



INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION



Take Me Away: On the Works of Bianca Kennedy

BY KIMBERLY BRADLEY



BIANCA KENNEDY, *Bath the Pain Away*, 2021, still from silent movie: 30 min. All images produced by the artist; courtesy the artist, unless otherwise stated.

A woman in her sixties reclines in a frothy bubble bath. This is perhaps not an odd image in itself, but in *Bath the Pain Away* (2021), German artist Bianca Kennedy's current in-progress film, the woman is in a bathtub-on-wheels in a sun-drenched room, and she is not alone. Two other women are in the room with her. The three speak to each other, but silently, gesticulating as their words literally hang in the air as visible text, their gestures freezing alongside their words as the camera pans and twirls. The protagonist is a district judge, adjudicating cases while naked from her warm-water perch. Many questions arise, but the most obvious is, why is all of this taking place in a bathtub?

For the past half-decade, the primary leitmotif in Kennedy's artistic production has been the bathtub—be the works original short narrative films, as is the aforementioned, or her three-channel work *We're all in this together* (2018), which collages hundreds of clips of cinematic bathtub scenes into a 14-minute video musing on humanity's relationship to the bath. Connecting to this project is an ongoing series of fine ink and marker works—which Kennedy began making in 2016—that capture and interpret these scenes, transforming them into gestural drawings. And then there is *VR all in this together* (2018), an animation in which a vast bathtub, situated in a lush fictional bathroom, is populated by a group of people bathing together. When viewers don a VR headset and see slowly moving figures, and hear gently lapping water, they essentially join a collective bath. Sometimes shown within an installation filled with balls from children's ball pits, the work also places the viewer physically into a collective vessel.

The bathtub is, of course, a purely functional object, but it is also a place of refuge, reflection, and respite for the human body in a literal or metaphorical state of nakedness. A bath can represent catharsis and purification, symbolizing the passage of time or a washing away of sins, wrongdoing, or uncleanness.¹ Immersing oneself in a lukewarm bath is the closest a human can get to being in utero. A bath usually represents a moment of privacy—a shared bath is thus an act of profound intimacy. And, as a plot device in literature or film, the bathtub nearly always signals a shift: characters consider their pasts, conjure their next moves, engage in intimate revelation, or, only occasionally, take dramatic action.

1 The Jewish ritual *mikveh* for women after childbirth and menstruation is evidence of this, as are multiple Roman Catholic rituals, such as the sacrament of baptism.



BIANCA KENNEDY, *VR all in this together*, 2018, still from stereoscopic 360° video, based on analogue drawings: 3 min.



Installation view of BIANCA KENNEDY's *VR all in this together*, 2018, stereoscopic 360° video, based on analogue drawings: 3 min, at "50 anos de realismo," Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil Brasília (CCBB), São Paulo, 2019.



Installation view of **BIANCA KENNEDY's** *We're all in this together*, 2018, three-channel video, found footage: 14 min, at "Wemhöner Collection - Longing and Fall," Kunstsaele Berlin, 2020. Photo by def image.

In *We're all in this together*, Kennedy assembles seconds-long bathtub scenes extracted from films spanning postwar cinematic history. We observe baths drawn and babies born; women, men, or children bathing alone; lovers, children, or siblings bathing together; laughing, reading, singing, eating, or masturbating in the bathtub; and the care inherent in people being bathed. These familiar acts flow fluidly as scenic triptychs, telling micro-stories, before Kennedy's narrative arc turns darker with bathtub suicide, murder, drowning, and horror-film scenarios like snakes or spiders emerging from drains or swimming around bathers. As similar camera views are juxtaposed, we catch moments of scripted conversation, with themes lapping like bathwater. There are iconic, recognizable moments from popular films like *Pretty Woman* (1990), *The Shining* (1980), *The Royal Tenenbaums* (2001), *Heavenly Creatures* (1994), and glimpses of star actors like Doris Day, Cher, Marilyn Monroe, Clint Eastwood, and Natalie Portman.² Spanning cinematic history and genres, Kennedy's collage represents the human condition, from birth to death, and its entire emotional range, as it takes place in a common household fixture.

Her interest in the bathtub and its significance originated in her fascination with how filmmakers treat the body in their work. While viewing the source material for *We're all in this together*, she simultaneously reimagined the seminal scenes in the aforementioned series of more than 200 ink and marker drawings, collectively titled *Portraits of taking a bath in movies* (2016-). Rendered by hand on paper—an analogization of sorts—the scenes become nearly unrecognizable as movie-star moments; their loosely drawn, delicately outlined figures become ordinary people. Contrasted with the sometimes ornate and colorful depictions of bathroom tiling, these figures unify the multiple threads of what a bathtub has meant to civilization.

These parallel works—one analogue, the others in different digital formats—represent the evolving practice and process of Kennedy. They could, however, also be exemplary of a broader trend toward, or ease in, code-switching and the conceptual exploration of one theme using multiple disparate technologies, borrowing the tropes of one and playing with them in another (to the viewer, *Bath the Pain Away* feels eerily like a VR piece, but is not). This in itself is not new in multimedia works, but here, we are forced to remember that Western society is in the midst of a paradigm shift when it comes to media. Today's consumption habits and distribution opportunities, as well as notions of collective memory and translatability, would make cultural critic Walter Benjamin's head spin. It is easy to envision Kennedy binge-watching movies, as we all do, on a small screen, a kind of at-home cinematic research that 15 years ago would have been impossible. Yet the largest question that Kennedy's bathtub-based work evokes is whether the lines between the digital and the analogue are blurring beyond recognition in our society at large.



Installation view of **BIANCA KENNEDY's** *We're all in this together*, 2018, three-channel video, found footage: 14 min, at "KÖRPER. BLICKE. MACHT.," Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, 2020.

² Kennedy's collaging is reminiscent of Candice Breitz's film collages *Her* (1978-2008) and *Him* (1968-2008), which create new narratives from seconds-long snippets, appearing like glitched GIFs, from commercial films starring Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson, respectively.



BIANCA KENNEDY & THE SWAN COLLECTIVE, *ANIMALIA SUM*, 2019, still from stereoscopic 360° video with interactive scenes: 9 min. Courtesy Bianca Kennedy & The Swan Collective.

There was a time before the bathtub. It was not a long time—Kennedy, now 31, earned her media-art degree in 2017, from the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich. The list of international exhibitions, film screenings, film festivals, residencies, and awards on her CV is already dense with entries: her practice and its themes have clearly resonated with the zeitgeist.

In her home-studio, VR headsets casually sit on a kitchen table while motion-capture equipment hangs like a high-tech spider from a hook on the wall. Her discovery of Swedish artist Nathalie Djurberg—whose oeuvre delves into human desire and disappointment through provocative, surreal stop-motion short videos—was an epiphany for her. Kennedy was born in Leipzig in 1989, the year the Berlin Wall fell and Germany began its reunification process. As a child she did not regularly visit contemporary art exhibitions and was unaware of the range of new media art until she was a young adult. “Seeing Nathalie Djurberg’s work was a turning point,” Kennedy explained, “I didn’t realize before then what video art really was, and how much you could do with it.”

Kennedy’s earliest academic works, such as *Weirdo’s Brain* (2012) or *Kinky Karma* (2013), are fantastical and dark Surrealist narratives. The latter four-minute video depicts Kennedy with her face painted red like a dark superheroine, appearing alongside a vaguely humanoid purple creature, a spider, and a sex doll or alter ego—all created by Kennedy as sculptures in clay and found materials—in an intricate and deftly produced (sur) reality. Djurberg’s influence is still palpable here, but the work foreshadows the techniques, pacing, and even dark humor that Kennedy would later expand on in her solo production as well as in her collaborations with The Swan Collective (TSC).³

If Kennedy’s solo work explores intimate and interior spaces, her collaborative artworks with TSC zoom out to consider broad-reaching issues that approach many of the art world’s current favorites, such as posthumanism, the Anthropocene, and the climate, but also speculate on real-world dilemmas like future food sources for an overcrowded planet, human evolution, and alternative (plant, animal, machine) intelligence. Kennedy and TSC pack their works into the framework of virtual and augmented reality, and set their stories in science-fiction-infused dystopian environments, building imaginary worlds.

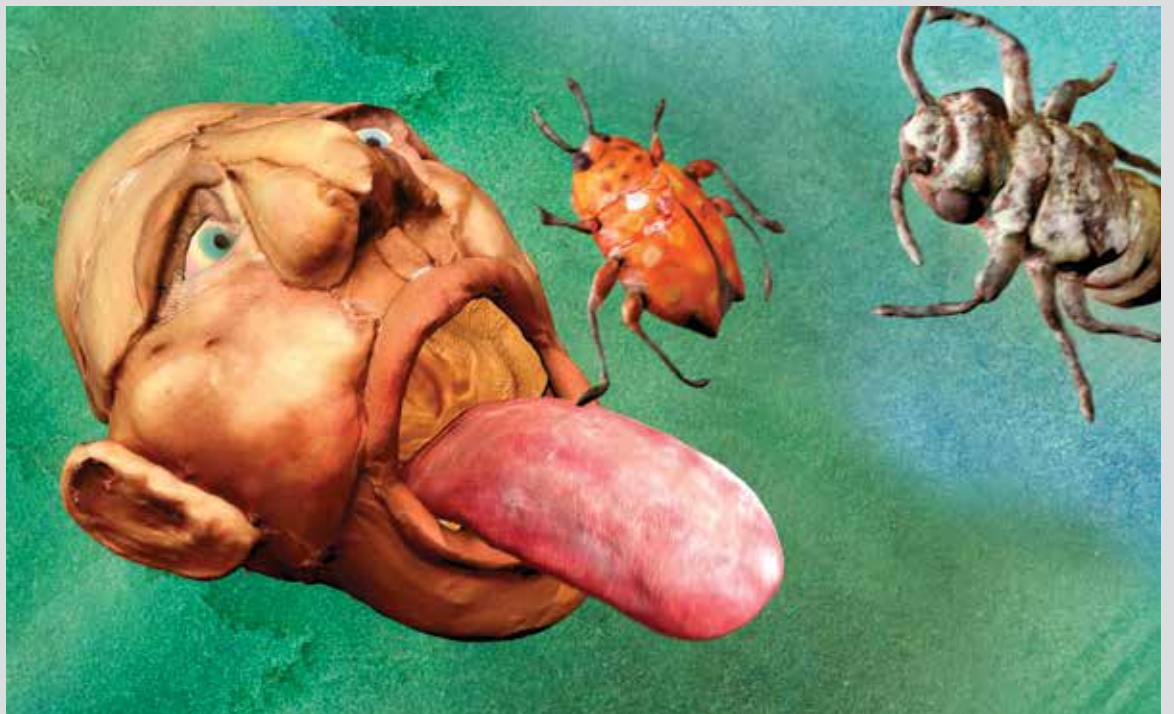
In *ANIMALIA SUM* (2019), a nine-minute VR experience featured as a short, animated film at the 2021 Sundance Film Festival in Utah, the audience becomes a large insect in the distant future. As the narrator explains that insects might offer the most efficient and viable food source due to the scarcity of protein, the viewer dives into the mouth of a human and moves through the digestive system, before feeding on other insects and continuing through dystopian scenarios rendered in rich 3D animation. The insects then revolt and suggest the whale as a better protein source. The ensuing battle between the tiny and large creatures is not unlike a wrestling match. Formally, evidence of Kennedy’s hand is everywhere in the VR piece’s animation and environments, and are a delight to view, although the boundaries between the digital and the analogue are blurred. The messages are serious, but the presentation is infused with an almost slapstick humor. Kennedy explains the use of levity as a gesture of accessibility, saying: “When people laugh, they’re more open to a message that counts.”

Hybrid (2015–16) is a ten-minute video narrated by four different voices imagining the year 3000. In a steady tone, the interspecies speaker describes his own mutations and transformations, cocooning and reproducing via spores and tumors, as well as outlining his distrust of humans, who feel threatened by and envious of the more adaptable and evolved hybrids. Throughout the video, backgrounds depicting urban wastelands, visualized by handmade miniature cityscapes, are peppered with visual jokes such as the “Last Cinema” showing a film called *Life 3.0: A Godumentary* or a “Hybrid Museum of 30th Century Art” filled with tiny sculptures and detailed videos of something that could only be called plant pornography.

³ The Collective is in reality five alter egos belonging to Felix Kraus, Kennedy’s partner.



BIANCA KENNEDY & THE SWAN COLLECTIVE, *ANIMALIA SUM*, 2019, still from stereoscopic 360° video with interactive scenes: 9 min. Courtesy Bianca Kennedy & The Swan Collective.



BIANCA KENNEDY & THE SWAN COLLECTIVE, *ANIMALIA SUM*, 2019, still from stereoscopic 360° video with interactive scenes: 9 min. Courtesy Bianca Kennedy & The Swan Collective.



BIANCA KENNEDY, *Bath the Pain Away*, 2021, stills from silent movie: 30 min.

These collaborative works could be placed within the lineage of recent video art that employs narrative structures—and omniscient narrators—to address current or speculative issues while experimenting with the visual possibilities of digital technology. Works by Hito Steyerl come to mind, as do Ed Atkins and Cécile B. Evans, both of whom tell critical stories within artificial worlds that incorporate CGI and high-definition video with original footage. All of the above have exhibited their videos within immersive installations, while Kennedy and TSC have also created extensive environments for their video works at institutions such as the Museum of Fine Arts in Leipzig, Krinzinger Projekte in Vienna, and Rio de Janeiro's Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil.

Yet while the speculative worlds created by Kennedy and TSC play with digital potentials and their pieces tell clear stories, they differentiate themselves by perhaps stubbornly depending on the duo's own analogue drawings and sculptural miniatures. Kennedy and TSC create as much as possible by hand in their studio, rather than on-screen, when working on an animation, digitizing their handcrafted models with 3D scanners in order to collage them on the computer. Kennedy has expressed her frustration with VR's current use in the art world: too much of it mirrors existing interfaces familiar to users from the world of gaming, whose developers, Kennedy admits, are simply further along in production proficiency than most artists. It's also clear that the artist is not, and may never be, ready to cede the authorial control inherent in creating handmade worlds. "If you create things solely on your computer, one layer is missing for me," she says. "Maybe this is what one could call the chaos level, a place where randomness and mistakes can still occur." For all their sci-fi visuals, there's a groundedness in these collaborative works, an avoidance of the all too uncanny. To err is human, after all, and organic unpredictability might be more appealing than algorithmic precision.

In her solo practice, Kennedy is quite ready to pull the plug on the bathtub, so to speak. Her next field of interest is a broader societal phenomenon, one perhaps alluded to in *Bath the Pain Away*. "I'm interested in the perception of older women," says the artist. "In our culture, it's still rather impossible to be old and female, but also powerful." Indeed, older women can become frightening, witchy crones, or jolly grandmothers, but mostly they fall into oblivion or are simply ignored or overlooked as members of society. One line in Steyerl's video *How Not to be Seen* (2013), which is primarily a deadpan critique of global surveillance, explains that one method of becoming invisible is "to be a woman over 50." Kennedy is currently outlining a VR work in which she will use motion capture to grant older women the mobility and visibility that they are due.⁴

What about questions of the future and humanity? Is Kennedy optimistic or pessimistic about the issues she grapples with in her more speculative pieces? "Absolutely pessimistic," she says resolutely. "I don't think so highly of us." She then hesitates. "Okay, 60 percent pessimistic, 40 percent optimistic." She smiles. There's still time. There are more solutions to explore, stories to tell. And new and better worlds to build, in the studio and beyond.

Bianca Kennedy lives and works in Berlin. She addresses human and animalistic desires via video, virtual reality, and installation works. Her artwork has been exhibited internationally, including at the Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil in Rio de Janeiro, Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, the Museum of Fine Arts in Leipzig, Vienna's Krinzinger Projekte, LOOP Festival in Barcelona, and Sundance Film Festival in Utah, among other platforms.

Kimberly Bradley is a writer, editor, and educator based in Berlin. She is the co-editor of *Navigating the Planetary* (2020).

⁴ Kennedy, in collaboration with Janine Mackenroth, edited the crowdfunding book *I Love Women in Art* (2020), featuring 100 female artists as introduced by 100 women in the arts in Germany.