

# EASTERNSPORTS

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### *A LOVE LETTER TO PHILADELPHIA*

by Kate Kraczon

Monumental and intimate, local and global, personal and mythic, *Easternsports* unfolds in a warp of color, music, moving image, and text. Time is a material in this work, layered and stretched in multiple directions, set to verbal, visual, and musical rhythms. Nearly two and a half hours in length, this in-the-round video installation invites viewers to enter, leave, and return as often and for however long they wish. Scripted by Jayson Musson, directed by Alex Da Corte, and with a score by composer Devonté Hynes, *Easternsports* is a morality tale for the digital age. Both deadly serious and heartbreakingly flippant, it embraces Gap commercials and grand jury rulings, middle-class aspirations and global imperialism. And it transforms a decade-long conversation between Musson and Da Corte into a work awash in the neon glow of their American milieu.

Longtime friends and first-time collaborators, Musson and Da Corte enthusiastically accepted my invitation to create a commission for ICA. I asked them to focus on the strengths in their practices that seemed underrepresented in recent projects. Musson has become recognized for his textile paintings made from Coogi sweaters (popularized by Bill Cosby and Biggie Smalls), but the alter-ego Hennessy Youngman he developed while a student in the University of Pennsylvania's MFA program has long demonstrated his mastery of humor and wordplay. The popular multi-episode web series "Art Thoughtz" (2011-2012) featured Youngman lampooning the art world, a performative form of catharsis as Musson navigated two years of graduate school. Da Corte's multidisciplinary work has also received wide acclaim. These acid-hued environmental installations filled with sculptures, photographs, and paintings often feature moving images. However, the videos themselves have never been featured. Based on my suggestions of how they might collaborate, Musson wrote the screenplay for *Easternsports* in New York while Da Corte produced the video in Philadelphia. They developed a vignette-driven update to Thornton Wilder's classic 1938 play, *Our Town*—with nods to Peter Greenaway and Jim Henson, David Lynch and *Duck Amuck*. Both scripts and sets overflow with allegory and intertextual references, many of them layered within Philadelphia culture.

Time is both slowed and accelerated within *Easternsports*, sometimes simultaneously as Musson's words amplify, concur, and occasionally collide with Da Corte's imagery. Appearing as subtitles and voiceovers, Musson's screenplay shifts from ponderous theories to social media banality, from pithy observations on class, race, and gender to tongue-in-cheek comments on personal and consumer desires, as a nonlinear drama unfolds. This linguistic dream space is matched by Da Corte's highly coded visuals. Shot at half-speed, the choreography and color-blocked costuming lend a theatrical flourish to the familiar (if bizarre) tasks Da Corte has filmed: yoga, "beer pong," a group of young women taking selfies, a karaoke performance, a man on a horse, a chain-smoking witch. With strategic stage make-up and clothing, actors are made anonymous or are seemingly doubled, mirroring one another's movements as if in a pas de deux. These actions are performed against graphic backdrops that are entirely handmade. Da Corte purposefully reveals their artificiality by including wall seams and wheels in each shot. There is no digital manipulation—no green screens or post-production editing. Though filmed digitally, the uncanniness of this visual mood seems analog, with intense colors and a depthless sense of space achieved through a masterful use of lighting and set design.

As floating as the mood and narrative may be, there is an origin to the story. Back in 2001, when Jayson Musson was an aspiring musician and artist based in Philadelphia, he wrote a poem that he self-published in a zine. The poem reflects on the ease that westerners have with casually dabbling in world cultures and religions. The poet's love interest is a woman with an "intellectual bent" who he believes would be charmed if he knew something about Buddhism, the "eastern sports" of the verse and a playful term for cultural exploitation. When Musson shared this text as inspiration for the

project, he and Da Corte had already begun developing a script and visual arc. As the artists moved forward in their collaboration, the titular poem loosely unified the work within a theme of adolescent desire and disappointment.

Predominantly communicated through text messages, the progression of *Easternsports* can be traced through an accumulation of these pithy, often hilarious comments between Musson and Da Corte (many of which are included in this catalogue). As Da Corte updates Musson with images from the Philadelphia shoots, Musson bounces back sections of script. The temporal lag in communication was minimal given the immediacy with which handheld devices—both artists are attached to their iPhones—allow instant response. The contemporary role of textual communication and how it alters the act of reading is central to Musson’s contribution. His gifted sense of linguistic rhythm has produced a script that effortlessly changes tempo and tone, often within the same scene; prosaic language morphs into poetic and back again. Offset by Hynes’s score, Musson’s syncopation produces a layer of pacing that weaves and nearly dances to Da Corte’s steady visual beat. Moments where image and text are disconnected intensify the unsteady sense of time experienced within *Easternsports*. Though Musson originally intended the entire script to be voiced in various languages with English subtitles, this ambition was ultimately streamlined to a French overdub in the first two scenes. Highlighting his own Francophile passion for New Wave cinema and post-structuralism, Musson’s choice comes with a droll and heavy dose of old-fashioned New World inadequacy.

Dialogue-free, the three remaining acts are illuminated by Devonté Hynes’s score. Shaped by character-driven leitmotifs, Hynes’s composition ingeniously harmonizes to Da Corte’s blaring, over-saturated colors and the humor and pathos of Musson’s script. Adding another layer of perception is Hynes’s own synesthesia, a condition that affects his work as he described in a 2014 TED Talk: “The way it works for me is my sight and sound senses are combined. Every sound I associate with a color and every color I associate with a sound.... The way I see things are constant streamers across the room, bouncing off from every touch and every sound.” Thus sound itself appears to grant an almost architectural spatial logic to *Easternsports*.

A nomadic approach to music, as something lived with as one moves through the world, is a recent phenomenon. As sound is increasingly rendered transportable, and as we are increasingly solipsistic with our listening devices, recorded music is rarely sited to a specific location as a shared experience. In *Easternsports* we are surrounded not only by text and sound, but also light and texture. Wall-size projections envelope us in a room within the space of the gallery, itself a totally fabricated setting. The entire space glows from Musson’s neon glyphs, our skins cast varied shades of pink, while brightly colored chairs are scattered across an elaborately designed carpet perfumed by orange oil and strewn with plastic oranges. The scripted space of the installation insists that viewers be made aware of their bodies. We twist and rotate to read the subtitles, attempt to see as many screens as possible, walk around and through the towering walls. A pop Gesamtkunstwerk, *Easternsports* repeatedly pushes well beyond the orthodox. Way past “normal” video length, the installation’s overabundance of sound and smell and visuality is tempered by the languid pace of Da Corte’s footage. The vignettes are leisurely, almost decadently slow.

“Video is essentially time,” Nam June Paik famously said in 1981, shaping an early understanding of the still new medium. And while video time plays its part, other temporalities and technologies shape *Easternsports*. An aesthetic of acceleration—of Photoshop and green screens, social networks and “real time” messaging—unfolds within an eccentrically slowed, steady pace for 146 minutes. Da Corte and Musson, themselves avid Instagram users with large followings, have perverted our understanding of this platform’s potential. Like many technically savvy artists, they circulated stills of their work in the months leading to the exhibition opening, garnering thousands of likes and “regrams.” The work lived first, and continues to exist, as a series of digital images dispersed infinitely on multiple platforms.

As the use of digital images as stand-ins, or doubles, for actual art objects continues to expand our understanding of contemporary art, Da Corte and Musson both capitalize on this emerging paradigm and ultimately critique it through temporal (and textual) choices within *Easternsports*. If—as video artist Douglas Gordon has said of his 1990s generation of artists—their relationship to film was dramatically altered by the introduction of the VCR, producing a “different film culture, a replay

culture, and a slow-motion take on things,” then Da Corte and Musson are of the “still” generation, the screenshot generation, when moving images are not only slowed, sped, and paused but also captured and shared statically, in small bursts of video, or through the micro-loop of the GIF. Through their profound understanding of this new scopic regime, the immediacy available within the current pop digital landscape is intentionally frustrated by *Easternsports*. You came to see the scene with the skateboarder that your friend posted on Tumblr? That’s two clock hours away.

SCENE 1  
[excerpt]

*Where’s my Authorial Authority! I wish there was a clothing label with that as a name, ‘Authorial Authority,’ y’know, like Under Amor but for the feeble and unsure.*

*But the girls.*

*I look at them and I covet their ease. I want to extend my phone out before me, camera turned back on my face, and regard myself with admiration. To believe, no, to know, that beauty and youth are undepletable resources like sunlight and wind.*

*To cut away the trauma, and curate what remains into a collection of images I send out into disembodied space. A version of myself that exists everywhere at once that can be encountered an infinite amount times to be consumed by a mass of unknowable viewers, much like yourself, Viewer. And I too become an unknowable consumer of someone else’s disembodiment.*

One by one, a group of young women in matching clothing and hairstyles assembles onscreen. Following Da Corte’s direction to “take a selfie,” the actors’ mannerisms and actions gradually develop into personalities and characters. They air kiss and hug, share oranges and take their seats in anticipation of what is about to unfold on the empty stage that occupies an adjacent screen. Meanwhile on another screen a lone karaoke DJ seems satisfied to perpetually tweak her electronic equipment.

A mummy slowly takes the stage, and the women continue to talk and move and pay no attention to the ensuing performance. The mummy asks the viewers, silently but directly, through subtitled text, “What’s your favorite song? What qualities make it your favorite?” and continues with a series of nearly rhetorical questions. The women continue to primp and talk, ignoring the mummy’s beseeching questions. They are distracted, it seems, by the effect of maintaining their public personas. As the mummy finishes and exits, a mime with a Swiffer enters and slowly sweeps the floor. A text on the humiliations and apathy of getting older as both an artist and an avid consumer of pop culture dominates the screen. Perhaps this is a personal vision. Musson experienced the flash of celebrity through “Art Thoughtz.” Though he has since retired the Youngman character, he continues to critically push the envelope of his own practice. How many young artists with sold-out painting shows would limit themselves to the literary for their first major museum project? The heroic journey within *Easternsports* is, at times, an artistic one.

SCENE 2  
[excerpt]

*I will leave this rice pudding  
place. I will venture out into  
lands unknown in search of the  
illusive treasure: the boon of all  
boons: an Image that Divides itself  
Perfectly. An image that never  
loses integrity as it is reflected  
infinitely, an image most rare that  
has yet to be reflected ever. These  
villagers will lose their shit.  
No other person has ever come into*

*possession of such a treasure. Most  
people reflect tired images,  
fragments of clichés from years  
past, pastiched into a mockery of  
what they claim inspire them.  
People adorn themselves in  
caricature. I am surrounded by  
cartoons.*

In the second scene, we seem to enter the psychological space of the narrator; a young woman in a black-and-white striped shirt muses on the triumphs of consumerism. Her attire is echoed in the diagonal stripes of the set background. She is joined by two attendants whose internal monologues respond bitterly to her self-righteous musings. As she “shops,” two skateboarders move in and out of the scene by way of a ramp that connects all four screens to encircle the viewing space. The skaters rhythmic sliding from screen to screen acts as a piston up and down within the woman’s thoughts and memories. And we hear her inner monologue of aspirations and self-pity, her sense of self as she buys and collects and returns in search of an ideal combination. It is a scene about consumption, not just of physical things but of personality traits and passions. It is the self-perpetuation of a belief system, if a shallow one. Items are requested and replaced as she fills and empties her shopping bags with things—labels removed—advertising plasticity and color. Bottles of soda-pop, the powder-coated chairs of the installation, plastic flowers and balls and unidentifiable objects, and many products that clean create an opaque visual logic on the shelves.

SCENE 3  
[excerpt]

*Are you on drugs?*

*Are you an artist?*

*My condolences if you are.*

*I mean if you are an artist. My condolences if you are an artist. I’m okay with drugs.*

*If you are an artist though, are you a successful one?*

*How do you define success even? you think.*

*Well, if you were at a dinner party, would you tell someone you didn’t know you were an artist?*

*Or would you simply tell them you’re a working stiff, just trying to get by buddy, in order to circumvent the awful conversation of having to explain what kind of art you make to another goddamn imbecile?*

*Well, what kind of art do you make?*

*Just kidding, I don’t want to know.*

*So is success as an artist being able to wear the badge of being an artist publicly?*

*Being festooned with accolades? Press photos of you standing in front of your artwork awkwardly, over-aware of the artifice of the whole photo shoot, but you don’t want to make the job of the photographer from the magazine any harder than it needs to be. It’s just a few photographs, you tell yourself, stand in front of the fucking painting and smile.*

*A week later you have a web link to an article you can forward to your family, subtly saying Fuck off, I did it you working-stiff, stuffed-shirt motherfuckers.*

Labor is the focus of the third scene. Musson's script, a manifesto of sorts, again enters the rhetorical with a series of questions and observations focusing on happiness, artistic labor, and spirituality, all with a decidedly Marxist bent. Despite harmonious backdrops, the four vignettes remain unconnected by the movement of protagonists among the scenes. On one, an alarmingly tanned, blond, young woman practices yoga. Smiling broadly, if stiffly, she makes various poses in front of a container of large balls in various colors. After climbing a ladder and taking a Buster Keaton-esque fall through the balls and onto the floor, she recovers and chooses a pink ball to physically and spiritually "center" herself in another pose.

On an adjacent screen, a model and her assistant, who are wearing Fall 2014 looks by luxury designers Proenza Schouler and Wes Gordon, prep for a photo shoot. Da Corte worked with Taylor Warren after initiating an email correspondence with the model who appeared in "Monster," Kanye West's infamous 2010 music video. Da Corte was curious about the on-set environment of the shoot. In it, Warren is one of Kanye's "dead" models, a decapitated head moved and propped by the musician. With its knowing depiction of black men as "monstrous," the video was widely seen as a form of commentary on the racially charged and dehumanizing labor involved in both hip-hop videos and the fashion industry. In the wake of the cultural debate "Monster" induced, Da Corte's casting of Warren knowingly indicts his own use of young bodies in his art.

On a third screen, two real life twins engage in a winless game of "beer pong," a form of table tennis within which the victor takes all: a pint of beer thrown in the face. Another shirtless young man supplies them with cups stacked like a towering, drooping sculpture. The true "sport" of *Easternsports*, this homoerotic imagery plays with the homosocial culture of fraternity life, where beer pong originated. The two competitors slowly ascend and descend identical ladders to collect cups as they construct the playing field across a table and proceed to play a round of this traditional collegiate drinking game.

The fourth screen is a touching homage to puppeteer Jim Henson. It shows a mason setting his wall of bricks in a mortar of peanut butter (a familiar material in Da Corte's art). The mason is stealthily shadowed by a group of Muppet-style puppets and their handlers. Henson's early experimental films—particularly his 1966 puppet-free *Time Piece*, in which Henson rushes through a bizarre series of situations involving the speeding up of time—were early influences on *Easternsports*. Likewise *Easternsports*, with its many modes of temporality, captures and plays with the anxiety that accompanies the shifting relationship of lived time and clock time.

#### SCENE IV [excerpt]

*This is the reason why you enjoy seeing the figure skater punished. It's not the hubris on the part of the athlete; you resent them for having the audacity to defy. You penalize hope by calling it hubris, but you resent the fact that you don't have the courage to defy the gravity of your own circumstance. You are weighted down by simple laws of life and want to see your fellow man weighted by down the same cowardice. You are a coward.*

*You are your own bogeyman, piercing any possibility of happiness.*

*Yes, things end, relationships may dissolve, humans may abuse one another to no end, nature may one day wipe out this blight known as mankind, as you'd most likely describe us, but this is nothing new, as long as people have populated this world, they've been at each other's throats, yet they still manage to love one another, to build, to learn to grow.*

*Doctor...*

*Hold on a sec, I'm not done. The only hubris I see is yours. You are the person who has it all figured it out, you sit on the sidelines of even your own life while judging the rest of us for having the audacity to try and do something with the short time we have on this world. We announce that we are engaged and you do not like it. We post pictures of our children and you do not like it. We share updates on our career and you do not like it. All the while your own supposed intellectual clairvoyance corrodes you*

*while you sit there not doing a thing like Bartleby the scrivener.*

*Doctor, that is not true, I—*

*Would you like to see a picture of my daughter? She just turned four.*

*Not really, I—*

*See this is what I mean! Not even willing to pay someone the simple courtesy of looking at a picture.*

American Apparel-clad actors climb and weave their way through a complicated, multi-roomed set while evading a chain-smoking witch (played by Da Corte). A campy take on Hansel and Gretel, the scene has an apocalyptic visual feel matched by Musson's nihilistic script. The screenplay, a conversation between psychiatrist and patient, pits the patient's pessimistic, extremely ironic views against the earnestness of the doctor's. Subjects range from western cultural hegemony to technological progress, and a reference to the 1986 Challenger disaster that dates the patient to Gen X. The image of the space shuttle explosion was a timely topic of late summer 2014 after being posted on American Apparel's Tumblr on the Fourth of July. The company claimed the employee who posted the image was too young recognize the picture as tragic.

Though linked by references to American Apparel—a source of employment and scorn for a generation of college graduates entering a recession—the strange schism between script and set is furthered by the presence of the 5,000 gallons of water Da Corte used to flood the floor of his studio by several inches. The actors splash their way from room to room as unending streams of water pour from clear glass fountains, recalling the use of dripping water as the earliest form of human clock time. The pink ball of our yoga instructor returns, transformed into a large pink balloon, which is moved from room to room by a young woman in a silver spandex outfit. The witch begins to methodically stab a blade between her fingers—a reference to the famous “knife game” scene in Roman Polanski's *Knife in the Water*. The pink balloon gradually makes its way towards the witch, whose movements Hynes has tensely scored at each stroke. The scene ends with the destruction of the balloon by the witch's blade, its demise somehow signaling an end to the sense of self or “centeredness.”

## SCENE 5

*For the entire world was Don Quixote born, all of us for him; he knew how to act, compelling us to write a new history of our own lives. Write, all of you, with a smooth and exquisitely designed pen about your exploits, whether they are valorous or profane. Write, and through writing, live. Live, and never succumb to the weight of another's pragmatism, which seeks to lead you away from your Self. Live, so that Don Quixote may never rot in his tomb, allowing him to forever make a new sally. And with this you will fulfill your duty to yourself, as writing and living are one, and you shall be pleased and proud to have been a human who completely enjoyed the fruits of your life, just as he wished, for my only desire has been to have people embrace and love the true history of Don Quixote of La Mancha, by which I truly mean you, patient Viewer.*

*Do not let the half dead instruct you on how to live. Sally forth to write your own tale, at the end of which, after many hard fought battles you can make the proclamation that no soul on Earth or in Heaven dare deny:*

*Victory!  
Victory!  
Victory!*

In the final scene of *Easternsports*, Musson's script and Da Corte's visuals are again fully aligned. With the tile façade of Philadelphia's Mummers Museum in the background, Musson and Da Corte have outfitted a black equestrian in a borrowed Mummers costume. His horse dazzles in a design by Philadelphia artist William Dufala, with strips of sparkling Mylar in various colors streaming down its shoulders. The Mummers—a carnivalesque tradition dating back centuries via medieval roots in

England—celebrate every New Year’s Day with festivities that draw thousands of people to central Philadelphia. Traditionally composed of working-class men, local clubs compete in themed costumed performances. Though blackface—a once popular tradition—was banned fifty years ago, the parade retains traces of cultural insensitivity. In 2013 a troupe made national news when they performed a skit about outsourcing dressed as both Native Americans and South Asians (“Indians”). The imagery and language used to address outsourcing—a threat to blue- and white-collar labor alike— was a vulgar reminder of the parade’s minstrel past.

As glitter engulfs the screen, *Easternsports*’s black Mummer defiantly sits atop his horse. Musson’s ultimate text, as excerpted above and based on Miguel De Cervantes Saavedra’s novel *Don Quixote*, rings with optimism. In Musson’s rewrite the hero does not renounce his illusions of knighthood as he does in the novel. By recuperating *Don Quixote*’s aspirational fantasies, Musson’s hopeful ending quells the cynicism in the previous scenes. Da Corte’s visuals are equally stirring. Inspired by the equestrian statue of *Don Quixote* that stands at the edge of the Kensington neighborhood of Northern Philadelphia—as if to guard against encroaching gentrification—the imagery captures the class and racial dynamics of the city and the art world. It seems to champion the audacity required to pursue the visual arts as a non-affluent person of color in the United States. When the horse punctuates the last Mummer moments with a pile of manure, collaborators Da Corte and Musson find a fitting end to their work’s narrative.

## PHILADELPHIA

From the harsh racial reality of the Mummers Parade to traditional brick architecture, this project is a love letter to the city of Philadelphia. Artists and institutions that have shaped Da Corte and Musson are referenced both overtly and subtly throughout *Easternsports*. Musson cites the works of Philadelphia-born writer Donald Barthelme in the development of his ambitious script, and reverberations from Musson’s popular *Black Like Me* column—which appeared in *Philadelphia Weekly* in 2007—surface as well. Da Corte’s visuals are equally autobiographical. The mummy performs karaoke against an arch that echoes Matisse’s *The Dance II* (1932) at the Barnes Foundation, a beloved tomb of modernist paintings whose installation has remained static for over fifty years. Several optical canvases by Edna Andrade, who taught at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia for more than three decades and was Da Corte’s instructor, are reverently recreated on a grand scale.

Like Andrade, local art heroes Karen Kilimnik and Virgil Marti have had major exhibitions at ICA, and remain influences in Da Corte’s use of color and decorative camp aesthetic. His own history includes several projects at this museum, each discreetly referenced in *Easternsports*. For the 2011 *That’s How We Escaped: Reflections on Warhol*, Da Corte installed an overflowing bouquet of fake flowers that spilled out of a recreation of the staircase Andy Warhol and Edie Sedgwick climbed during Warhol’s 1965 ICA exhibition. In 2012 he created a large, two-sided tableau for *First Among Equals*, an exhibition that featured a separate installation by Musson. All of Da Corte’s ICA installations include favorite materials like soda-pop, shampoo, and hand cream, and several thrift store props from his ICA shows make appearances in *Easternsports*. Artist Michael Smith’s traveling retrospective—on view at ICA in 2008—was another mutual influence on Musson and Da Corte as they thought through the immersive video environment of their project. *Easternsports* is a complex but earnest regional iconography, a made-in-Philly artwork both spiritually and physically.

The dreamy pace of the video and its otherworldly kitsch aesthetic intentionally evoke the films of David Lynch, himself a Philadelphia-trained artist. Lynch has often cited the city as inspiration, most recently for a 2014 retrospective of his paintings at his alma mater, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The entry to the *Easternsports* gallery—a glowing portal with patterned tile—is a Lynchian cue first seen in 1977’s *Eraserhead*. The lounge-singing mummy could be Da Corte’s own Julie Cruise, Lynch’s musical muse from *Twin Peaks*, and Musson’s surrealist script is a homage to the filmmaker’s darkly humorous screenplays. Lynch’s film and television work, full of archetypes and doubles, teenage girls in wigs and young men coming of age, and his skill in turning the prosaic uncanny all bleed heavily into this project. But while Lynch’s use of space is dramatically deep, the sets of *Easternsports* are intentionally foreshortened.

This compressed use of space, a central feature of the *Easternsports* video, comes from a logic

intimately bound to gothic imagery. The actors move in front of planes of color as if two dimensional, rarely moving forward or backward from the camera. The decorative, figureless backgrounds, shadowless use of light, and the horizontal scrolling among multiple screens all lend an illuminated manuscript impression to the work. Musson's use of varied colloquial language as each vignette unfolds suggests *The Canterbury Tales*, his quasi-religious themes made manifest in the visuals.

The continuous tension between image and text, between Da Corte's video and Musson's script, revisits the confrontation between verbal and visual that inflamed the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages, one that seems utterly prescient as artists continue to confront technological and temporal shifts. *Easternsports* exposes the growing fissures between the visual and textual of digital culture, between the depthless illusion of Tumblr imagery and the winding conversations of Twitter, and how intersectional moments can be reached.