

CRISTIN TIERNEY

(Un)common Denominators: Janet Biggs' Single-Channel Videos

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Children play marbles at a refugee camp in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa. Workers in Kawah Ijen in East Java, Indonesia, carry baskets of yellow sulfur on their shoulders. Janet Biggs has borne witness to these scenes and more, traveling from the Arctic to the Afar Region. She has found her way through crystal mines and driven across salt flats in the American West. She explores the human experience of distant landscapes and the mysteries of situations closer to home, exploring the mind itself as terra incognita.

The video camera is Biggs' chosen medium, and she is a master of its potential, creating complex amalgams through highly sophisticated editing. She describes her process as using a documentary point of view as a starting point for gathering imagery, but "at some point, I need to push myself off that path, to slide sideways. For me, this is where the art happens, where the project broadens allowing for unexpected juxtapositions and convergences."ⁱ By offering two disparate scenarios in a single-channel video, the viewer is invited to find connections between seemingly unrelated endeavors. The sequencing offers intriguing dialogues between scenes and sounds. With their high production values, Biggs' single-channel videos provide as rich an experience as a multi-channel video installation. Each video lends itself to multiple interpretations, touching on themes that run throughout her oeuvre.

One prominent theme is the idea of the extreme, a word often used to describe the situations to which Biggs is attracted, extreme as in exceeding what is usual or reasonable; the limits of a scale or range of possibilities. Travel is one arena in which this plays out in her work; sports are another. In an early video titled *Chamblee* (2003), pairs of wrestlers leverage their weight against each other, struggling to hold each other at bay; one slip in defenses and the other will win. There is no room for error, and no equipment beyond the sheer force of two bodies pushing against each other with all their

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strength. Spectators in the video egg the wrestlers on and so do we, drawn in by the tension.

Biggs explores athletes in established gender roles, showing us that performance and the drive towards perfection take many forms. *Airs Above the Ground* (2007) is a slow-motion video of a young synchronized swimmer underwater, assiduously putting herself through a series of rehearsed movements, concentrating on going through the motions. While on the surface the swimmer makes a pretty picture, referencing a Hollywood stereotype of femininity, the scene is also subtly disturbing. We sense the effort beneath the young girl's smooth façade. It becomes tangible through the apparent translation of a mental state into a physical one.ⁱⁱ

As we watch athletes in Biggs' videos strive to reach their limits, we are reminded that physical performance is tied to mental discipline and to training. These same attributes are essential for musicians. The virtuoso pianist performs with serious intensity, and then bows to an empty auditorium in *Enemy of the Good* (2007). He appears to feel the pressure of the audience in his desire for perfection even though the seats are empty. The alternation of physical feats with musical performance in *Vanishing Point* (2009), *Duet* (2010), and *Fade to White* (2010) suggests a common denominator in the human tendency to accept challenges and strive for the highest standards.

For Biggs, video is as much an audio as a visual medium, and she creates an intricate relationship between the two. At times the camera focuses on a musical performance, but then the scene shifts and the same score becomes the soundtrack for a different scenario—we hear it while we're seeing something else. In *Duet*, a pit crew at a NASCAR track rushes forward to change the tires of a race car at the precise moment that an elegant violinist and singer begin to play and sing. We hear and sometimes see the musicians, alternating with footage of the crew changing tires at lightning speed in a precise and coordinated—even choreographed—series of movements. Although the classical performance may seem incongruous juxtaposed with

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the racetrack, there is something exalted about the combination. In a similar vein a gospel choir at Harlem Addicts Rehabilitation Center sings about the need to bear witness and be free in *Vanishing Point*.ⁱⁱⁱ The scene then changes to the record-holding motorcyclist Leslie Porterfield skimming across salt flats in Utah at breakneck speed (with the unseen Biggs following the motorcycle in a pick-up truck). These unexpected pairings of musical genres and physical feats challenge cultural hierarchies, and we're reminded of the incredible breadth of human achievement.

Biggs is at times a spectator, a witness and a participant, and the viewer can take up these positions as well, identifying with the subjects and spectators on the screen. We are privy to the tense and quiet moments before the action starts. In *Vanishing Point*, we see the final moments before the choir starts to sing—the nervous fidgeting and anticipation—and in the next moment we see a similar tension in the spectators waiting with their binoculars for the motorcyclist to appear. We also get the thrill of being in the driver's seat and seeing the landscape unfold.

While Biggs' videos often explore human achievements, we see consequences of the human drive towards mastery when she addresses the climate crisis. *Fade to White* (2010), part one of her Arctic Trilogy, was filmed in Svalbard, a region between the top of Europe and the North Pole that has seen an average 7.3 degrees C (13.1 degrees F) winter temperature increase since 1971 due to human-caused global warming.^{iv} The artist joined an expedition on a 100-year-old schooner and, unseen, films a crew member as he lowers his kayak into the sea and paddles around, exploring. In some frames he traverses the slush of melted glaciers, in others the water is distressingly smooth and unobstructed by ice. The ship's masts remind us of an historical age of exploration before climate change. Now, polar bears falter along the edge of the water, standing on small ice floes. Biggs has reflected on the conflict between bearing witness to a vanishing landscape and intruding on it, aware of the seduction of human power: "We're in the age of the Anthropocene. Our presence, the industrial revolution, and the nuclear

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age have changed our planet forever... 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.”^v Alternating with scenes of the white-clad counter tenor John Kelly, whose elegiac and unearthly beautiful singing of a Baroque aria arguably represents the best of what human culture has accomplished, *Fade to White* concludes with a scene of a vast expanse of water without a glacier in sight.

The human costs of the Anthropocene are unequally distributed, bound to a legacy of colonialism where laborers are treated as an expendable resource. In *A Step on the Sun* (2012), workers in a sulfur mine labor in a toxic and extremely dangerous situation inside the crater of an active volcano. While the miners are theoretically self-determined, the region offers a severely limited choice of how to earn a livelihood. With no access to modern equipment, the workers stuff cloth kerchiefs into their mouths as protection against sulfur fumes as they fill their baskets. Biggs filmed there for two and a half weeks, sharing the same risks to her personal safety and nurturing relationships with some of the miners. She has built and maintained a positive connection to Abi Slamet Hariadi, her principal subject, who no longer works in the mine.

The other end of the scale of technological progress is evident in *Seeing Constellations in the Darkness Between Stars* (2018), parts of which Biggs filmed during her residency at the Mars Desert Research Station in the barren red landscape of Hanksville, Utah. The research station simulates life on Mars, a planet with no oxygen, in anticipation of exploring or ultimately moving off an exhausted and uninhabitable planet Earth—a “plan B” for a select cohort of Earthlings. In *Seeing Constellations*, we watch one of the entries in a competition to create the next Mars rovers. The rover moves independently, industriously digging for a core sample, picking something up. But then it fails, flips over, and falls into a crevasse; humans rush over to rescue their creation like EMTs at a crash site. These scenes alternate with scenes of the first cybernetic drummer, Jason Barnes, performing while wearing a prosthetic

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arm. His prosthetic is fitted with two drumsticks, one of which he controls. The other drumstick independently beats in response to his rhythm, in effect a second musician. Barnes' missing limb has not simply been replaced, but enhanced with AI, breaking down the traditional binary between human and machine, between natural and artificial. In her essay "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway asks "Why should bodies end at our skin?"^{vi} As Haraway observes, humans routinely use technological enhancements to expand our capabilities.^{vii} Each of the two scenarios—preparation for space travel and AI-enhanced prostheses—suggest a post-human world of hybridity and "fields of difference" rather than binaries, reminiscent of Haraway's description of the cyborg. The two instances in *Seeing Constellations* may seem futuristic but are happening right now.

Biggs seeks out points of intersection between her work as an artist and scientific research. She has collaborated with neuroscientists exploring neural diversity, particularly the ravages of Alzheimer's disease, which has affected several members of her family. In *Can't Find My Way Home* (2015) she filmed University of Houston faculty members researching treatments for Alzheimer's in their lab. We observe them as they look for clues to the workings of the diseased brain on a cellular level. Biggs then cuts to scenes that suggest how such brain changes might be experienced by an individual. Her subject is an older man looking intently at samples of crystals at the Denver Gem and Mineral show. Although he seems disoriented and unaware of his whereabouts, he examines the samples with a certain authority. Then the scene shifts again and we see Biggs in full protective gear, tentatively making her way through the tunnels of a crystal mine, entering dark passages and feeling her way forward until she comes to a larger space where she is surrounded by crystals. Through shifting between scenes, the crystal mine starts to seem analogous to the brain. We begin to visualize it as a three-dimensional space full of twists and turns. Through Biggs' journey, we sense the isolation and disorientation Alzheimer's causes, but also the magic of arriving at an unimagined destination that no one else can see.

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The people in Janet Biggs' videos are in the midst of challenging situations, some of their own making and others externally imposed. As viewers we gain insight into the subcultures and collective identities they inhabit. We admire the mastery of individual achievement and see how the drive towards mastery can have disastrous consequences, as with the environmental crisis, or spur an adventure into the unknown, through space exploration. One life can be enhanced through cybernetics while others are left behind in inhuman and unchanged labor practices. These contradictions are at the heart of Biggs' video production and address crucial questions about our paths forward.

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Notes

ⁱ Janet Biggs, Jokūbas Žiburkus, Jason L. Eriksen, "Art-Science Collaborations: How to Break Boundaries without Breaking Trust." *Mobile Brain-Body Imaging and the Neuroscience of Art, Innovation and Creativity*. Ed. Jose L. Contreras-Vidal et. al. <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-030-24326-5> (accessed May 15, 2021).

ⁱⁱ Andrea Inselmann discusses the gender stereotyping in this video in relation to Hollywood film. See *No Limits: Janet Biggs*, Ex. Cat., Tampa Museum of Art, 2011, 43-44.

ⁱⁱⁱ The refrain is "I need a Witness/Can I Get a Witness/Lord help my eyes to see." Lyrics by Janet Biggs. Music by Barney McAll.

^{iv} *Climate in Svalbard 2100: A Knowledge base for Climate Adaptation*. NCSS Report 1/2019. <https://www.miljodirektoratet.no/globalassets/publikasjoner/m1242/m1242.pdf> (accessed May 15, 2021).

^v Janet Biggs, "Janet Biggs with Nancy Princenthal," *The Brooklyn Rail*, November 2017. <https://brooklynrail.org/2017/11/art/JANET-BIGGS-with-Nancy-Princenthal> (accessed May 24, 2021).

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^{vi} Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<https://www.sfu.ca/~decaste/OISE/page2/files/HarawayCyborg.pdf> (accessed May 29, 2021).

^{vii} Hari Kunzru "You Are Cyborg," *Wired*, February 1997.

<https://www.wired.com/1997/02/ffharaway/> (accessed May 30, 2021).