Janet Biggs
Overview Effect
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June 6-August 2, 2019
In the process of making my work, I have witnessed the devastating effects of climate change, from the melting Arctic to expanding deserts. I have seen this planet boil and burn. I’ve seen it tear itself apart at the seams, shake itself to its core, and erupt in clouds of noxious gasses.

In 2018, while filming in Djibouti, I witnessed Yemeni refugees fleeing the bombing and devastation in Yemen. They risked everything to cross the Gulf of Aden in broken boats, to arrive at a desert tent city subjected to furious sand storms and temperatures of up to 134 degrees.

At the same time, I watched migrant Ethiopians fleeing their country’s oppression and poverty as they braved a four day walk across the desert of Djibouti. With only threads of clothing hanging off their backs, the Ethiopians didn’t all survive the journey. Their water supply often ran out before the desert did. If they made it to the shore, they would take the same boats back across the Gulf to Yemen.

This cross current of human movement, all in pursuit of survival and possibility, while not exclusively necessitated by human exploitation and a changing climate, bares some hallmarks of the future we have wrought on this planet.

At the other end of a spectrum of human movement in pursuit of survival and new possibilities, there are scientists working in such diverse locations as the desert of Southern Utah and high in the Himalayas. Daily, they don spacesuits or “SIM suits,” exit the airlock of their habitat, and head off on EVAs to collect data in the hope of someday doing the same on Mars. In 2018 and again this year, I was a crewmember and artist-in-residence on two Mars analog missions, filming the experiences from inside a SIM spacesuit.

This is what it feels like to live inside a spacesuit. It is heavy, both the physical weight of wearing a life sustaining garment and the psychological weight of knowing that you must. Simple tasks like bending over and picking up a stone become Herculean. I learned to hum. It regulates your breathing. If you breathe too hard or fast, your helmet fogs and you can’t see. If you breathe too hard or fast, you use up all your oxygen. Once your helmet is locked into place, any moisture inside—sweat, a runny nose, tears—can blind you. Once your helmet is locked into place, your peripheral vision is blocked and depth perception altered.

What looked like a small step was a big step, and then a bigger fall. First there is panic. Did I tear my suit? Then, did I break something? My helmet? Oxygen tanks? Bones? Am I bleeding? Can I get up? You can’t feel for a bump, a bruise, a cut. You couldn’t stop the bleeding anyway. That thing we all do, brush a piece of hair from our eyes, run your hand over your skin to detect some change, something new, is impossible inside pressurized gloves. That thing we all do, run our hand over someone else’s skin, is impossible.

In 1987, Frank White coined the term overview effect in his book *The Overview Effect—Space Exploration and Human Evolution*. The overview effect was a cognitive shift reported by a number of astronauts having looked back from space to their home planet Earth. It is one planet, one ball hanging in space. National borders are not visible. We are one population, human, and our atmosphere is frighteningly fragile and paper thin. The earth will remake itself and survive the legacy of its human inhabitants, but will we?

Janet Biggs
Excerpt from *The Brooklyn Rail*
June 2019
Weighing Life Without a Scale, 2018. three-channel installation, HD video with sound, 16:9 format. 9:14 minutes.
Weighing Life Without a Scale, 2018. three-channel installation, HD video with sound, 16:9 format. 9:14 minutes.
Janet Biggs: point of non-recurring

The notice that I only had 10 days to write this text hit the airwaves on the same day as the first images of the InSight landing on the dull sand of Mars’s surface, after a seven month-trip. To recover from the jolt, I turned on the TV, and to my surprise, there it was: Mars, some 225 million kilometers away from where I sat.¹ Not very clear images, just some clumps of dust, brownish soft sand enhanced with a meticulous high-definition video animation explaining the probe’s multi-tasking mission. Mars is being studied as a possible habitat for mankind in the event of a collapse of our planet.

Mars on TV and Mars on my psyche. Even when I was trying not to think about such a close deadline, a sequence of images I had seen a few days before at the Museo de la Naturaleza y el Hombre, on the island of Tenerife,² came powerfully to mind. I was there to see the installation and write this text. They were from Weighing Life Without a Scale, Janet Biggs’ new work, showing there for the first time. On three large screens hung side by side in a sizeable, bare space at the Museo, Weighing Life Without a Scale is about the present, even if it appears at first glance to be speaking about a time yet to come. The Earth’s time is running out. In Weighing Life Without a Scale, Biggs embraces the now, and she looks at it with hope. Unconnected to religion, believed by philosophers such as Kant, for Biggs hope is a political and aesthetic strategy, a voice speaking directly to scientific and political quests for survival. Weighing Life Without a Scale is the result of a crafted, intelligent, and unexpected edition of images from various sources: NASA footage of Mars filmed by a Rover; astronomical observatories in the Canary Islands; the Markazi refugee camp in Obock, Djibouti, full of desperate, displaced Yemenis; or the Mars Desert Research Station in Hanksville, Utah, where life on Mars is simulated. Among the natural treasures featured here is the Mount Teide National Park, in Tenerife, a unique geological gem in which volcanoes, craters, vents, lava streams, and different textures form an impressive array of configurations and colors.

There are no images of environmental disasters, those that you see every day in which water, due to global warming, plays a strong role: tsunamis, tornadoes or floods. Nor flames of destruction. On the screens the desert landscapes are barren, arid, formed of stones and craters. There is no water; perhaps a post-doomsday vision. Studies claim that if the Earth’s average temperature goes up by two degrees Celsius over the next 32 years, the planet will start to become a desert.

The three-channel wall projection, an awarded proposal by the Guggenheim Foundation, in 2018, is part of the project Like Walking on Mars.³ The title quotes the words used by an acquaintance of the artist, describing the mental deterioration of a relative with Alzheimer’s disease.⁴ The editing of the video has a similar structure: it goes in and out of reality, like a mind that is collapsing. It has a dose of authenticity, for instance, in the images of the refugee camp (reminding us that millions of refugees are currently stranded in such places), alongside a sci-fi imagination: one sequence shows a group of scientists, all wearing orange space suits, learning to walk on the planet’s surface during a simulated EVA at the Mars Desert Research Station.⁵

¹ After a seven-month journey, Nasa’s InSight has an unprecedented mission: to map the planet’s interior. The spacecraft touched down on target, a lava field named Elysium Planitia, as part of a two-year mission to study the planet’s deep interior.

² Museo de la Naturaleza y el Hombre (MNH), based in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain, contains many significant archaeological finds and is considered the best repository of objects from the Pre-Castilian Canary Islands.

³ The project includes two more videos, Space Between Fragility Curves and Seeing Constellations in the Darkness Between Stars, discussed in the essay by Denise Markonish.

⁴ Or, as the artist says, “a possible description of the mental state of those who suffer from the disease as well.” Knowing close-up what Alzheimer’s means, she worked with this topic in Vanishing Point, 2009; Can’t Find My Way Home, 2015; Persistence of Hope, 2015; and Breathing Without Air, 2015.

⁵ The Mars Society has constructed Mars Analogue Research Stations (simulation habitats) and sent information collecting robots to Mars, and predict that it’s only a matter of time until the first human flight. In preparation for this event, simulation astronaut crews are conducting missions at remote locations here on earth that closely resemble the terrain of the red planet.
Among many others, Stephen Hawking reckoned that humanity only has 100 years left on Earth. Faced with a growing list of threats (climate change, overpopulation, migration, nuclear war), he believed that we had reached “the level of non-recurring” and that the only option if we are to survive as a species is to become multi-planetary, beginning with the settlement-colonization of Mars. Most of the scientists, politicians and activists participating in the UN Forum on Climate Change in Poland last December agreed with this “point of non-recurring,” as Robin McKie reported in the Guardian: “The world may no longer be hovering at the edge of destruction but has probably staggered beyond a crucial point of no return. Climate catastrophe is now looking inevitable. We have simply left it too late to hold rising global temperatures to under 1.5C and so prevent a future of drowned coast, ruined coral reefs, spreading deserts and melted glaciers.”

The 92-year-old naturalist and broadcaster who gave his voice to the Netflix series Our Planet, Sir David Attenborough, was even more pessimistic. He warned the Forum that climate change will cause the collapse of civilization if world leaders fail to set the international community on a low-emission path. Deadly tempests, financial crashes, terrorism and deprivation are some of the tragic and devastating outcomes we have already seen, but full-scale, global climate change is a horror yet to come.

There is no question about the vast difference between the ancient and the modern world. Today, the planet is overpopulated, globalized and crammed with destructive technologies, increasing the danger of a global rather than a local crisis, like those that proliferate in the history of ancient cultures.

In Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed, by the Pulitzer prizewinner and professor of Geography, Jared Diamond, we witness an amazing parade of different peoples and cultures, from pre-historic times to the present, that failed. But despite narrating countless stories of societies that didn’t succeed, the author refuses to despair. At the end of this 500-page tale of doom, Diamond dedicates a few pages to the “reasons for hope.” For him, we are responsible and we must reverse these conditions. He believes we may succeed, regardless of the many counter-examples he gives. He also has hope because he trusts “environmental thinking.” He posits that we are winning this battle: “environmental thinking” is spreading and has invaded all kinds of the media, there are rich reports on the subject, and it has been incorporated into the art lexicon.

An inquisitive and intrepid traveler, Biggs has visited and operated in a multiplicity of situations, from iced and desertic lands; inside of mines, volcanos and research centers. Some are distant and in precarious lands, reminiscent of the travels of English women in Africa, in the 18th century, as I wrote in the foreword of her catalogue at the Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, Florida, in 2011. All of this experience has developed a sharp eye when looking at a landscape and an acute comprehension of this confusing and chaotic world. The result of Weighing Life Without a Scale and its thoroughly strategized imagery is nevertheless uplifting: it brings hope. She is one, among many, who believes that: only in the darkness can you see the stars.

Berta Sichel

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7 Our Planet premiered on Netflix on 5th April 2019. The ambitious series has been created in collaboration with Silverback Films, whose director Alastair Fothergill was the creator of the critically acclaimed original Planet Earth and Blue Planet series, and WWF, the world’s leading conservation organization.
8 The majority of carbon emissions came from about 100 large corporations.
11 These words are attributed to Martin Luther King Jr.
single-channel HD video, 16:9 format. 6:47 minutes.
The Persistence of Hope

“It is not every day that the world arranges itself into a poem.” – Wallace Stevens

Janet Biggs walks through the world as a documentarian with the eye of a poet. She imbeds herself into situations most of us would steer clear of: a sulfur mine, an active volcano, the arctic tundra, and most recently, a Mars simulation experiment in Utah and a refugee camp in Djibouti. At these sites, Biggs serves as a witness for us, all the while creating complex video installations that begin with the desire to document people and place, and end with the transformation of footage into haikus, simple, yet lyrical poems of interconnected images. Biggs need not narrate the whole story; rather, she edits her footage together until it embodies the presence of humanity (of both man and machine), and exemplifies the persistence of hope in these marginal sites.

In her two most recent multi-channel works, Biggs searches for hope, exploring the ways in which human nature can complicate this venture. In Space Between Fragility Curves and Seeing Constellations in the Darkness Between Stars, Biggs investigates the binaries we set up in the world: micro/macro; man/machine; hope/futility; and need/choice, using these tropes to explore the spectrum of luck and the progress of civilization through both human and scientific exploration. Even the titles of the works, poems in and of themselves, hint at the futility of these binaries by offering her viewers entrance into the space between poles of existence. These works exist in this liminal space; between the binaries, between documentation and poetry.

Space Between Fragility Curves parallels the plight of refugees in Djibouti with the desire to explore and perhaps one day settle Mars—both functioning as forms of escape from man-made situations: war and climate change. The two-channel installation began when Biggs visited two extreme environments: The Mars Desert Research Station (MDRS) in the Utah desert and Camp Markazi in Obock, Djibouti. MDRS was established by the Mars Society in 2001 as a simulation program (due to the region’s geologic analogue to Mars’s topography) to conduct scientific research in the pursuit of data needed for the future exploration and settlement of Mars. At this site, participants don full simulated spacesuits, or ‘SIM suits,’ and live in a habitation module. Camp Markazi, on the other hand, is a desert tent city and refugee camp, where temperatures rise up to 134 degrees. In these harsh conditions two groups come together: Yemenis fleeing war, and Ethiopian migrants escaping drought. The Yemenis are in a holding pattern, waiting for the war to end so they can return to their country or find a new country to take them in, whereas the Ethiopians are striving to get to the more fertile Yemen, often unaware of the horrors of the warzone awaiting them. Both groups face poverty, oppression, and danger through their journey, yet they remain hopeful that they will find something on the other side; not unlike the hope of scientists to discover that Mars is indeed habitable.

Biggs immersed herself in both sites; filming in a SIM suit in Utah and giving cameras to members of the refugee community in Camp Markazi, so that their point of view can be present. The finished work begins with portraits of the two landscapes, both desolate but one desert and one water. In the background, we hear static radio communication and also the sound of a marimba. This latter sound initially seems out of place, until Biggs reveals that this is not just a soundtrack layered on top of her image, it is, in fact, created by Shimon, a robotic marimba player. Created by Gil Weinberg at Georgia Tech’s Center for Music Technology, Shimon uses machine learning, or Artificial Intelligence (AI), and algorithms to look at images, or people, and to sense cues, which enables the machine to collaborate and create new music. Weinberg and his Robotic Musicianship group aim to “facilitate meaningful musical interactions between humans and machines, leading to novel and creative musical experiences and outcomes.”

After the landscape portraits leave the screen, students and scientists donning their SIM suits appear, while on the second screen, we see Shimon watching the very same footage from the other channel. Shimon is looking at the MDRS participants while simultaneously creating and playing a soundtrack to their activity. For the rest of the seven-minute film we see layered images of MDRS research in the pursuit of data needed for the future exploration and settlement of Mars. At this site, participants don full simulated spacesuits, or ‘SIM suits,’ and live in a habitation module. Camp Markazi, on the other hand, is a desert tent city and refugee camp, where temperatures rise up to 134 degrees. In these harsh conditions two groups come together: Yemenis fleeing war, and Ethiopian migrants escaping drought. The Yemenis are in a holding pattern, waiting for the war to end so they can return to their country or find a new country to take them in, whereas the Ethiopians are striving to get to the more fertile Yemen, often unaware of the horrors of the warzone awaiting them. Both groups face poverty, oppression, and danger through their journey, yet they remain hopeful that they will find something on the other side; not unlike the hope of scientists to discover that Mars is indeed habitable.

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1 https://www.shimonrobot.com/info
2 To create Shimon’s music knowledge Weinberg and his students loaded into its processors a vast history of music, and to get started on Biggs project he was fittingly played the score to Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey.
and Shimon along with ethereal footage of two young boys playing by the water in Djibouti. Shimon’s lyrical soundscape and oddly human motion makes the interplay of these three visuals feel like a choreography of hope and futility through the desire to explore something other than what we are given. The parallels between the scientific endeavors at MDRS and the complicated ideas of settling Mars suddenly become aligned with the desire to flee one place for another as present in Djibouti. In this video both sides hope to find something better on the other side. Biggs doesn’t judge the motives of her subjects, and in that lies her poetry. For, this cyclical persistence of hope is made palpably present in the last frames of the film, which show the two boys in Djibouti boarding a makeshift raft and rowing off into the distance. Biggs doesn’t show us where they are going and it doesn’t matter.

Similarly, Seeing Constellations in the Darkness Between Stars also opens with portraits of a sort. This four-channel work begins with close-up images of a robotic mechanism coupled with the desert landscape at MDRS. Then, a young man sitting at a drum set appears on screen and we watch him fit a prosthesis over one arm. This is Jason Barnes who worked with Gil Weinberg to become the first cybernetic drummer. Barnes lost his arm in a workplace accident in 2012 and just a year later he was accepted into the Atlanta Institute of Music. Barnes sought out Weinberg’s robotics program, where the two worked together to create a prosthetic arm fitted with not one but two drumsticks. Using muscle fiber sensors, Barnes controls the main stick in the typical rhythmic way, whereas the second has a “musical brain” and “hears” the other stick. This complex mechanism allows Barnes to collaborate with himself through AI, becoming a hybrid man/machine.

Just as Shimon provided the soundtrack to Space Between Fragility Curves, Barnes provides one for Seeing Constellations in the Darkness Between Stars.

Across the four screens of this installation, Biggs shows us Barnes creating the soundtrack for the video alongside images taken from The University Rover Challenge (URC) organized by the Mars Society. This competition, held annually since 2007, takes place near the MDRS and challenges university teams from across the globe to create the next generation of rovers that may one day research Mars. Biggs attended in 2017 and filmed the competition. In her footage, we see rovers attempting difficult tasks like picking objects up and placing them in other locations, drilling into the earth, etc. However, the most compelling moment happens when one rover shows its fallibility. On two screens, Barnes is hitting his stride, playing a complex syncopation at the very moment that a rover begins to struggle, getting stuck, and eventually falling into a crevasse. It’s a duet not unlike the one Shimon plays with the footage in Space Between Fragility Curves. Just as the rover begins to fail, Barnes ceases playing, takes off his prosthesis and becomes solely human once again. Biggs gives us a portrait of a man, at just the same time that humans rush to the aid of the fallen rover. There is a moment of sadness here, where the world seems to stop and recognize its own fragile humanity.

In both of these works Biggs allows us to confront a kind of utopian thinking, a blind hope that we can achieve anything in the pursuit of new opportunities. But she also reminds us that this balance is fragile. In her book Hope in the Dark, Rebecca Solnit states that “Hope is a gift you don’t have to surrender, a power you don’t have to throw away. And though hope can be an act of defiance, defiance isn’t enough reason to hope. But there are good reasons.” Janet Biggs gives us good reasons to persist on hope, and reminds us that even in hope we have to look deeper, into the cracks, and pay attention to the breaks between the lines of poetry, for as Leonard Cohen sang “That’s how the light gets in.”

Denise Markonish

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3 The footage was shot by Hilal Osman, a Yemeni refugee living at Camp Markazi.
5 From the Leonard Cohen song “Anthem” from the 1992 album The Future. The full line is: “There is a crack in everything (there is a crack in everything) / That’s how the light gets in”
Janet Biggs
Recent Work
Space Between Fragility Curves, 2018, two-channel installation, HD video with sound, 16:9 format.
Crew 181, First EVA, Sol 2, 2017. c-print mounted on gator board. 28 x 42 inches (71.1 x 106.7 cm).
The video intercuts scenes of the Danakil Depression, the desert, salt flats, volcanoes, nomads, workers and the Afar militia, with segments featuring Elizabeth Streb dancers. It shifts from panoramas of unearthly splendor to sensitive close-ups of the faces of the local inhabitants, who are often regal, often suspicious, and even hostile, underscoring the complex, double-edged nature of otherness. Biggs was inspired initially by reading about the region; what stood out for her was that all sources described the Afar Triangle as the most inhospitable place in the world, with average temperatures of 110-120 degrees. Biggs wanted to know what it was like to live in the most unlivable place there is, since people do live and work there. They are also possessive of it, willing to die defending it.

LILLY WEI,
BURNAWAY, JUNE 2016

Afar, 2016. three-channel installation, HD video with sound, 16:9 format. 9:24 minutes.
Local Afar, 2016. c-print mounted on gator board.
24 x 36 inches (61 x 91.4 cm).
In the two-channel video *Written on Wax*, Biggs makes herself the subject as she participates in an experimental study in which she receives jolts of electricity while looking at quick clips from her videos, focusing extensively on her experiences with horses as well as such athletes as synchronized swimmers and wrestlers as she attempts to turn positive associations into negative ones. With [this work], Biggs explores memory in intimate, poetic ways, facing recognizable, everyday fears with beauty and grace.

MARK RIFKIN,
*THIS WEEK IN NEW YORK*, FEBRUARY 2016
Can’t Find my Way Home juxtaposes footage shot in the crystal caverns below the German Merkers salt mine with documentation of neurological research conducted in laboratories in New York and Houston. [It] draws visual connections between the structure of these crystals and the proteins that determine the biochemical conditions of a hyper-excited brain, such as one afflicted with Alzheimer’s. By physically exploring the crystal cavern, Biggs figuratively sets out to investigate the diseased brain of her grandfather, tracing fading memories and making astonishing discoveries as she herself experiences disorientation and confusion, some of the same symptoms endured by Alzheimer’s patients.

CLAUDIA SCHMUCKLI, BLAFFER ART MUSEUM UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON, JANUARY 2015
Markers, 2015. c-print mounted on foam core.
20 x 16 inches (50.8 x 40.6 cm).
33 x 50 x 2 1/2 inches (83.8 x 127 x 6.4 cm).
This wordless, five-screen video projection was mostly shot at a sulfur mine inside an active volcano in East Java, where unsupervised miners labor in unspeakable conditions. As always, Biggs was the principle camera-person, and assumed some of the same risks her subjects did. We see a lone miner ascend the forbiddingly steep, rocky interior of the crater, bearing more than his body weight in sulfur crystals. Clouds of gas provide a poisonous, intoxicating yellow glow. Book-ending the roughly ten-minute loop is footage taken by a camera attached to a weather balloon, along with documentation of the meteorological station the balloon serves: a note of buoyancy, however fragile. Music, a significant element throughout Biggs’s work, consists here of a cello composition written and played by William Martina.

NANCY PRINCENTHAL,
THE BROOKLYN RAIL, NOVEMBER 2017
Janet Biggs (b. 1959, Harrisburg, PA) focuses on extreme landscapes and situations, drawing connections between physical terrains and psychological, societal, or political dynamics. She has had solo exhibitions and film screenings at the SCAD Museum of Art, University of Waterloo Art Gallery, Blaffer Museum of Art, Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Tampa Museum of Art, Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten Marl, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Mint Museum of Art, Everson Museum of Art, Gibbes Museum of Art, and the Rhode Island School of Design Museum, among others. She is the recipient of numerous grants, including the 2018 Guggenheim Fellowship, Electronic Media and Film Program at the New York State Council on the Arts Award, the Arctic Circle Fellowship/Residency, Art Matters, Inc., the Wexner Center Media Arts Program Residency, the Anonymous Was a Woman Award, and the NEA Fellowship Award. Her works are in the collections of the SCAD Museum of Art, Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain (FRAC), Zabludowicz Collection, Skulpturenmuseum Glaskasten Marl (Ruhr Kunst Museen), Tampa Museum of Art, High Museum, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Mint Museum of Art, Gibbes Museum of Art, and the New Britain Museum of Art. Biggs lives and works in New York.
These essays were commissioned by the Museos de Tenerife on the occasion of the exhibition Janet Biggs: Like Walking on Mars curated and coordinated by Yapci Ramos and presented at The Museo de la Naturaleza y el Hombre and The Museo de la Ciencia y el Cosmos, November 16, 2018–January 14, 2019.

Photography credits:
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Robert Cmar at Museo de la Naturaleza y el Hombre – p. 7, 12-13
Robert Cmar at Museo de la Ciencia y el Cosmos – pp. 22-23, 26-27, 35, 36-37
Robert Cmar at SCAD Museum of Art – pp. 42-43
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