

# BLACKNESS IS NOT SITE SPECIFIC

An interview with Anna Parisi

By: Natalia Almonte

*Caught in the Act*, 2020, 00:06:13

A performance by Anna Parisi

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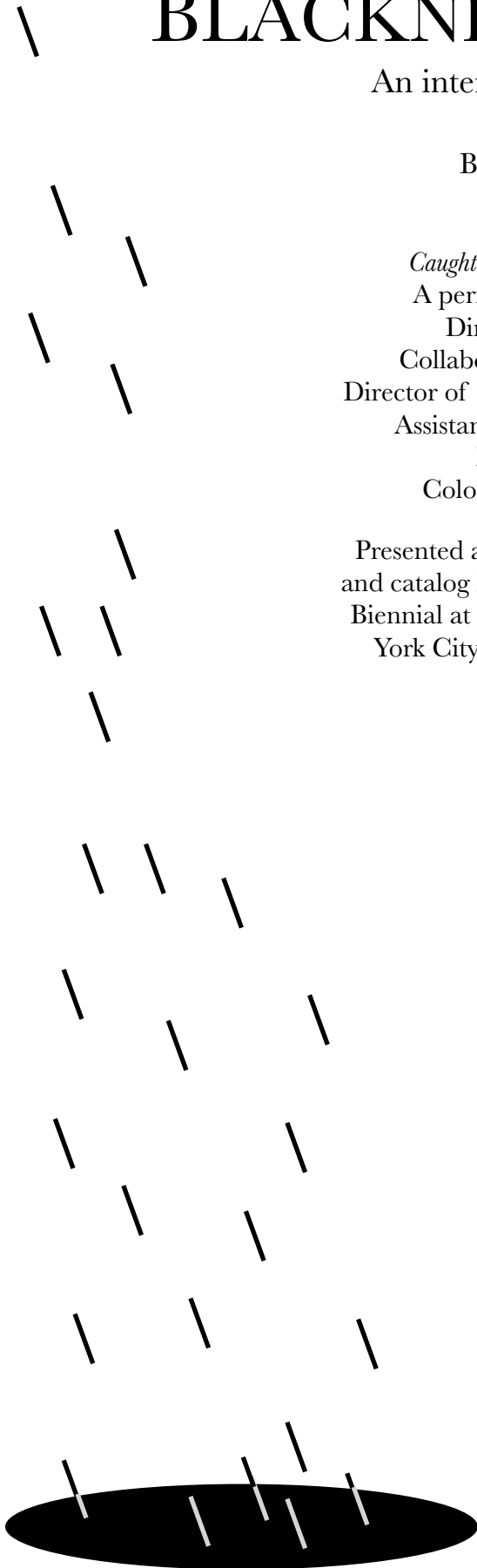
Presented at the virtual closing reception  
and catalog launch of the Immigrant Artist  
Biennial at the EFA Project Space in New  
York City on Saturday, October 24th,  
2020.

*NATALIA*



With the gun by your ear, shots are fired.  
Click and ring.  
Click and ring.  
Rain.....  
The building is abandoned,  
the metal is rusty,  
the air might be toxic,  
the weeds are overgrown,  
the roof is collapsing.  
It rains inside.....

The space seems beyond repair but it's  
beautiful. Despite its decay, the energy is  
seductive. Each room, welcoming  
participation, activation. There is a willingness  
to share itself, its past and its secrets with you.  
Its full potential never reached, but it's never  
too late.



BLACK | WHITE

G  
R  
E  
Y

ANNA



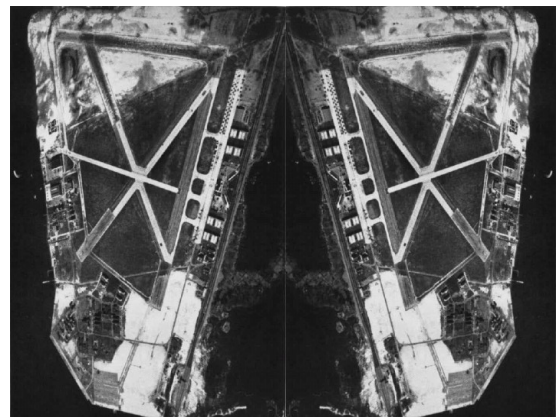
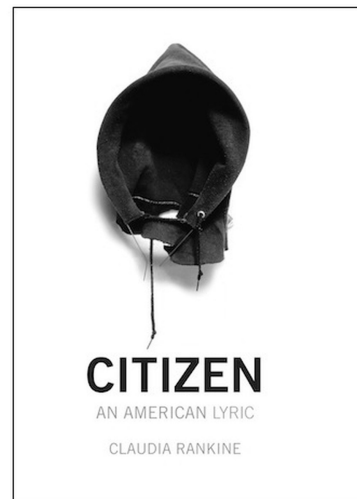
**THE IDEA:** I stopped by a little bookstore in Manhattan and there was a skinny book called, *The White Card* by Claudia Rankine. It's a play where the black artist is invited to have dinner at the house of a white collector/curator and their interactions show that they are unaware of their own racism. I had also read *Citizen* and loved it. I had this in mind and after the performance I did at Urban Glass I was thinking about the violence that was inflicted on my body and I didn't want this to happen anymore. I didn't want to put my body in a situation where it had to suffer in the hands of white people. The whole idea of *Caught in the Act* was born out of the desire of translating the weight that racialized bodies have to bear while navigating space and their lives. This weight needs to be shared. There is a need for whiteness to show up and do their part. Not only in bearing the weight but fighting for and with people of color.

**THE LOCATION:** The Floyd Bennett Field in Brooklyn, New York, was built in 1928 as an airfield that never fully served its purpose. Today it is managed by the National Park Service. The original function of the structure that hosted the performance is unknown, although there is some evidence that it could have been used for ballistics.

**THE LOCATION AS METAPHOR:** An invitation to participate in an abandoned idea, the abandoned utopia of tolerance and true democracy... — of understanding between races and credos. We almost had it and we lost it and had it and lost it again.

## THE INTERVIEW: Anna's apartment

I ate a cheese danish on Anna's couch that flaked and crumbled onto my lap and then the floor. I sat there like a child waiting for her to come vacuum my mess, literally and figuratively. As a white Puerto Rican (depending on who you ask), I am aware of my own conflicting identity, in many situations a privileged one, so I do not pretend to be a voice for the black experience. Anyway, I press record, starting the hour long interview about *Caught in the Act*, only interrupted between questions by Anna refilling our shot glasses with port wine.



Bird's eye view of Floyd Bennett Field

*Bottoms up!*

ANNA

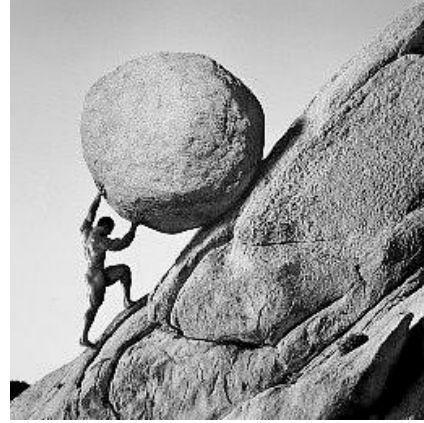


**THE TITLE:** Caught in an action, an act... for black people, this circularity is so recurrent because we are constantly protesting, constantly doing the work and then we are back where we began. The choice of using rocks comes from the myth of Sisyphus. He pushes a boulder up a mountain, only to see it fall. He keeps doing that over and over and over so he is recurrently caught in an action, an eternal loop of resisting, finding strength, and doing it all over again. I also go back to this existentialist book that I love, *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett, that when enacted, it's like theater of the absurd. The characters are stuck in a place waiting for Godot, the "mythical figure" that never arrives. What strikes me about this play are the last phrases:

"Well, shall we go?"

"Yes, let's go."

(They do not move.)



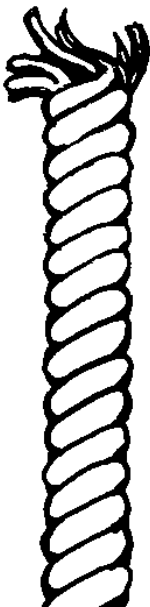
The myth of Sisyphus

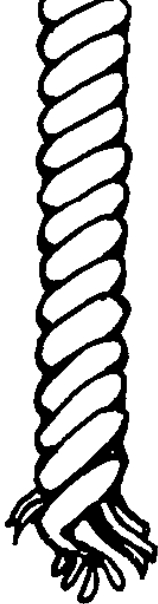


*Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett



**THE ROPE:** Aren't we all bound to invisible ropes? Bound to our responsibilities, to what society expects from us, routines, rules, demands, making money, a capitalist system, racialized systemic oppressive systems, confronting otherness. The rope here establishes the connection between both characters. They can't escape it, a fate of sorts. What is most interesting about it is the way the characters handle being bound. Alexandria moves gracefully, meaning it is easy for her to navigate the space. Even though she is bound, she is always poised and walks slowly. The other character is in a constant struggle because she is trying to deal with the things tied to her — which are heavy. The rope represents the connectedness but also the difference in their realities. People of color HAVE to deal with otherness. You can't just say "Oh I'm white, I don't want to deal with this." We have to deal with "what makes me different from you." The way that we confront otherness is precisely the point that I am trying to make with the piece.



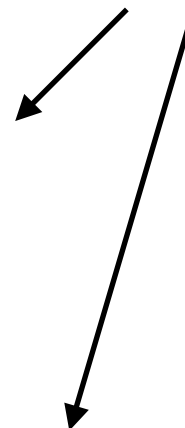


*Quer outro?  
My \$8 bottle.*

### THE KARENS:

“Calm down!”  
“So aggressive!”  
“How dare you!”  
“That’s against the law.”  
“I live here. I’m a tax payer.”  
“Go back to wherever you’re from.”  
“My goodness! Nothing better to do with your time.”  
“Are you kidding me? You don’t have a reason to be here.”

AUDIO



ANNA



THE YEARS: 1798, 1831, 1835, 1871, 1888

1798 is the first year they did the census in Brazil, and slavery was booming. It was THE thing, THE hype. They discovered with that census that the black population far outnumbered the white population. For me, that is very interesting because Brazil is the country that received the largest number of slaves during the Atlantic Slave Trade Era. So there was this moment in time where blacks outnumbered whites, but they were still enslaved. This year was so filled with potential for Brazil to become a black country.

1831 was when slavery was legally forbidden in Brazil, but it didn’t catch on and was largely ignored by slave owners.

1835 was the year of the Malê Revolt which basically was a bunch of slaves that said “fuck that” and orchestrated a revolution against the slave owners.

1871 was when the free birth law was implemented which meant that every black baby was to be born free and could not become a slave.

1888 was when slavery was actually abolished in Brazil.

All these moments are moments of potential, of liberation with moments when black people had hope. As part of the audio of the video, I repeat the years over and over as a kind of mantra. I go into this place of compulsion, obsession, a PTSD way of coping. I keep repeating it as a way of healing and motivating myself/ourselves to keep going. Essentially there is a black character that is just trying to survive, heal and deal with her own existence and her black body, touching on the issue of mental health related to otherness.

ANNA



**THE EMBRACE:** Most of my work is about violence, race and oppression against minorities and racialized bodies. I keep going back and forth between Martin Luther King and bell hooks, and their ideas of love and non-violence as a goal and end for these tensions. But also James Baldwin, *Wretched of the Earth*, Black Panther ideas, a violent approach, fuck the oppressor. I hope and want things to not be resolved through violence, even though I know it might be a necessary way of engaging with the issue. Usually in my work, I am very confrontational with the audience. I am trying to slap you in the face. Like, “Hey, c’mon!” *Caught in the Act* is trying to consider the place we are at, both thinking about the protests here in the U.S., and the protests back in Brazil. Given this political moment we are all facing with the election that is due to produce a state of chaos — I think that embracing violence might not be the best solution.

The first time in the performance when the two characters exchange looks, there is a brief moment of comprehension and empathy. The embrace for me is an invitation, as well as a gesture towards tolerance, even though “tolerance”, the word itself doesn’t suffice as a concept because tolerance implies having to respect the other, their desires and needs but there’s a loophole there, freedom of speech — meaning I can say this and you have to respect it. I don’t agree with that. I think there is a limit to tolerating what someone else will do, that is why when I talk about tolerance, it is very important for me to mark and to state that there is a limit to tolerance. Maybe tolerance isn’t the right word. It might be empathy, being able to see each other in our own flaws, failures and vulnerabilities and find a common place for dialogue. That’s why in the end, the embrace happens while you can hear a voice singing the words: “Talk, talk always, about everything, about love because words weigh as bricks, bricks become walls, walls divide.”



\*from Anna’s Instagram, posted May 23, 2020 — 2 days before George Floyd was murdered, 3 days before BLM protests, a few months into the pandemic and social distancing.

*Resonanzgeflechte* by Ute Klein

I think this whole fear discourse that has invaded our imaginary since 2016 of “fuck the other,” “kill the other,” “Muslim ban,” “gays are bad,” you know, this narrative of hate and fear of what is different has created an environment where we are not able to dialogue anymore. If you’re a Trump supporter you are a demon. Sometimes yes that is the case, but sometimes no. Sometimes there is a lack of comprehension. There needs to be a conversation so this hate and fear can dissipate or transform into something different.

For me, this piece is a very utopian piece. Even the location... it is an abandoned place that never happened. Floyd Bennet Field was designed to be an airport but only worked as an airport for half a year, so it never happened. There is this thing of reaching an understanding of races, and credos, and beliefs, and gender, and preferences, that we always strive to get to but never did and if we did get there it was only briefly. There is this constant aspect of a decay that surrounds it, the decay of these ideas, but also the potential of rebuilding. I think the piece contrasts these two elements of decay and rebuilding in an interesting way. So the embrace for me is an invitation for us to reimagine and rebuild realities or utopias or a moment that we might have lost.

*Last one eh?*

*NATALIA*



I had stood behind the camera during the performance, witnessing the nuanced metaphors that were strategically holding up a mirror to whiteness. It made me observe my thoughts about my personal confusion with my own racial identity. While watching the two characters move, I wondered on which end am I tied to, and truthfully, I did not see myself in either. In retrospect, this conclusion is actually a relief, that although I feel personally undefined, a clear definition is not the point. The beholder will see what they see and that is out of my control. All I can do is behold with empathy.

After the interview, I recognized that I have no business interpreting this piece, since the artist's words cut through so clearly. I will only leave you with this image that will forever be tattooed in my mind.

*Anna's shoulder.*

The basket full of rocks hanging on Anna's shoulder for hours was leaving its mark from the pressure of its weight, each fiber from the rope carving a line indenting her skin. The reddened and puckered skin, the bruising skin, the beautiful black skin, displaying an elegant threaded texture revealing her strength of will to communicate her message. To realize a utopia, one first has to imagine it.



Courtesy of the artist