

WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY: on Matt Savitsky's *LA TIME*

One of performance art's enduring promises is its potential to incite radical political action. As narrated in scholarly surveys of the form,¹ Angeleno performance art repeatedly mobilizes artists and their publics against the forces of policy, urban planning, commerce, and capital. Especially between the late 1960s and early 1990s, the form called together punks, comedians, formally-trained artists, Hollywood hopefuls, and curious interlopers. This ephemeral commons, assembled in bars, backlots, and galleries, gathered against (and in spite of) the hegemonic geographies that shaped the Southern California landscape. Subsequent generations of performers and art writers conjure this spirit in their own accounts of the genre.²

Matt Savitsky's *LA TIME* inherits this narrative, proposing its own observations of - and movements with - the entity called Los Angeles. The concept began as a performance during the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein Savitsky took to Instagram to read from and reinterpret each day's issue of the *Los Angeles Times*. These readings evolved into a series of seven videos, three of which occupy the gallery space at Human Resources Los Angeles. Each video, scaled to monumental proportions, features a front page of the *Times* published during the stay-at-home era. Mounted to a sheet of Plexiglas, and with its images removed, each page becomes a window onto actions filmed across the city.³ Through these windows, scenes unfold as both floating vignettes and fragments of concealed wholes.

LA TIME's performances demand engaged, active interpretation. Is Jess Hemingway, who carries a sign through the booths and walkways of Santee Alley, a street preacher or a lone protestor? Why do C Bain and Marissa Brown engulf a cluster of trees in caution tape? What links Gregory Barnett's cigarette smoking to Savitsky's lips latching onto a straw? In all instances, ambiguity charges the staged tasks. Their purpose and meaning - their significations - may be drawn out in many directions.

Indeed, *LA TIME* exposes and highlights the urge to divine meaning from ambiguity. Supplementing the videos are three performance scores, generated collaboratively by Savitsky and the cast. In them, hand-drawn tangles of arrows, doodles, words, and phrases sprawl across the images removed from each front page. Drawn out in many directions, these pencil, pen, and marker lines only hint at the process of translating words and images into performance tasks. While they do not reveal the specificities of this process, they document collective attempts to make sense of "old news," as Savitsky affectionately describes it. These attempts, like the long arc of performances before them, manifest a fleeting, counterfactual experience of Los Angeles.

¹ See, e.g., Meiling Chen's *In Other Los Angeleses: Multicentric Performance Art*, and Peggy Phelan et al.'s *Live Art in LA: Performance Art in Southern California, 1970-1983*.

² For example, Brian Getnick draws connections between post-recession real estate speculation and 2010s experimental performance in the final issue of *Native Strategies*, entitled *Final Transmission: Performance Art and AIDS in Los Angeles*.

³ Gesturing toward the collision of past and present moments, Savitsky filmed each installment of *LA TIME* exactly one year after the publication of its respective front page.

Amid so much ambiguity, how might we interpret these performative gatherings? What is their political content? *LA TIME* eludes easy representations of queer, feminist, anti-racist, or anti-capitalist coalition-building, unlike its more storied antecedents. But the work certainly grapples with the contexts that shape it: we might ask, for instance, how these videos frame a 'post-pandemic' city besieged by corporate and commercial speculation. (How many new luxury apartment complexes render a neighborhood unrecognizable? To whom? In what senses?) And as often noted over the past half-decade, social-distancing requirements fundamentally altered many performance makers' practices.

If LA's landscape has been forever changed, and if our ways for gathering on that landscape have changed, then our relationships have surely changed too. By treating each front page as the embodiment of a dominant cultural narrative, *LA TIME* invokes historian Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" - the sense of shared space, time, and (national) narrative conjured in part by mass-produced print media. *LA TIME* never defines the relationships between its community of performers, the people around them, and the locales they occupy. What it emphasizes, though, is the work of assembling - of *framing* - a community at a time when sociality is often charged with violence. In this moment, what brings (which) people together? Once gathered, what do they decide to do, and how?

On individual, communal, and structural levels, ongoing pandemic(s) yield competing visions of truth, authority, and sovereignty. Each vision proposes its own understanding of space, time, and techniques for navigating them. Between the authoritarian corruption of leftist political language, on one hand, and the overt memeification of politics, on the other, ambiguity abounds. Those who pursue a liberatory politics must therefore ask what concepts and practices frame our efforts. A first step, perhaps, is mapping the trails of movement we make in our being-together.

Gathering is as much a matter of conflict as of cooperation. *LA TIME*, like many of Savitsky's works, indexes an interest in group dynamics and collaborative decision-making processes. We might ask what disciplinary principles inform the effort to coordinate performers who work across genres, including dance, theater, comedy, and visual art. This layer of investigation might reveal more explicit connections between intra-group politics and broader understandings of solidarity and mobilization. Even so, the work reminds that any artwork, like any gathering, enacts a vision of the world. If *LA TIME* tells a story about performance and politics, it dramatizes the questions, hopes, and potentials that make political action possible.

Text by Ajani Brannum