

janet biggs



<interview>

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Andrea Inselmann: Let's talk about your work before video, particularly the work that dealt with issues related to childhood.

Janet Biggs: There was definitely a break in my work when I started to mine my own biography. I made pieces about early childhood fears and the construction of security in childhood. I collected images and objects to create large installations.

A Like the one with the baby shoes?

J That installation was titled *One in Every Fourteen*, based on the March of Dimes' statistic on birth defects in America. The title became ambiguous as people brought their own histories to it. It was read as a Holocaust piece, the number of people born gay in America ... whatever a person's history was, that's what s/he brought to the piece.

This idea of the viewers completing the piece came out of recognizing a lack of choice as a child. It felt as though my behavior was orchestrated by society and by my parents. So in my work, I very much wanted to allow the spectator to become the choreographer. This was also the first time I used the image of the horse.

A In *Crib*, which included stuffed toy horses surrounding an elevated crib.

J I used the image of the horse because riding gave me a sense of power and control for the first time in my life. I started when I was 7 years old. My dad grew up with horses. My mother was the dominant force in my early childhood but she was afraid of horses. In riding I had found an area that made her uncomfortable and that I became proficient in. Making this 1200-lbs. animal go where I wanted was a huge sense of power for a child.

A Psychoanalytic writing describes the child's transition from the dominant mother figure toward the father as an expression of independence. Your experience is a literal illustration of this separation from the mother represented by your father's world of horses and riding, which connoted power and freedom.

J It felt like I had moved from a feminine to a masculine world. I needed to figure out what it meant to grow up female in this society.

A Were you one of these horse-crazy girls?

J I was the complete horsy girl in school. I wanted all the paraphernalia that went along with it.

A So, you are *Celeste* from the portrait?

J That photograph became a hybrid of our identities. Her room cemented the whole idea of my subsequent installation *Girls and Horses*.

A How did people react to the issue of child sexuality in *Girls and Horses*?

J The footage of girls playing horsy became the private realm, whereas Amanda circling the gallery represented public space. Because the home movie images were glimpses into private lives, the spectators were put into the uncomfortable position of voyeurs. People with any kind of experience with molestation or sexual inappropriateness in their past found these glimpses very disconcerting. Other viewers saw them only as pleasure. I was aware that they would be read in Freudian terms but my desire was to put out images about positive experiences with early



One in Every Fourteen (1992; mixed-media installation; dimensions variable; detail)

sexuality. Spectators, however, had the final word on the piece.

A Did male and female spectators respond differently to the installation?

J Generally, women engaged more readily than men. I was definitely making girl art.

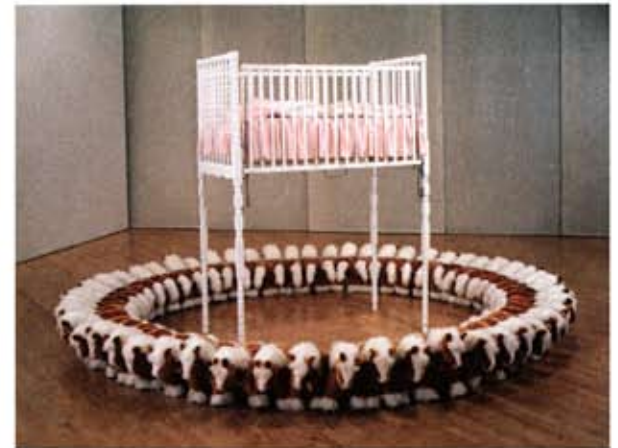
A You were presenting an empowering experience for female viewers.

J Boys have opportunities at a younger age to express power. Girls are not necessarily encouraged in the same ways.

A The image of the horse-crazy girl is often related to some kind of excessive female sexuality.

J The boys would approach the piece with a snickering "those girls." For the girls, riding certainly doesn't mean sexual pleasure. It allows for a different kind of pleasure. But there is also another side to this, which has to do with beauty and nurture. Girls who don't ride often get little toy ponies, whose manes they comb and braid. The fascination with horses in this way engages traditional femininity while also providing experiences of power and control.

A I am interested in your ideas about voyeurism, spectatorship, and the viewer's participation. You put a lot of thought into the physical design of your video installations.



Crib (1993; mixed-media installation; 96 x 144 x 144")



Celeste in her Bedroom (1996; C-print; 48 x 84")

J I wanted to explore how I could prescribe viewers' actions. In *Girls and Horses* I consciously set up the installation in such a way that there were large projections of Amanda on horseback circling the gallery walls, which put the viewer in the role of a riding instructor. In the center of the gallery a number of television monitors were set up with girls playing horsey. There was constant travel, the horse traveled around you and you traveled around the monitors, forcing you into becoming a performer. As observer of these private moments, you also became the object of the gaze.

A The way in which the circling projected images and the monitor sequences function is similar to how individual takes might function in a film before editing. Only here the viewers can construct their own narratives. The design of *Risperidone* employs similar strategies with its three image sequences projected in different viewing bays.

J I just read about a writer who is doing participatory fiction online. I wanted to set up a similar situation for my viewers, so that they have choices in setting up the narrative.

A Conceptually, your video installations foreground the process of putting a film together. For instance, in *Water Training* you installed the images at a 90-degree angle with the corner functioning as the suture in the piece, making usually hidden processes of editing visible.

J I recognize the underlying process necessary for making something look seamless. The reason why I prefer making multi-

channel videos is because they are more akin to how we experience life. But it also represents an awareness of how film mediates reality. I believe my process gives the viewer an increased participatory role.

A Another important theme in your work is how authenticity relates to your choices of scenes. In *Water Training*, for instance, one never really knows what is happening to the seemingly struggling horse. You also mentioned the image of your aunt in *Buspar* in this context.

J Reality is a construct, which is different for everybody. There is this notion that we all share a concrete reality ...

A ... and that film is the perfect medium for representing it.

J Right. The idea that a shared reality can be represented is totally absurd. I am very much engaged with the spectator's notion of fact, which also relates to the construction of female identity and the objectification of women in the mass media. There are many opportunities to invert these preconceived notions.

A In *Girls and Horses* you present a girl having fun while being in control. In *Water Training* you show the enormous strength and effort required to perform the ultra-feminine activity of synchronized swimming.

J Revealing the underbelly of things is always of interest. What it takes to make something look seamless and to make the masquerade or performance convincing. Anything I can do to get close to that performance is welcome. This happened with the image of my aunt Ann, who is autistic. I was really happy when a banner of her on the outside of a museum was read as an image of the artist. To emphasize this question about the authenticity of the image, I have started to use performers who are often more convincing than people with actual disorders.

A While the horse is in a lot of your work, it's not so much a part of the recent pieces.

J Actually *Risperidone* is one of the few pieces that does not include horses. I felt so comfortable with that image in its multiple meanings that I used it over and over again.

A As you break away from the image of the horse you introduce different images of masculinity.



Flight (1999; four-channel video installation and photograph; dimensions variable)

J There were actually two earlier pieces, *Ritalin* and *Haldol*, in which I represented horses and adolescent masculinity. In *Risperidone*, gender stereotypes are presented in a straightforward way. There's nothing more male than watching football players encourage each other to bang their heads.

A It's interesting that the lead-in image in *Risperidone* is the female swimmer. I assume it was also a conscious decision to put the wheelchair-bound basketball player in the center as a kind of transitional image.

J Even though the swimmer is confrontational in her obsession and her embrace of power I think it's a seductive image to start with. To make the transition to the stereotypical role of men, and to question and debunk it in prescribed activities under pharmacological influences put William in the middle. In some ways he's emasculated because he's wheelchair-bound. Yet he's the most confrontational image in the sequence. He bridges stereotypes because he's constantly flipping back and forth between expectations. He has this ability to confront with a gaze, which is like nothing I've ever seen before.

A Is William really wheelchair-bound?

J Yes he is. We made the decision to remove the footrest so his feet are on the ground and you see movement in them, prompting your question. He really is wheelchair-bound with a spinal-cord injury.

A You have all those different levels of fiction in your images.

J *Crib* was one of the first times when I presented a layered image to invert traditional readings and to embrace multiple perspectives.

A Contemporary art has seen a shift from the production of art to its reception. How do you see these intersecting in your work?

J Contemporary art engages the viewer in different ways than past work. The completion of the piece is through the viewer. Previously there was the assumption about a linear, static, and direct perception. That there was ...

A ... one meaning, one intent, and that there could be a direct relation between the original intent and its interpretation or reception.

J Now the reception becomes as much a method of communication as the production.

A How does the element of seduction function in this context?

J I'm easily seduced by images and want to communicate this to my viewers. But I want to use it carefully, which goes back to the editing process. I exploit the seductive beauty of images to take the viewer to a new place of ...

A ... pleasure, perhaps? Feminist theorists like Laura Mulvey postulated in the 70s that there couldn't be any pleasure in looking for women ...

J ... that spectatorship has to be theorized as masculine.

A Gender issues are the main themes in installations like *Girls and Horses*, *Water Training*, and also *Flight*. How do you subvert stereotypical positions in your work?

J The notion that there is no pleasure for a female spectator is an antiquated view of spectatorship. It's certainly necessary to acknowledge, because most of our history comfortably falls into this idea. But as feminist theory has progressed, an understanding has developed that the female spectator can clearly embrace pleasure by reversing roles and by acknowledging the processes of masquerade in spectatorship. Video has so readily been linked to the objectification of women that it's interesting to subvert it into a new kind of seduction.

A In your earlier installations, you tended to emphasize the masquerade aspect of gender. I noticed a shift away from those concerns in your more recent work.

J In the early pieces the construction of gender was fascinating to me because of my own biography. But along the way ideas of free will became a concern, and I started to look at the construction of identity within a larger scope that led me into the work with medication. While societal behavior is prescribed externally there is also an attempt to prescribe behavior internally through pharmacology.

A What about your process? Do you use a script or do you start with images?

J I start with images. I've now amassed a library of images, from which I can pick and choose. I also do some specifically choreographed shoots, which I then combine with found images. Not everything is carefully scripted. I do use chance occasionally. There's got to be discovery for me. Making choices throughout production is essential to my process.



Ritalin (2000; four-channel video installation; dimensions variable)

A You are both an artist and an athlete. How has that affected your artistic practice?

J I've used athletes—both human and horse—as representatives of a certain level of obsession and compulsion that's about obtaining a goal, which is really never obtainable. Making art involves a similar obsession to communicate. My artistic production is very much akin to the images of the athletes. I've ridden and competed for years. It is an obsession similar to my compulsion to complete a new installation.

A Another aspect of your life also prompted the recent work?

J The medication pieces came from a contemporary aspect of my life, when I became medical guardian for my aunt Ann. I suddenly had to look at medication and how it can influence the quality of your life. I was faced with having to make decisions about the welfare of another human being.



Haldol (2001; three-channel video installation; dimensions variable; details)

A In the pre-medication work, you dealt with the deconstruction of stereotypes. Now with this new responsibility you're confronted with questions of functionality.

J And what's required for some kind of minimal participation.

A These questions are not only relevant to the formation of your images and narratives, but also to the conceptual issue of how society functions.

J In the medication work I was forced to look at structures of societal participation. It was more about construction than deconstruction. I had to imagine myself as someone who needed medication to participate and to experience pleasure. Since I was suddenly forced into this imagined experience of otherness, it influenced my work tremendously.

A ... so much so that you try to recreate some of these mental states in your installations. How do you do that in *Risperidone*, for example?

J I use different devices to give the viewer a feeling of what it might be like to need Risperidone.

A What is the medical use of Risperidone?

J It is an anti-psychotic medication that's used for schizophrenia, and more frequently to control self-abusive behavior. Not only did the idea of obsessive-compulsive self-abuse dictate the choices in images, I also wanted to explore the heightened anxiety that might make someone self-injurious. I try to do it through images but also through sound and installation devices.

A Your athletes' commitment to their sport not only borders on an isolating obsession, but on compulsion.

J Yes. I picked very specific sports for that purpose. The swimmer is isolated in her aquatic environment, the basketball player because of the wheelchair, and the football player not only because of the helmet, but because I filmed him in individual drills. I also use sound to be as anxiety-producing as possible.

Whatever anxiety can be brought out by one image I hope is built up throughout the installation. Sequenced and hooked up to a synch box, the images cut from frantic athletic activity to slow pans of nature, at which point the viewer recognizes a connection between the sequences, creating a need for a different understanding. Subsequently the viewer's path through the gallery follows a new pattern, and hopefully frustration is heightened because s/he can never understand all three images at once.

A And one can never quite grasp the relationship between the three images.

J Their relationship is as mutable as people's paths through the gallery. The volume of the sound track increases throughout the sequence of the sports activities. So the spectator, especially with a companion, becomes aware of their interaction escalating as well. Right when you're yelling at each other the sound completely cuts out. The spectators are left in a vulnerable position. Becoming the viewed, they are the spectacle, possibly being inappropriate in their behavior.

A How do you relate this viewing experience to the medication?

J Risperidone is supposed to dampen self-injurious impulses. The effects of the medication are reflected in the escalation of anxiety and subsequent calm. By the time viewers get to the calming influence, however, their anxiety is heightened because they realize something deviates from their expectation. In this way, the piece ends up questioning outside influences on comprehension and participation in a broader sense.

A ... as well as what are acceptable levels of participation. Why is athletic obsession accepted and ...

J ... obsessive circling or rocking is not? With this work I seek to question what constitutes control and free will as they relate to our participation in the social construct.

A Is there a relationship between the isolation of the athletes and the position of the viewer?

J This was not an overly considered issue, but viewers of the installation can be rather isolated in their own anxiety.

A There is one instance of spectatorship within the image frame in *Risperidone*. I am curious how that might relate to the viewer's experience.

J I intentionally included the spectators within the film because I wanted to point out the complicity between the onlookers within the scene and the viewers of the installation. The paternal figure of the coach is very supportive while other spectators clearly are not. Possibly critical of the whole activity, they facilitate the gallery viewers' participation and criticality.

A ... with this instance of hyper-masculinity then becoming a comment on the spectacle of masculinity.

J Definitely. Football is a prime example of how the expression of power and aggression is a team activity for boys, while girls experience it more often on an individual basis.

A Let's talk about your piece *Ritalin*.

J I wanted to express the idea of fiction in an even stronger way. Even though the boy is not actually on Ritalin, his drumming has an intensity and commitment that border on obsessive-compulsiveness. Through editing and other postproduction techniques, like altering speeds and layering sounds, I was able to set up a situation with so much input that individual components could no longer be isolated, thus replicating what it might be like to need Ritalin. The projection of the drumming boy is juxtaposed with three television monitors showing images of horses performing the elaborate footwork of dressage.

A Harnessing the horses' power within very controlled movements.

J This combination of images is intended to describe attempts to control energy and power, while denying any kind of clarity about the boy playing the drums, for instance, creating uncertainty whether he is or isn't on the drug.

A Earlier we talked about images being the first step in your process. I'm wondering about how you make choices about a sound track.

J When I first started making videos, sound was a complete afterthought. It's something that has evolved with the work. I compose by layering, repeating, and increasing found sounds. *Risperidone* probably has the most considered sound of all the pieces. I worked on it with a composer, Dan Reetz. For the sound track of the swimmer, Dan smashed different objects for a feeling of aggression and applied those sounds to the chemical structure of Risperidone.

A How does the sound work in the installation?



Risperidone (2001; three-channel video installation; 11'3" x 14'8" each image; details)

J Each sequence in the individual bay has its own 2-track sound track and the mixing happens on site. The viewers' primary aural experience is the sound track of one image in one bay, while being very aware of the sound next door. As you move through the installation, the previously elusive sounds become more concrete. From certain vantage points you can experience two visual and two sound tracks at once.

A I recently saw a single-channel piece by Salla Tykkä, a young Finnish artist. It makes deliberate use of the emotive score from another film. What are your feelings about using existing music?

J I never rule anything out.

A As I listen to the deliberate choices that go into creating your installations I wonder how more knowledge about your process might add to the experience of your work?

J As much as I expose a certain degree of effort in the synchronized swimmers, for instance, a tremendous amount of work remains invisible. The spectator doesn't necessarily need to know my plotting through the creation of the piece. On the other hand, I do believe that knowledge of my obsession during production can enrich the viewers' experience of the piece. Instead of making this obvious within the piece itself, there are more appropriate places for that kind of information. My work has to be successful without knowing my original intent or all that went into making the piece.



A In Hollywood films, of course, everything is made to seem effortless and seamless to encourage a suspension of disbelief. Many contemporary video artists play with these conventions to bring to the foreground the mechanisms of the cinematic apparatus.

J Exposing these systems necessary to produce a cinematic fantasy can extend to an examination of larger systems of power and control. Video is a great medium to expose their underpinnings. On the other hand, it also begs to buy into the screen fantasy.

A Video is such an important contemporary medium because it deals directly with cinema's illusionistic character. The cinematic experience dominates contemporary culture but spectators are not given the tools to analyze it. The early years of video were characterized by a desire to increase people's visual literacy.

J Nam June Paik is a prime example of those pioneer video artists who used found images from the mass media to point out the structures at play in the images fed to us on a daily basis. The original attraction to the medium was its cheapness and disposable character. VHS tapes were easily reproduced, thus questioning the rarified status of fine art. However, as the medium has evolved, artists have become increasingly interested in its seductive qualities, which have also affected its costs. Originally affordable and accessible, the latest editing technologies and equipment are cost prohibitive and difficult to access, which is also true in digital media. In spite of their democratic potential, these media have repositioned themselves into the realm of the white cube.

A This development is reflected in more and more complex installations.

J For me, that's just as exciting as could be. I want access to an Imax, because it's all about setting up the theatrical experience. You can control any situation and disrupt any architectural situation. Janine Antoni once said to me that, "video is the only medium that gets better when you throw more money at it." Like in other media, artists will find the scale most effective for them.

A I've always wondered what artists would do with Hollywood budgets?

J It would be a shock to their methods of working, but one I am willing to take on. I have seen pieces that were created for \$50,000, which is nothing in Hollywood, but rare for an artist's project.

A Have you ever wanted to do a feature film?

J Sure. I'd love to be a filmmaker or do a rock video. But my brain just does not work in that way. Even when I approach a single-channel piece, I don't combine images sequentially. I'm extremely resentful of being forced to watch for a given duration. Why limit yourself to the expectation of the money shot of the fabulous ending when you can have them repeatedly?

A Money being no issue, what would be your dream project?

J The dream project that I need the big budget for is a production in Antarctica, involving athletic obsession and the isolation of the Antarctic landscape. It would be an exploration of female identity in a very abstracted environment, in which societal control was replaced with different pressures. I would inscribe a perfect ice oval in the center of a large glacial field and then use helicopter shots to get all sorts of angles of a lone female speed skater.