear of castration or the envy of not having one.”

(In ‘The Matrixial Borderspace,’ Ettinger hypothesizes that if we conceive our connections to each other being less about a connection to phallic thinking and more a matrixial, or womb-like, entering into each other, then we would be embracing unknowns.)

Taking her grounding in theory one step further, Williams often binds her work with a series of “readers,” photocopied books full of essays and excerpts that Williams is currently thinking about, offered as a way of understanding her work. In these readers, one might find essays about the effects of



incarceration on the black population or a chapter of a book on the politics of skin color or about black hair. Her most recent reader, which accompanied her works in the group show “A Subtle Likeness” at the ONE Archives at the USC Libraries (curated by Black Radical Imagination’s Erin Christovale) culls entirely from ONE’s vast LGBTQ materials, and revolve around women who perform closest to the proximity of the white male gaze. In it are plates from medical images of what were once known as hysterical women, tabloid articles about white actresses, as well as an essay about Cindy Sherman, a “white photographer who wants to multitudinously be consumed by this gaze.”

Often these essays will play a conformational role in Williams’ life and practice. She points to “Psychoanalysis and Race,” in which Spillers describes a group of Austrian analysts in West Africa, who try to understand if there’s a cultural relevance to their feelings of powerlessness.

“They found that there was none,” Williams says. “A lot of the disruptions of the gaze, and a lot of the neuroses around castration, that West Africans were experiencing in their lives was external. It was a colonial imperative. It wasn’t relevant. That was an interesting thing for me, because being in white spaces, and having my emotionality coded, and being an artist, [I] start feeling like psycho too. Especially for a black woman who is not wealthy, and making art for my living. It’s ‘crazy.’ I was reworking a lot of those ways I feel like I’ve been coded by spaces for which psychoanalysis is relevant, and seeing where those overlaps fall apart.”

I offer to Williams that the readers are quite generous to her viewers — a way to take home knowledge that isn’t easily obtained, has been edited for clarity, and gives insight into work that isn’t often allowed. But Williams demurs.

“In a way, I feel like it’s a corrective,” she says. “Because these books are really hard to find. I have to use friends’ JSTOR accounts, and hide IP addresses. With academic and theoretical texts, they’re loftily above populist opinions about stuff, so it’s nice for me to show these texts to people who are about to see my work, so it’s not so generous, because it’s how to read what I’m thinking about, and how to make what I’m doing more legible. And that’s about having information being accessible to

everyone. Some of those texts are super expensive, and that’s ridiculous in America, I’ve found. In Europe, even people who are self-publishers get a certain amount of ISBN numbers, so if you publish anything, you can go into every public library, and into government archives. But that doesn’t really happen in America. These works are only available in college classes where you’re paying \$100,000. So it feels nice for me to be just like, ‘Here, it’s 10 bucks.’”

Though Berlin-based, the Baltimore-born Williams has a longstanding relationship with Los Angeles. In addition to the ONE Archives exhibition, the Human Resources performance, and the group show at the Underground Museum, Williams recently held a solo show at SADE (beautiful collages of the gesturing hands of Civil Rights leaders), and is gearing up for her first solo show at Night Gallery. But first she’s off to Mexico City.

“I’m going to go to Mexico City and try and do a score with women’s bodies, and we’re looking for funding and a place to try to do another,” she says. “I want to redo [the 1913 performance] “Hexentanz” by [choreographer] Mary Wigman with video. I want to do that here. But I think I’ll probably start off in Mexico City doing the groundwork. And then I have a solo at Night Gallery. I want to make some prints with diffraction ink — invisible ink. But don’t know what that’ll look like.”

Whatever shakes out will certainly be something to get excited about. Encountering Williams’ works always leads to a million different microanalyses; each piece or performance is densely packed with words and images that can launch so many conversations about race, femininity, and psychology, but don’t necessarily rely on any one of those things. With “Affect: Network: Territory,” Williams proved herself to be a force to be reckoned with. And for that, we should all bear future wit(h)ness.