



Double Take–Whitney Biennial 2017

Chris Sharp and Genevieve Yue

March 21, 2017

[...] Cauleen Smith also visits sites of historical importance in H-E-L-L-O (2015), though the cultural map she draws emerges not in language, but in the call-and-response of musical instruments playing the five-note refrain from Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977). In long shots that take full account of the musician's figure (not to mention the impressive length of a contrabassoon), she tracks forwards and back, or sweeps in wide pans, to depict each musician planting what is effectively a sonic marker similar to the otherworldly visitors in Steven Spielberg's film. With voices emanating from places like Louis Armstrong's Colored Waif's Home for Boys in Corona, Queens, and Preservation Hall, an institution of New Orleans jazz, Smith creates a chorus out of a far-flung diaspora.

The point of origin for this African-American community is indicated in Smith's haunting *Sine At The Canyon Sine At The Sea* (by Kelly Gabron) (2016). Made in the immediate aftermath of the election, the film harnesses the fear and outrage of that moment, while also launching the viewer into a broader historical and extraterrestrial perspective. Smith's alter-ego Gabron, last heard as a male voiceover in *Chronicles of a Lying Spirit* (1992), returns in full force. Over an NPR radio interview with white supremacist Richard Spencer, she corrects his simplistic, racist remarks with sharp-tongued indignation. What makes Spencer wrong is his small-mindedness, his concern only for those that resemble him. Smith links this to a brutal history in which people were sent away to the colonies, never to return, as we see images of the Door of No Return, the path to the slave ships taken from Goree Island, off the coast of Senegal. What do we do with people unlike ourselves? The answer, for Smith, is not to send people away, but to take the riskier step of keeping everyone in sight. Toward the end of the film, she offers this beautiful, big-hearted prayer: "So here's my wish for us. Every sunrise and every sunset in the world all at once. For you." In all its complexity, she recognizes the hard and necessary work of community, of living with. It is a task made all the more difficult when we understand, as Smith does, that the notion that some people can be ignored or expelled is the very heart of the violence we currently face.