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Candice Breitz: *Too Long, Didn't Read*

JUNE 2020

By Jason Rosenfeld



Candice Breitz, *Love Story*, 2016. Commissioned by the National Gallery of Victoria, Outset Germany + Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg. Courtesy Kaufmann Repetto, New York, and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg / London.

On View

Baltimore Museum Of Art

Candice Breitz's exhibition at the BMA was meant to open on Sunday, March 15, the very weekend that the museum closed because of COVID-19. It was to include two multi-channel moving image installations: *Love Story* of 2016 and *TLDR* of 2017. Instead, the museum and the artist have loaded the videos on artbma.org. There are issues with the presentation, and over 35 hours of footage is daunting, but it is a worthy attempt to highlight the committed work of this important Berlin-based White South African artist, despite the regrettable loss of an impressive slate of public programs that the museum had scheduled around the social themes of these films: mainly the refugee crisis and the criminalization of sex work.



Candice Breitz, *TLDR*, 2017. Commissioned by the B3 Biennial of the Moving Image, Frankfurt. Courtesy Kaufmann Repetto, New York, and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg / London.

TLDR is a continuation of Breitz's community-based and collaborative artistic productions that engage in contemporary political debates and challenge mainstream media-driven dialogues. A commission of the B3 Biennial of the Moving Image, Frankfurt-on-Main, in 2017, the title stands for "too long; didn't read" and the installation is a triptych, with a portrait-format full-length image of a 12-year-old boy, Xanny "The Future" Stevens, in the Virgin Mary/Christ position in the center. There are landscape-format wings on either side with five figures against a dark backdrop, each of whom serves as a saint in a sacra conversazione religious tableau and who collectively function as a chorus that sings or holds up emoji masks to their faces or crude signs to enhance the commentary ("My body my business"; "Workers of the world unit [sic]"; "Not your Olympia"). The group is composed of members of the Cape Town collective Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT). They wear orange outfits that resemble prison togs and bear the logo "THIS IS WHAT A SEX WORKER LOOKS LIKE." A grim reaper appears now and again in a skull mask and a black gown, like that of a judge. The accompanying music ranges from drumbeats to Zulu and Xhosa protest songs to Mariahlynn's "Once Upon a Time," Tina Turner's "Private Dancer," Rihanna's "Work," and Roy Orbison's "Oh! Pretty Woman" (note the Hollywood connection in the latter).

The precocious Stevens, who confesses that his “mom works in women’s rights and all that,” is the Greta Thunberg of South African sex workers advocates.¹ He provides a commentary (largely dictated by Breitz, as revealed early in the work), that traces Amnesty International’s efforts in 2015 to decriminalize consensual sex work and the response of religious political groups and by organizations such as the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women seeking to rescue sex workers—many of whom do not want rescuing. The chants of “Decrim,” a universal rallying cry for agency and freedom in sex work activism, resonate through much of the one-hour run time. The opposition coalition prevailed, largely with the help of celebrities who advocated against decrim by adding their signatures to the protest, but who appeared to be largely uninformed about the debate. To illustrate this, the 10 Black sex workers on the wings hold images of White female actors up to their faces, signatories such as Meryl Streep, Lena Dunham, and Emma Thompson. “Sit down, pretty women. Stay in your lane,” intones the young narrator.



Candice Breitz, *TLDR*, 2017. Commissioned by the B3 Biennial of the Moving Image, Frankfurt. Courtesy Kaufmann Repetto, New York, and Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg / London.

At the 39:08 mark there are 36 seconds of silence when the chorus holds up memorial posters with text that is very difficult to read on a computer screen (and impossible on a phone), but that document the murders of individual sex workers and what happened to their killers. The grim reaper makes sense, now, though these posters would presumably have been more legible in the intended large-scale gallery presentation. At this point, Stevens steps aside and the whole cast comes out to sing both liltingly and forcefully in multiple languages (“we are ready for decrim”; “they’ve seen us on the news, but have no idea who we are”; the national anthem of South Africa) while an informational text directs viewers to a nearby room to watch ten interviews with members of the chorus (now just a click away). The film then becomes a raucous extended cast dance party. At the very end Stevens returns and says “Ok. I’ll take that from the beginning,” recommencing the loop—all video art should adhere to round time lengths as Breitz’s smartly does!

The connection between the criminalization of sex work and the dangers faced by these members of SWEAT is made chillingly clear in Breitz's stark and tenebrist set, with its black void of a background and brightly lit participants. The sound is full-on, and must be even more absorbing in a gallery presentation.

Back at the 36-minute mark, Stevens muses about humans' shrinking attention spans and the challenge of conveying information. And yet, through her young medium, Breitz airs her self-awareness of the manipulations of the video, the script, and its delivery. Stevens, who admits to having received the day off school for the shoot, discusses Breitz's aims. Not only has the artist used a tween to deliver the message, but, as the narrator notes, "She's shameless, you know. She'll even use Hollywood stars to get your attention." This is the partial approach of the earlier piece in the exhibition, *Love Story* of 2016, presented at the Venice Biennale in 2017 when she represented South Africa with the multi-media artist Mohau Modisakeng. Here, Julianne Moore and Alec Baldwin voice the words of six Asian, African, and South American refugees whose own stories, some stretching to four hours of recorded video, form the rest of the work (two are unavailable as the subjects' asylum applications are being processed). It is a nice complement to Krzysztof Wodiczko's recent installation, *Monument*, in Madison Square Park that featured filmed interviews with refugees projected onto the Farragut Monument.

Watching Breitz's films at home on one's own devices allows you to see the running time, to pause the videos, to rewind or fast forward. In the four galleries allotted for the BMA exhibition, time would have been dictated by the willingness to sit or stand still, to wear headphones, to pace yourself—the challenge presented in *TLDR*'s title. However, what has become clear in the two months of global shutdown is that when it comes to fine art online only single-channel video really works: it has been a thrill to see the Holt/Smithson Foundation release hard-to-see films by Nancy Holt and Robert Smithson on Vimeo for 24 hours every Friday, or to watch James Nares's magical films as Kasmin Gallery releases one every weekend. The Breitz show was going to be ticketed (with free return entry). But museums and galleries might consider extending this new tradition of releasing films online for a limited period once the world begins to reopen, so that people can get a better appreciation of what these artists are doing, even if the presentation is not ideal. Breitz's pointedly political videos deserve absorbed attention from the widest possible audience.

Endnotes

1. Josie Thaddeus-Johns, "Candice Breitz: Too Long, Didn't Read," *Elephant* (24 May 2019) <https://elephant.art/candice-breitz-long-didnt-read/>

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