

CRISTIN TIERNEY



INCONVERSATION

# JANET BIGGS

## with Nancy Princenthal



Janet Biggs, *A Step On the Sun*, 2012. (still from the video installation) multi-channel, high definition video installation with sound. Courtesy the artist, Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York, Analix Forever, Geneva, and CONNERSMITH, Washington, D.C.

Breathtakingly beautiful, like all of Janet Biggs's work, *A Step on the Sun* (2012) is also—again characteristically—a haunting account of several kinds of mortal danger. 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 cameraperson, 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. Bookending the roughly ten-

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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.



Portrait of Janet Biggs, pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

Biggs's videos, which she began exhibiting in the early 1990s, have lately taken her to the Taklamakan Desert in China; the Afar Triangle of East Africa; and the Norwegian Arctic. Most recently she has been a resident at a simulation site designed to prepare for manned travel to Mars. Her sensibility evokes Jules Verne and Joseph Conrad, and also such conflict-zone photojournalists as Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger, with this difference: Biggs's geography is skewed not just to remote and dangerous areas, but to instability more generally, to places where sand whips up, lakes boil and oceans freeze. She likes going underground, and also diving deep into the mechanisms of consciousness and its vulnerabilities, as in individuals suffering from autism or Alzheimer's. In short, Biggs's subject is anything that could be called shaky ground.

Janet Biggs and Nancy Princenthal met at the Neuberger on October 4 for a public conversation about *A Step on the Sun*. The following is an edited version of that discussion.

**Nancy Princenthal (Rail):** One place where we could start is where *you* started—how did you get to Ijen? How do you make your first contacts, how do you establish relationships, how do you choose the sites where you're going to be doing your work?

**Janet Biggs:** Sure. I think I first learned that there was an active volcano where people were mining sulfur in East Java, Indonesia from the pages of *National Geographic*. I was intrigued and then obsessed. I continued researching Kawah Ijen and came across Michael Glawogger's film *Workingman's Death* (2002)—which is an extraordinary documentary film that presents different segments of unimaginable labor, the mining at Kawah Ijen being one of the segments. I became absolutely committed to going there, but needed to figure out how that would happen. How that happened was a process. Eventually, I found someone online who self-promoted as a guide in the Ijen plateau region. So, I hired this man, Aan, as my guide and translator—having no real idea what that actually meant— and somehow convinced my husband, who occasionally backs me up with a second camera, to join me. We got on a plane. After twenty-six hours, we got off the plane. At the airport I saw someone that I vaguely recognized from a JPEG on Facebook as our guide, got in a van with him, and drove for the next twelve hours—on a road that had no defining traffic lines. Donkeys, ox carts, motorcycles, cars, vans, and big trucks were all going as fast as they possibly could. We arrived at the Kawah Ijen plateau, which is this beautiful, verdant landscape, but still had to figure out how to get inside the volcano, how to meet miners, and how to convince the miners to allow us to film them. I've learned that no matter how much research and preparation goes into a project, as soon my feet hit the ground I realize how little I know or understand about the place where I'm standing. It is impossible to be prepared. One of the first things that shocked me was: it's a really tall volcano, kind of like an isosceles triangle, which means a forty-five-degree angle of ascent. When you finally get to the rim and look down into the volcano there is a brilliant turquoise lake at the base of the caldera. It is stunningly beautiful. The lake is the largest sulfuric acid lake in the world. There are sulfur dioxide fumes billowing up out of it, and the miners move like dancers under the weight of the sulfur they are carrying.



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My crew consisted of Aan, Aan's friend Imam (who I was not expecting to hire, but somehow came along in the deal), and my husband Bob. Imam was extraordinary in that he sang through the entire filming process, some of which became part of my soundtrack. Imam had worked as a miner in Ijen for ten years until his lungs completely gave out. He is now able, through his friendship with Aan, to figure out other ways of making a living. Mining in Ijen is the epitome of self-employment, as in: if you can weave a basket, can climb up that volcano, make your way down into an active volcano amidst toxic fumes and unstable footing, fill your basket with more than your body weight in sulfur crystals, and somehow carry that basket back out to a weigh station at the base of the volcano, then you are an Ijen miner.

**Rail:** We talked earlier about the surprise of the mining operation being self-regulated—there's not a mining company, per se. Miners instead organize themselves, to the extent that there is organization.

**Biggs:** Which is very minimal, but there is some organization.

**Rail:** Was that something you knew going in, or was that one of those things that became a point of interest when you got there?

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**Biggs:** It wasn't something I knew going in, but something I needed to grasp quickly to be able to navigate in that area. I knew that the volcano itself was owned by the Ministry of Forestry. I also knew that there was no overarching organization or structure that oversaw the miners. I learned that Indonesia is a culture of consensus. It's a norm that you have to adhere to and I was grateful that Aan skillfully guided me through this process. We met with the military police, we met with the Ministry of Forestry, we also met with students from the University in Surabaya. All these meetings gave me a fuller understanding of the local dynamics, the history of mining in Ijen, and why there is no mechanization in place for extracting the sulfur. I also learned that a culture of consensus means sitting in rooms for hours, having long discussions about why and how access should be granted. Often, these long conversations ultimately ended in a consensus on how much bribery I would pay. I learned the necessity of buying as many loose cigarettes, as much chocolate, and getting as many small bills as possible every morning. This was how I made my way through roadblocks, paying officials, and the miners too. You know, gaining access to places and people around the world is a fascinating art unto itself.

**Rail:** You learn the language.

**Biggs:** It's expensive, it's time consuming, and anyone that works in feet-on-the-ground politics or is an activist understands that consensus has its frustrating side, I think.

**Rail:** Before you identify a place, and when you get there, are you looking for portraits of people, portraits of conditions under which people work, or for a particular landscape? Like, pointy volcanoes, ever more dangerous? [laughs]

**Biggs:** Well, you know, I just can't turn down a good pointy volcano, it seems. There's something about being at the ends of the earth, in the most romantic sense, that draws me to a location. I love being off the grid. If a satellite phone can't work in a region, I'm happy to be there. I often think of the early explorers, their romantic notions about discovery, and then the reality of what happened when their feet were on the ground. My process often starts with the discovery of some otherworldly, unimaginable landscape. But it's not just the landscape—it's realizing that there are people who can exist, and at times thrive, in these extreme locations, that will make me leave my comfy home in Brooklyn and go. So, when I traveled to Ijen, I had an idea of the visuals

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because of my research, but I still needed to find an individual miner to become the focus of my project, someone who could be a protagonist equal to the numbingly beautiful landscape. I spent the first day or two going in and out of the volcano, witnessing what was going on, and using a scatter shot approach to filming. At some point I saw Abi [Slamet Hariadi] and had a sense that he might be willing to work with me. Happily, I was right. Not only did he agree to let me film him for the next two weeks, but he embodied qualities that really shaped this project.



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**Rail:** This is the guy who often has a bandana in his mouth, who you see repeatedly in close-ups. Were you drawn to him by his demeanor, and the way he went about the work? Did he collaborate at all on how he was going to be seen?

**Biggs:** Not initially. Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, and I'm an uncovered western woman. While Indonesians have a wide range of commitments and responses to their faith, there still was a lot of distance between us. Aan translated for me and let him know that I planned to pay him for his time. So, at first, it was really just a business agreement—but as the filming progressed I learned that the depth of his humanity was extraordinary. In conditions that were unimaginable, and while carrying more than his body weight in sulfur, he would point out details of the volcano's beauty to make sure I didn't miss anything. Eventually, I grew to know his sense of humor, and at some point, we started having broader conversations. He introduced me to his family and I got to know his history. There were times when all five of us were sleeping on the

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rim of the volcano, in our gas masks, inside a three-person tent. We all experienced a kind of unexpected intimacy throughout the project—and because of that, we reached a comfort level where Abi became a real collaborator, helped shape the project, and often advised me on specific shots.

**Rail:** That's been true of your work all along—that you've portrayed relationships with central figures who both directed themselves and are shaped by your vision. Which is, to jump back to the landscape for a moment, what you do with landscape as well—it's an absolutely gorgeous, terrifying, sublime, beautiful landscape to begin with. But it becomes yours because of the way it's edited and installed. I want to get to that in a moment—the installation. But one thing that we were talking about earlier, that I honestly hadn't thought about before, was how your work is situated between a documentary tradition of going to a place and developing relationships with the subjects, diving really deep into the local conditions, which are really quite desperate in this case (and in others), and the art place that your work lives in, which has to do with the landscape tradition in some respects, and also with other artists who are using video. This is a really long way of asking, How do you feel your work to be situated between those two disciplines—documentary film and art?

**Biggs:** I straddle a lot of different worlds in my life and art. I am dedicated to witnessing, which gives me a kind of kinship with documentary filmmakers. When I travel for a project, my primary role is to see and film as much as I possibly can and to be sure to maintain the dignity of the people that I'm filming. I am an intrusion—I've walked into somebody else's life and world. I'm very aware of that fact. I may have some preconceived notion of content and structure, but I've done enough projects to know that I need to film everything possible, as original ideas often change. My departure from documentary film into what I consider an art project happens when I push myself sideways off a traditional documentary path. It can happen in different ways. Sometimes through encounters with the landscape and its inhabitants, when I realize that the smallest detail or ritualized behavior can be as captivating as a grand story or dramatic vista. Sometimes it's through editing juxtapositions, collaging seemingly disparate elements. There is always a conscious moment where I need to insert myself to eventually be able to remove myself. I try to open it up and allow for a shared authorship with my audience.

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**Rail:** That was going to be my next question. [laughs] Where is the first-person pronoun? Of course, it's all over the place. And it has shifted over the course of your work. Some of your earlier work involved your family and gender issues that don't figure as prominently in this recent project.

**Biggs:** Where the "I" is, where the first person is in the work, is shifting all the time. Any time I think I understand or am comfortable with my work, then I need to push, make a shift. I'm the outsider walking in. While I'm an artist, I'm also a tourist—I don't deny that role—but I'm also the author of the work, and an absolute control freak. So, there are all these different sides to place and position. I'm a control freak that wants to walk into an environment where there is no infrastructure, where satellite phones don't work—so I have no control. I challenge myself and become off balance specifically to lose track of pronouns. Authorship starts floating about. What does collaboration mean? They all get mixed together.

**Rail:** One of the places I intended that question to go had to do with this very sticky question of risk. One way you're in all of your work is that you're assuming some of the same hardships and some of the risks that we're watching the subjects face as well. Can you talk a little about risk?

**Biggs:** I am also a tourist in terms of risk. I'm working in this volcano for only two and a half weeks. Of course, there are some risks from the fumes, of stepping into the sulfuric acid lake, or losing your footing. The sulfuric lake is essentially sitting on a pool of magma. About every ten years or so the magma gets really active and creates a large sulfur dioxide bubble that will burst to the surface of that lake. When this happens, it sucks all the oxygen out of the volcano and kills everyone inside.

You listen and look at the miners for information about current conditions. There are not many volcanologists working in that region so there is minimal data. We had one moment, inside the volcano, when all the miners started really yelling—screaming—which is never a good thing when you're inside a volcano. What was happening was we were having an earthquake inside an active volcano. [audience gasps] The sulfur dioxide fumes are in continuous contact with the walls of the caldera. It's as if they are under constant acid rain. The rocks are very porous and not stable. Climbing in and out of the volcano was a challenge even without an earthquake. Rocks came pelting down. People were injured, but luckily no one was killed.

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Again, I was there for a such a short period, this was the miner's daily lives. That being said, I do own my thrill-seeker side. I really like learning new tasks. When I was in the Arctic filming for a couple months, I had to learn how to shoot a high-powered rifle to protect myself from hungry polar bears. I learned how to competently paddle a kayak in arctic waters by joining the New York kayak polo team, which is a full contact sport. I thought my paddling skills would improve faster if someone was aggressively trying to capsize me. There is a performative back-side to my work that's obviously appealing. But I still am very aware that my luck at being born where I was born allows me to look at risk in a very different way than somebody like Abi looks at risk.



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**Rail:** To jump tracks a little, maybe this is a good place to talk about the weather balloon footage that is part of this video.

**Biggs:** We are back to the idea of what removes my work from documentary filmmaking and places it in the realm of an art project. In this case, I decided to bookend the story of Abi working inside the volcano with images of a weather balloon. When I was in the Arctic, I watched a weather balloon launch. I learned that balloons are launched around the world in synchronized timing to get a global perspective on what's happening in the atmosphere. I thought that that was beautiful. There was this poetry about the launching of all these balloons. They became a metaphor for the

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absolute persistence of hope that existed in Abi and the other miners. The promise of science and technology to improve human conditions didn't apply, didn't reach this part of the world. It was a way to look at dual existences and what possibility means in different parts of the world. The balloon symbolized transcendence and the beauty of hope, but when a weather balloon goes up in to the atmosphere, the atmosphere thins, the balloon expands, and it ultimately bursts and plummets back to earth.

**Rail:** And your camera is attached to it!

**Biggs:** Right. After seeing the launch in the Arctic, I came back and did some research about weather balloon launches. I contacted NOAA, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and asked if I could film one of their balloon launches. They were fine with me filming from the ground, but I also wanted to attach my camera to the balloon. NOAA was a little...[laughs] I love hanging out with scientists, but there was a bit of reluctance there. I had heard that students at MIT were having huge success with a certain scale of balloon launch, so I got in touch with students at MIT and asked if I could work with them. They were incredibly generous. They'd been attaching cameras themselves, so we sent up a balloon with a camera attached, and happily found the camera when the balloon came back down. That's the footage at the end of my piece.

**Rail:** That's a pretty good parable. [laughs] Dead balloon delivering your camera with its live footage back to you. We talked a little bit about the curiosity of a weather balloon being an incredibly primitive kind of instrument for sending this extremely sophisticated technology up to do some very important data gathering. I want also to go back to the title, which you slipped in very quickly a few minutes ago. Do you want to talk about the title?

**Biggs:** I had recently made a performance piece that included musicians, a Gospel singer, projected video, and a kayak ballet on the East River. The performance was based on my memories of 9/11. I had written lyrics for the singer which included the verse "it's just a step on a cloud." I was referring to the horror of people jumping from the Twin Towers. When I came up with the title *A Step On the Sun*, I was thinking about those lyrics. Also, the brilliant color of the sulfur made me think of the sun. It took me a while to recognize the title's relationship to the myth of Icarus. It is a kind of inverse of hubris, of possibility and potential.

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**Rail:** And that's what happened to the balloon, right? It went up too high and—

**Biggs:** —Down it came, yeah.

**Rail:** You wrote the lyrics for many of the musical compositions that came into earlier work. Do you want to talk about the music and, in general, the acoustic elements of this piece?

**Biggs** My undergraduate degree was in painting, and my graduate studies were in glass blowing. The thing that connects these materials, that now allows me to work in video, is that my projects are idea-based rather than rooted in a specific medium. I am self-taught in video. When I first started making videos, I was using inherent sound. After some time, I realized that sound could be of equal weight to the images, even the dominant element in a piece. Which, considering that I am the daughter of a composer—you'd think I'd get that earlier.



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I often now mix in inherent sounds with artificially made “Foley” sound, and original musical compositions. I see a lot of live music. If there are musicians that I think are extraordinary I will stalk them and beat down their doors until they agree to work with me. And I've been lucky enough to work with some amazing musicians. In this piece I worked with a cellist, Will Martina, who I've worked with now for a number of pieces. He's a really accomplished studio musician who will come into my studio with his cello and just start playing as he watches my video. He's composing and playing what he's sees. I often ask him to shape the musical composition by describing colors, or

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emotions, but never in musical terms or notes—because I am the daughter of a composer. [Laughs]

**Rail:** Yes, it's important to have a dialogue with your family. [Laughs]

**Biggs:** It took me until I was in my forties to ask my father to collaborate on a project. I said I just wanted the simplest piece of music with ascending and descending scales. He agreed, and then there's this long period of silence. I called my mother and I said, "How many times has he recorded it?" And she said, "I think he's on his twentieth version." He finally sent me the piece of music that he had labored over, and because I am his daughter—I bastardized it by re-recording it under water. [Laughs] Lucky for me, we received a very nice review about the sound on that piece.

**Rail:** What piece was that in?

**Biggs:** It was a piece called *Apraxia*.

**Rail:** So, fairly early on. In *A Step on the Sun* the music and all of the sound components are really integrated—they take a background relationship to what's going on visually. The nature of the installation steps forward a bit. I know this is not the first time you've shown this work, but it is the first time you've shown it in this configuration. Can you talk a little bit about what the decision-making process was, and what matters about this five-channel presentation, and the way the screens are set up?

**Biggs:** The first time I exhibited this piece, I placed the projections in a circular shape so that the piece completely surrounded the viewer. I had edited the individual channels very specifically in terms of sound. When a rod hit the sulfur, you would hear it behind you and spin around. I thought that would give the viewer a similar feel to what I experienced inside the caldera. I was always off balance and unsure of what might be behind me. I wanted that kind of experiential situation for the viewer.

There are two reasons why I'm very happy with the installation here at the Neuberger. First, you really need to have a compelling reason to try and spin your viewer around in a room. I talk about sharing authorship, and I talk about a level of participation I'd like from my audience, but the reality is we're all figuring out our space within someone else's work anyway. Trying to spin my audience felt unnecessary. The other reason I changed how this piece is installed here is due to the museum's architecture. When I

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walked into this dramatic Phillip Johnson building, and looked through the series of doorways that frame upon frame the entryway to the gallery where I would be exhibiting, I thought, “Oh my God, this piece has got to take advantage of every aspect of this incredible view.” It was an easy decision to make it a presidium piece, although I was careful to never allow my viewer to see all five screens at once. I still want the viewer to have some level of physical interaction with the work, just in a more modest fashion.

**Rail:** The installation keeps you moving from one image to the other because they’re not strictly synchronized, but there is some overlap. In keeping with the rhythm of the music, there is the visual rhythm of moving through the landscape, up the caldera. There’s also the fortuitous thing about this installation, which is the [Romare] Bearden show [in the adjacent gallery]. I know I’m not the only one who’s made a connection between your project and his work here.

**Biggs:** When Helaine [Posner, the exhibition’s curator] was visiting my studio she mentioned that the other exhibition on the first floor of the museum was going to be Romare Bearden. I was literally floored. I am so honored to be in the same museum and would never presume to make connections between our work, but I will happily tell you what I love about his work. Bearden’s connection to music is just joyful. It’s rhythmic, there’s this cadence, and sometimes a cacophony that happens in the work that is so compelling and exciting. And I love the filmic quality, the movement that exists in the abstractions as well as the collages. And, of course, his commitment to portraying humanity in its most deep and complicated form—is something I am not alone in being moved by.

**Rail:** The paintings, especially the landscapes, are such a surprise to see and so interesting in relationship to *A Step on the Sun*. I have a feeling that lurking somewhere in your work are references to other artists, too.

**Biggs:** You know, I cannot deny a connection to someone like Caspar David Friedrich, and the romantic notion of the sublime. Edmund Burke’s sense of the sublime, which contains both awe and terror —we’ve talked about destabilization and losing your balance, things that happen when you come in to contact with the sublime. It is so transporting in ways unimaginable, and yet, there is the reciprocal side, which is the terror. I think that both states are essential in life, truthfully.

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Along with Friedrich, I find visual connections all over the place—in science, in other artworks—which complicate perspectives. With an artist like Robert Smithson, there is a kind of poetry in altering the Earth which I find beautiful—but it's still altering Earth. We're in the age of the Anthropocene. Our presence, the industrial revolution, and the nuclear age have changed our planet forever. There's a kind of hubris in earthworks, which I do not think is just male. It's seductive to me to have that hubris, to alter the land, alter the earth. But then I'm reminded of my time in the Arctic—which is a landscape that I desired so strongly—when every physical footstep I took was destroying the landscape that I so desired. I think that this is why I look at Earthwork artists often, because of the complicated nature of our existence on the planet.

I would just like to end with a quick spin back to that pronoun question. I've made a lot of work by walking into someone else's life. While I think that the role of a witness is important, I think it is essential that first person narratives and perspectives exist. I am lucky enough to have been able to go to parts of the world from which we in the West don't often get first person perspectives. Their voices are not getting out. My current project has taken me on three trips to the Horn of Africa—in part so I could bring first-person perspectives out. Most recently, I brought video cameras to Yemeni refugees in a camp in Djibouti. Something that felt especially urgent considering our current administration's attempted border bans. And then I went to Mars. So, perhaps, we should just end there.



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