

“Come the Light, Come the Hope”: On Kat Anderson’s *Restraint Restrained*

by Rabz Lansiquot

I write this piece as I encountered the work, as myself, a Black, queer person with first-hand experience of mental illness, and second-hand experience of those institutions set up to deal with mental illness through friends and family in various ways. I guess one could say that I also have third-hand knowledge of the ways in which mental illness and the conditions of those institutions have and continue to cause pain, trauma, and sometimes untimely death to Black people disproportionately. I say this to assert the subjectivity inherent in all engagements with art, foregrounding James Baldwin’s notion of “the flesh-and-blood-person”¹, an embodied spectator¹ whose experience of art and film, how it makes us feel, what it makes us think of, what we think of it, is always informed by how we are or aren’t able to move through the world.

When I entered the gallery space for Kat Anderson’s *Restraint, Restrained*, I was struck firstly by the darkness. The black walls and low light counteracts the thrown-ness² Black people often feel² when entering an arts space. It feels oddly warm, inviting.

The first piece you encounter is the sound piece *...Hold 2, 3, 4...* which instructs you to breathe cyclically, the pace slowing as time passes. The work feels like a mindfulness tactic, one that you encounter both on your way into and out of the experience of the film *John*. A way to both prepare you for the complex and difficult experience you are about to have, and to release the stress and anxiety likely created from it afterwards. It brings you into your body to receive, and then back into it to be able to process. *...Hold, 2, 3, 4...* references both the military technique of tactical breathing, in contrast to Martiniquaise anti-colonial thinker and activist Frantz Fanon’s notion of ‘combat breathing’, which aims to mobilise your life energies “in order to continue to live, to breathe and to survive the exercise of state violence”³. It feels like an act of care to the³ Black viewers entering the space, and these references feel like an intimation towards the need to fight.

I entered the centrepiece of the exhibition, the imposing two-channel film *John*. The film follows John, a dark-skinned Black male patient of a psychiatric hospital. The oscillating soundtrack acts as a sonic representation of both mental illness, a dull hum, bass which vibrates the room as you watch it, so constant that sometimes it seems to disappear and other times is debilitating, and white supremacy, high frequency ringing, tapping and buzzing in your ears. When they converge they become bigger than the sum of their parts.

¹ James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 1976

² Referencing Zora Neale Hurston’s famous quote “I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp, white background...” in her essay *How it Feels to be Colored Me* (New York: The World Tomorrow, 1928)

³ Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, *Introduction: Combat Breathing: State Violence and the Body in Question*, In *Somatechnics* 1.1, 2011, Edinburgh University Press

The film begins with a black screen. A group chants “Come the light, come the hope,” a refrain from the poem *Revolution* by H.S. and C.B. (two black sisters), one of the many textual references Anderson employs throughout the show from her research at Black Cultural Archives. The voices call John’s name and he wakes on an inbreath, as if from a nightmare. He struggles to wake comfortably; stirring, thrashing, stretching. The only adornments in his light grey room, which his clothing almost blends into, are a mirror and a red mark on the wall. Blood? He approaches the mirror, pulls at his face, rubs his eyes. Waking up Black in racial capitalism feels like this. Heavy. Dull. As John slowly emerges from his room through a neon-lit corridor, the fact of his institutionalisation becomes clear. A concrete room with blue walls is populated with patients and white medical staff, who appear to engage calmly and sympathetically with the only white patient before they all turn to glare at John as he enters.

He wakes again, same weight. The red smudge on his wall is now bigger and is the head of a horse. As he leaves his room again, faster this time, he witnesses the three white staff members restraining an older Black man. Arms around his neck, his hands pulled behind his back as he struggles to the ground. John is scared, tearful, and runs away as we witness more the man fighting for his life. This is not a fantasy. Anderson’s work references the formal modes and aesthetics of the horror genre, and this work specifically references the sorts of ‘clean’ dystopias created in sci-fi. As a fan of this genre I’m constantly fascinated by the ways that the worlds and stories, most often told through white protagonists in worlds without any significant Black presence, parallel Black experience in the lived world and *John* is a film clearly made by someone who shares these concerns. This scene refers explicitly to, and draws from, real cases of mentally ill Black people who have died in these institutions, which are set up supposedly for their protection and wellbeing. Sean Rigg and Olaseni Lewis, whose relatives appear in the works, are just two in a long list of UK cases that include both men and women.

John hides in a dark cylindrical space and follows a flickering light at the other end which leads him to an orange room, filled with a group of Black people who chant, over and over again, “come the light, come the hope”. The warm oranges and browns of their clothing and the sun-like wall are a stark contrast to the blues and greys of all of the other spaces we’ve seen John in. The group are played by Black revolutionaries, healers of varying types including Marcia Rigg (activist and sister of Sean Rigg, a Black British musician who suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and died in police custody in August of 2008), Hakim Taylor (teacher, mindfulness practitioner and child emotion coach), Barby Asante (artist, curator and creative activist), Melz Owusu (non-binary academic, activist and poet), Aji Lewis (activist and mother of Olaseni Lewis, who died in 2010 after being restrained by 11 police officers in Bethel Royal Hospital in 2010), Melba Wilson (writer and mental health services advocate and manager) and Leslie Thomas QC (a barrister who specialises in civil liberties, human rights, police and inquest law, and who represents the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire). These revolutionaries nurture John, hold him, hear him, and he is able to return to the ward and resist. Fist in the air, John stands in defiance, still visibly fearful, until one of the staff members tackles him to the floor.

John’s protest is, unsurprisingly, met with violence. What happens next is obscured somewhat with darkness. Flashing lights that mimic the presence of the police spill out beyond the screen and

illuminate the struggle. But the struggle we see is not of John, restrained, being killed, yet. It is of John, fist still raised, and of the staff members who are writhing in pain, brought to the ground by fear, despair and torment. The bass intensifies and Anderson's voice emerges, reciting a complex and nuanced text with Fanonian inflection. "...that moment when, you realise that you yourself are dying, and have been for centuries. But up until now, you have thought that you were somehow, utterly alive..." This segment continued to ring in my ears. "they let you go on thinking that you were alone. Thinking that somehow in your superiority, and moral making, that you were the rights and they were the wrongs of the earth. That you could find a way to finally rid them, the ones of no worth."

I realised quickly that this text was not about me, or John, but was about them, those white people wrapped up in institutional racism to the point of violence. I read this in two ways. Firstly, the effect of violence, its burden, is not just held by those it is enacted on but also by those who enact it. The violence and the culture, or more specifically hegemony, of justification around it, reverberates in their psyches, warps reality, produces and reproduces itself. Secondly, that this act of defiance, this resistance and strength, causes a psychological fissure in the minds of white subjects. It challenges all that they think is right, and just, and all that has told them, throughout their lives and beyond, of their superiority and of their claim to privilege. The inclusion of this performance of fright by the white actors, who we see screaming, crawling, unconscious, dying, turns the gaze onto whiteness, points the finger, illuminates. It also resists the expectation of the evidencing of acts of violence against Black people, the spectacle of Black death and pain displayed in film, journalism and art so commonly in recent years. "The demand that this suffering be materialised and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and terrible". It addresses the double standard in the media of withholding such imagery⁴ of the deaths of white victims of violence, and gratuitously displaying those of Black ones.

This explosion ends with everyone on the floor, seemingly unconscious, and the Black man who appeared to die earlier in the film, coming to, approaching John, and with sadness and intimacy placing his hand over his head. He says a prayer, kisses John's head, and suddenly John's unconscious body transforms into that of a blonde, white man. The other man stands to his feet with strength, as if he has accomplished what he set out to do and as he stands he is lit in orange light, wearing orange clothes, mirroring those of the revolutionaries. He has changed John's lifeless body into that of a person who may demand some collective sorrow, or even receive some justice for his death. Possibly, in death, he may now be afforded some dignity, some humanity.

John blends reality and fantasy seamlessly, as if to say, there is no such thing. This may reflect the fractures in reality caused by some mental illnesses but it may also reflect Black living in the world. "Come the light, come the hope", again.

Through to Gallery 2, where a second video piece *Roundtable Conversation* is presented. This piece presents a conversation between the real-life revolutionaries that play this same role in *John*. The work begins with a question; "Can we map the impact of technologies of race, gender, law,

⁴ Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-making in Nineteenth Century America*, 1997, Oxford University Press

colonialism, empire, capital, and governmentality on Black minds and bodies?" They reflect on the themes of the film and the exhibition at large; they talk through the psychic effect of policies such as the hostile environment and institutional racism in general; their own mental health challenges; the cases of their loved ones who were stolen from them as a result of institutional racism in psychiatric institutions; their strategies for survival and for resistance; and on violence. This piece gives voice to those doing the work. Those fighting back, those trying to heal and encourage others to heal. It makes real the fantasy, elucidates the terror, reminds us that sci-fi is not just fiction. Mental health is inextricable from white supremacy and capitalism. Research has, and is continuing to be done, on the links between generational trauma and mental illness. Being Black or otherwise other-ed in a world built on white supremacy is proven to be bad for your health.⁵ Not only this - those of us who struggle with these issues are significantly less likely to seek help in the first instance, and if we do, we are more likely to face racism and therefore a lack of holistic support, at multiple levels, from strangers on the street; friends and family; employers and co-workers; therapists; GPs; nurses; medical staff; security staff; law enforcement; mental health facilities; prisons and more. This kind of violence and negligence is, quite literally, a killer, and it was imperative that this work be included in the exhibition to remind us of that, from the lips of those who deal with it everyday.

Throughout the exhibition, in both the main space alongside *John*, and in Gallery 2, alongside *Roundtable Conversation*, are six large text prints. The words are beautifully embossed in black on black paper, spread wide across the page, illuminated slightly by dim lights. They are of texts and poems selected by Anderson whilst researching at Black Cultural Archives and draw from Black liberation papers and journals like *Race Today* and *Black Voice*. Peppered throughout the gallery they remind us of the rootedness of this history of struggle and resistance. Black testimonies from H.S. and C.B., Eric Roach, Amadeu Samuel, Carlos Omar, Emanuel Corgo and Brixton Defence Campaign Bulletin No.4 of revolution, of death and pain. These are not names that bounce around in general consciousness and so, to me, they feel like another starting point. More research to be done, more legacies to uncover.

Kat Anderson's exhibition resists the trope of presenting anti-Black violence in the gallery space, by approaching the issue holistically. The four works address the violence itself; the psychological affect and effect of that violence (both for the Black and the white perpetrator) in *John*; people who in their communities are doing the work of resisting and healing from that violence including their strategies both in *John* and *Roundtable Conversation* as well as in the words we can catch a glimpse of on the walls; and lastly, offering a space to enact one such simple strategy through the cyclical breathing in the sound piece *Hold....2, 3, 4*. The painful and difficult work that needs to be done to watch the horrors that the character of John encounters is supported by the other pieces that surround the film. That work is situated alongside a lineage of ongoing, fierce and powerful collective resistance to the conditions he, and we, face. It is painful and scary, it hurts as I wrestle with it, but it is not without context and research, not without hope, not without history and community, and most significantly, it is abundant with care.

⁵ I'm no psychiatrist or scientist so am not offering statistics but much research has been done that I'm sure can be found online or in a research institution near you! For now, take me at my word.