

CRISTIN TIERNEY



ArtSeen

## Janet Biggs: *Overview Effect*

by Nicole Miller and Eleanor Paynter



Janet Biggs, *Weighing Life Without a Scale*, 2018. Three-channel HD video installation. Courtesy the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.

Among recent artwork and global exhibitions addressing precarious migration, Janet Biggs's *Overview Effect*, debuting in the U.S. at Cristin Tierney Gallery, is especially seductive. Biggs's music, performance, and video work combines advanced technology and precision tools with on-the-ground investigation, often in extreme conditions, from the sulfurous interior of an active volcano to the labyrinth of a salt crystal cave or the glacial waters of the Arctic. Biggs's compositions are attentive to duration and scale and attuned to vulnerability as well as resilience. In two new video installations presented by Cristin Tierney, *Weighing Life Without a Scale* (2018), on view June 6th through 30th, and *Seeing Constellations in the Darkness Between Stars* (2018), on view July 8th through August 2nd, Biggs weighs the utopian promise of dissolving borders in contexts shaped by systemic instabilities.

Drawing on footage from the artist's residency at the Mars Desert Research Station in Hicksville, Utah, as well as images of refugees and migrants in Djibouti, these two videos plant us in inhospitable terrain, centering climate change and following groups of scientists as they explore the possibilities of colonizing Mars. *Weighing Life Without a Scale* depicts the resolute movement of researchers and refugees through the desert. Through a delicate choreography of macro and micro—industrial technology and analog forms of social life—the artist makes resonant visual connections between these worlds. We see the curved line of the earth's horizon reappear in the sphere of a geodesic dome, the astronaut's helmet, and the marbles lying in the dirt of the refugee camp.

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By juxtaposing and often mirroring shots of the scientists with images of refugees on the move, the video suggests potential parallels between precarious mobilities in the Horn of Africa and the colonizing mission staged in the Utah desert. According to the press release:

Disparate at first glance, each location is linked by the theme of human movement: Ethiopia's drought pushing out its people; Yemenis escaping war, corruption, famine, and disease; and humanity's cannibalization of Earth driving the quest to go to Mars. The massive destruction that people have wrought on each other and the planet is inescapable from scene to scene.

Together, these scenes of displacement allude to the exhibition's title: the "overview effect" is the sense of global kinship reported by astronauts who have seen the earth from space. "It is one planet, one ball hanging in space," Biggs wrote in the *Brooklyn Rail* last month. "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?"

Does Biggs's "we" posit an equivalence between white, techno-industrial mobilities and precarious mobilities in the Global South? Unlike the scientists, on a colonizing journey, the Yemeni refugees are fleeing in the wake of imperialist power struggles and colonialism's *longue durée*. While these forms of mobility are related, they are not equivalent or indicative of a universal condition in the Anthropocene. These are racialized territories, demarcated by the predominantly white scientists in helmets and suits and the impassive, white observatory domes that tower over the landscape—and by black or brown refugees, sheltered by cotton t-shirts or hijabs, often sitting idle in the camp. Though the video ends with footage of a young girl in the Djibouti camp singing about happiness, love, and hope, the penultimate sequence, which intercuts an image of Earth seen from space with a close-up of marbles in the dirt, again raises the question: do the residents of the Markazi camp have the vantage of the overview?



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In the single-channel video *Seeing Constellations in the Darkness Between Stars*, on view now, Biggs explores the complexities of transhuman interconnection. A meditation on hybridity, the work examines forms of inquiry, creativity, and perhaps subjectivity that emerge through bio-technological collaboration. The work pairs footage from the Mars Society's 2018 University Rover Challenge at the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah with that of a drummer fitted with a prosthetic arm. The drummer, Jason Barnes, plays his kit with three sticks: one held in his left hand and two held by the prosthetic arm and controlled through the arm's AI, which reads his muscle movement. The video cuts between the recording studio and the red desert, where robotic vehicles navigate over the cracked earth and execute a series of discrete tasks, such as collecting rock samples or grasping a water bottle. The drummer, working in concert with the AI, provides the initial soundtrack.

The work appears to embrace the collapsed distinction between human and machine. We marvel at the drummer's skill, activated by AI, and the rover's searching penetration of unknown terrain, controlled remotely by someone off-screen. Biggs foregrounds the intimacy of the bio-tech relation, her eye lingering on the human when the mechanical collaborators fail, or are set aside. This emphasis on intimacy offers a romantic, rather than utopian vision, which sidesteps questions that remain critical to these scenes. Who is deploying hybridization and toward what end? As advancements in AI engineering, these hybrids of organism and machine serve a discipline that historically seeks to master nature by dividing matter into human and inhuman forms. The cybernetic project of the Mars Desert Research Station is embedded in a system of knowledge that sustains this distinction in the service of a geopolitics of colonial extraction. It's not clear whether Biggs's project questions this conflict or merely reproduces it. Moreover, though the teams competing in the rover challenge are international, the work's human subjects are white. Casting our cyborg present within a Eurocentric framework, *Seeing Constellations in the Darkness Between Stars* perhaps exposes the blindspot of cyborg discourse that is not accountable to questions of race or other sites of difference.

Writing this discourse onto a broader vision of the Anthropocene articulated in this exhibition risks translating the works' utopian promise into a vision of universals. "To be included in the 'we' of the Anthropocene is to be silenced by a claim to universalism that fails to notice its subjugations," Kathryn Yusoff has written. "The supposed 'we' further legitimates and justifies the radicalized inequalities that are bound up in social geologies."<sup>1</sup>

Though *Overview Effect* brings a global "we" into focus, Biggs is also attuned to the solitary individual in unstable terrain. Moving deftly between the long view and the close-range, stitching fragile connections between distant geophysical worlds, Biggs depicts both precarious migration and colonizing exploration as an individual encounter with the environment—and therefore with the self and the limits of the human.

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## Endnotes

1. Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2018) 12.