

DIARY

SIGNS ARE EVERYWHERE

June 10, 2020 • Los Angeles • Christina Catherine Martinez on Drive-By-Art
Los Angeles



A Covid-19 announcement on the California highway. Photos: Christina Catherine Martinez.

BEFORE ANYONE GOT STARVED ENOUGH to sneak out for a fuck or a socially distanced porch hang, we took drives. On a recent Saturday, I visited the Westside edition of “Drive-By-Art,” an outdoor exhibition billed as “public art in this moment of social distancing” and organized by Warren Neidich, Renee Petropoulos, Michael Slenske, and Anuradha Vikram. On the way, I passed through Silver Lake and Echo Park, where a number of Artemisa Clark’s replicas of posters from New York in 1987—when Carl Andre was on

trial for second-degree murder of his wife, Ana Mendieta—remained stapled to telephone poles beside lost pet flyers and handwritten signs promising ca\$h 4 houses. Call the 212 number on Clark’s posters and a woman’s voice answers: *This is your wake-up call. This is your wake-up call. This is your wake-up call.*

The drive to Venice from northeast LA took only twenty minutes—a rare thrill, edged with guilt. “This is where the elderly live, so you might not know that many of us,” architect Kulapat Yantrasast said, laughing, as I pulled up to his house for Kool Kat’s Kare Wash, a performance that offered attendees a free car wash (executed by assistants), a glass of white wine or Perrier, and an Ivy League-ish looking bumper sticker reading, “Proud Survivors: Homeschool University”—a cheeky nod to families with students homebound by Covid-19, though as a former homeschooler myself, I pasted it on my red 1997 Mazda Miata without irony. For being the go-to architect of such imposing LA art temples as the ICA, David Kordansky Gallery, and the now-shuttered Marciano Art Foundation, Yantrasast grokked the underlying pathos of such an encounter-hungry endeavor as Drive-By-Art. The performance was a low-key act of service that achieved the kind of causal connection rarely captured by the gravid connotations of cabalistic argot like *relational aesthetics*—but it was a sterling example of it.



The author's car being cleaned at Kool Kat's Kare Wash.

In the parking lot of 18th Street Arts Center in Santa Monica, artist Dan Kwong stood at the edge of a giant painted yellow circle and addressed a group gathered at the center of his scale model of the solar system, spread out over an appropriately distanced eight-and-a-half miles. “Most planets are in places where you can pull over and take a look,” he explained, “except for Mars, Mars is *right* on PCH.”

Lita Albuquerque’s nearby film projection wasn’t scheduled to start until sunset, so I pointed my car toward Pan Pacific Park, where protesters had been peacefully gathering since noon. Heading north on Fairfax, past Little Ethiopia and a decimated LACMA, demonstrators thronged the sidewalks, talking and laughing and walking back to their cars, signs dangling casually. The streets became dense and peppered with cops while cars honked in solidarity and pedestrians cried “BLACK LIVES MATTER!” in return. Flanks of police in riot gear blocked most streets, pushing car traffic south and west. I turned left

on Third, then went north on a small residential street called Edinburgh before realizing the police were obstructing access to the park. I got out of my car and joined the flow of protesters. The last time I was this far west on Beverly was two years ago, for a gallery dinner for Torbjørn Rodland. Now, hundreds of people were kettled in the few residential blocks between Beverly and Third. The group I found myself with were mostly teenagers; the odd journalist or photographer scurried around. We formed rows, some holding hands, some with arms up, others on their knees, facing the cops.

For more than an hour, the police barked in unison and marched back a few paces. We chanted “BLACK LIVES MATTER,” and advanced the same. Finally, one cop broke through and went out into the center of the street and said, “I need to talk to your leader.” Everyone laughed.

“Fuck you!” someone yelled. Then someone else: “There’s no leader, asshole. We’re a community!”

“I need to talk to someone if we’re going to move!” the cop yelled back.

A very young brown woman, probably a teenager, raised her hand and walked forward. She met him in the middle of the street, and they spoke calmly and quietly, each occasionally nodding and gesticulating. The cop walked away, and she turned around. “They’re going to let us through to march west down Beverly!” she yelled. “Everyone stay calm, stay together, and watch out for each other!”

A loud crack rang out from the boulevard, then another, and just like that, the cops closed ranks and marched forward. Protesters scattered. A group of teens tried to corral everyone down a side alley. I jogged back to my car, which was now covered in shards of glass, though my own windows were intact. I zigzagged through residential streets lined with jacaranda trees and Spanish revival bungalows, but LAPD blocked every exit. Behind them, more heavily armed forces ran along Beverly—tear gas, the odd lick of flame, shouting. Purple jacaranda buds floated down and landed on the cops, standing totally still and unmoved by the scene. At last, I’m able to head south on La Cienega. More and more cop cars screech past in the opposite direction.

Going east on the 10, I spotted a girl on the overpass, her long hair blowing around like black fire against the sunset. She'd unfurled a bedsheet spray-painted with the words "LATINOS FOR BLACK LIVES MATTER" over the overpass. I honked and she pumped her fist as I passed under her. Things felt almost normal until I hit the 110 North, where rows of police with assault rifles perched on every bridge, like crows. Curls of smoke, distant cries: I've never seen so many police mobilized so quickly across all of Los Angeles (as I write this, they have been joined by the National Guard's khaki-brown Humvees). An emergency alert popped up on my phone, declaring a citywide curfew starting at 8 PM—thirty minutes. I set down my phone and stepped on the gas.

All previously scheduled night viewings of "Drive-By-Art" were canceled.

— Christina Catherine Martinez

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