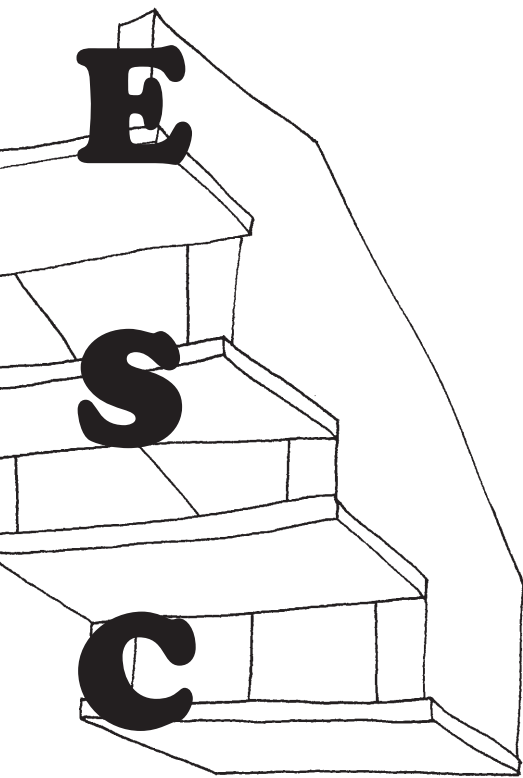


CECELIA CONDIT
PHOEBE LIN ELNAN
RAMAYA TEGEGNE



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ESCALIER est une revue d'artistes relativement semestrielle basée entre Paris et Genève.

ESCALIER traite de conversations au sens large et à travers différents protocoles plus ou moins stricts.

PRIX LIBRE: merci de payer cette revue à hauteur de vos moyens, comme il vous semblera juste. La totalité de la recette de chaque numéro est reversée équitablement entre les artistes qui y ont participé.

WHO ARE YOU TALKING TO?

Johana Blanc

For a few years now, I have decided not to read anymore novels written by white, heterosexual, cis-gender men, except in major emergency cases or with a gun to my head. This was a real revolution in my life, and in my approach to writing and creation in particular. It made me realize, among other things, that very little of what constituted my first contact with culture was addressed to me.

I believe deconstructing the idea of neutral speech or neutral listening is at once salutary, unavoidable and urgent. Because besides relieving me from a few superfluous patriarchal injunctions, I think this exercise has allowed me to see my own vision, its specificities as well as its flaws. Being aware of where you are looking and talking from is a powerful critical tool, or as Donna Haraway explains: *only a partial perspective promises an objective view*. I'm not talking from nowhere, and I'm not speaking alone. On these grounds, the question that remains to be asked is: Who am I talking to?

To whom is a work addressed, and who does it give voice to? What vector can it constitute, and to what message? Through three conversations, giving place to a triple edition of the review *ESCALIER*, I focused on works that mobilize this notion, whether as a theme or as a tool: Cecelia Condit's experimental video *Possibly In Michigan* (1983), which will be discussed here, has gone viral among 16-20 year olds, and its hashtag recently hit 65.7 million views on TikTok; the philosophical tale *Sad Bread* (2021), in which Phoebe-Lin Elnan tells us about a baker who doesn't know who he is feeding; and finally, Ramaya Tegegne's performance *Corners* (2017), which details her environment by postulating it as a condition of existence.

It is pretty clear when you start a career in contemporary art that your work is not going to be seen by that many people: however cross-disciplinary and curious art can (or should) be, it's a niche. Why are some artworks more likely to escape from it is hard to define, but I believe one of the main factor is the need for new narratives, and ways to tell them. *Possibly In Michigan* is a powerful tale about female friendship as well as a strongly rooted work, existing from and for women solidarity. As random as it may sound at first, the fact that Cecelia Condit's early 80's feminist video is now trending on TikTok comes as no surprise at all.

TIK TOK TIK TOK

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Cecelia Condit

J: Can you describe the video *Possibly In Michigan*? It would be great to have your words introducing it.

C: It's a 1983 video about two women who are shopping in this commercial world of the American mall. They meet a cannibal, Arthur, who follows them home. There it becomes more complicated. Janice kills Arthur to save Sharon, and they cook and eat him. One of the unspoken themes of the piece is that boogie men never really go away, as Arthur shape-shifts back to life as a pig. But my friend Jill Sands (who plays Sharon) and I talk about *Possibly* as if it's still new to us, and we are still discovering what we made back then. Though it's a complicated video, we both agree on that: "Love shouldn't cost an arm or a leg."

J: Can you tell me a bit about how you use fiction as a tool in your movies? Your work is not a testimony, or a documentary about violence, though it's engaging in and profound.

C: Thank you. I think violence is in all my videos, but sometimes the violence is more overt than others and changes slightly. In the beginning of *Possibly in Michigan* I say, "Sharon and Janice are attracted to violent men. It was a way of making the violence seem like it was their idea". Karen Skladany, who plays Janice, conjured up those lines. I was playing the cannibal, Arthur, who as a woman I certainly didn't identify with. Looking back, I must have been trying to understand violence against women, and at the same time trying to play Arthur with a certain authenticity and humor. I can't do movies about men killing or hurting women anymore, but in 1983, having the women kill and eat Arthur seemed so powerful to me. They were so exposed, naked. And in the final scene, Sharon and Janice are actually naked. I know there are sexual interpretations about this, but they are also like new-borns, comfortable in their skins, holding the power to save themselves, and celebrate it. Girlfriends are valuable. I've always held the belief that the more isolated women are, the more vulnerable. Surviving is not easy or assured. Friends have saved my life time and time again, and I have saved theirs.

J: About that scene, that revenge part. What I find interesting about it is that there is no rage. In many other revenge movies, the part where they kill the bad guy would be super exhilarating, repeating a super manly pattern of justice, a weirdly arousing violence representation, which I often find quite problematic. But that's not what is happening here. It's a completely different kind of violence, this part of the two women eating their aggressor, it's not violent at all. It's like... How would you describe it?

C: Well, it's funny about that. I am a woman commenting on violence against women, that may make the difference here. But maybe I should have made it angrier, but my anger plays out somewhat evenly in my work, as each piece progresses and evolves. Through the filming, writing and editing process, I begin to process these angry moments I have and control them, as I shape the piece. However, I do not do my work in isolation. That is not me. There were always three of us. Karen Skladany (Janice) who composed and performed the soundtrack and wrote the *Animal/Cannibal* song specifically for *Possibly*. Sharon, played by Jill Sands, whose remarkable innocence balances out the cruelty of the narrative. Jill was invaluable and involved in all aspects of production, from performing to writing to editing. There were fun moments in making *Possibly*.

The scenes were always in flux, evolving organically. On the day they were to eat Arthur, Jill Sands (Sharon) brought clove cigarettes to smoke, saying "If we're going to be naughty, we should be smoking." Then another friend told me that they should not wear clothing in that scene. I certainly don't listen to everyone or everything my friends say, but on that final filming day, Sharon and Janice were both naked and naughty, and innocently smoking cigarettes, having a festive ritual of serious cannibalism in a little ordinary house, in a nondescript suburb that could be anywhere.

J: Yeah, it looks very ordinary, even in their attitudes, it looks like something they are used to doing.

C: Well, I did want Sharon and Janice to have an innocence, but in filming, things are always in flux. The narrative could have said that they killed other men before Arthur, but I would have run the risk of saying too much...

J: You use fiction as a way to approach the subjects you engage with. There are a lot of metaphors, even though they are not always explicit... I thought about that line from Jeanette Winterson in her novel *Why be happy when you can be normal*, she talks about how people keep asking her about her books and whether the story is true or not. I'm sorry for absurdly translating from the French translation, here it goes: "I wrote a story that I could live with, because the other one was too painful and I would not have survived it". She says she wrote about the violence in her life, but had to write it in fiction. I thought about your work because it engages rough topics through fairy tales, and music... You talk about male violence, domestic violence, and you use fiction for it, but it's certainly not a way of easing into it.

C: Funny. The music, the fairy tale aspects, and the humor make my work more bearable for me, and I hope more forgiving for the viewer. I don't experience myself as someone using the narrative format to make it easier for myself. But I understand what Jeanette Winterson is talking about here. I heal through making these videos, as I am sure she does through her writing.

J: Is it talking about fear by creating another anxiety, one we can consider and deal with?

C: That's perceptive. I believe that other people's anxieties do talk to me. I never dated a cannibal or have been brutally attacked by a stranger. These are not my stories, but stories of friends and strangers do become a part of my narratives. They add complexity and depth to the story line, particularly in *Possibly*, where I included dreams and terrors of my friends. I find that other's anxieties can grow to be more dangerous as I work on the piece and as I grow older. In *I've been Afraid* (2020), I sometimes address fears in a more light-hearted way, and not all of them are my fears. But I make them mine. I find I can connect to some fears like I have lived with them all my life. My favorite line from the song is "I've been afraid of being me/Afraid of what you'd think of me/Afraid of who I might be/If I could really be me."

J: I don't know if you're aware of it, but on your Wikipedia page the French article defines you as a feminist, when the English one doesn't.

C: Oh, why is that I wonder? I'm a feminist. Though when I made *Possibly*, feminism was not so much a factor I was considering. I just knew that my girlfriends were central to my life, and that men were dangerous. And I think it has proven to be true, right? Anyway, the first person who wrote about *Possibly in Michigan* said it was a feminist manifesto, and I called her and said "No, it's not, it's my own personal attempt to figure out

what to do with dangerous men and traumatized women, and all the violence in society". I was naive back then. I called the cannibal character Arthur because it sounds like Art-HER. It was the early 1980s and I felt that women artists historically have been so ignored and swept under the rug. It was my way of addressing the art establishment that just wants to "art her", "fuck her", "hurt her". So often heavily masculine work has been considered brilliant, and heavy work by and about women has been considered fringe and easily pushed aside.

J: Just to make sure that I understand the pun correctly: it's art-H-E-R ?

C: Yeah, that's right. That's why I chose the name.

J: Oh ok, at first I thought you meant art-H-U-R-T.

C: Oh, no art-HER, but art-H-U-R-T is good too! Art HURTS sometimes. I've been hurt making work, but you learn to ignore it, as it is part of the game. The worst most hurtful art-HURT for me was in 1984, when CBN, the Christian Broadcast Network and Pat Robertson aired *Possibly* against my wishes and broadcast part of it with another soundtrack. Robertson said I was "gay and anti-family, and that I hated man". I felt demonized. It made me question myself, which I'm sorry it did. I just had a little boy, and I was worried about what kind of mother I would be. I knew I wanted to raise him to be unafraid, as opposed to me whose nightmares chased her around all night. He definitely art-HURT-ed me. In *Beneath the Skin* (1981) I say, "After he killed her. He absorbed her. He consumed her innocence and became like a child." Maybe that's how monsters keep going: they lie, consume, ignore and forget. Arthur or ArtHER is my private comment on the damage the art establishment has done to women for centuries. But only I have known the spelling and I like that. Another secret. When I placed Sharon and Janice in a mall, I thought of it as a dangerous place for women because it encourages us to believe that we can buy our way into beauty or sexiness, or wholeness, or power, but it is not true. I have Sharon and Janice sing "Buy Buy" as they wave bye bye to each other. I know for sure that even though they are there, Sharon and Janice don't buy into that lie.

J: I want to ask you about the video *I've Been Afraid*, which is sort of in dialogue with *Possibly*. I keep reading the lyrics, and it says "I'm not afraid", but then it only talks about the fear. So I was wondering, how ?

C: How I was afraid ?

J: No, how are you not afraid anymore? It states that, but then it only talks about being terrified... And still, for some reason it does feel reassuring. Why?

C: Oh, it feels reassuring?

J: Yeah, or empowering in some way.

C: I have been afraid all my life, I was born afraid. But that changed with *I've Been Afraid*. My first video, *Beneath the Skin*, is about a man who killed the other women he was seeing. And then there's *We Were Hardly More Than Children* (2019) about my friend's illegal abortion that almost killed her... And me, if only emotionally. And in *Pulling Up Roots* (2015), where a woman struggles to leave a forsaken ruin, which for me was leaving a marriage of many years. In *I've Been Afraid*, I found that just saying those lines in my work, even without an explanation, allowed me to feel free and safe. I began to feel whole. Each video I made brought me closer to this resolution, and by the time I got to actually say, "But I'm not afraid of you or you or you or you. Not anymore", I wasn't afraid. And I haven't been, really. Not anymore. However, there are verses I chose not to put in *Afraid*, that worry me still.

*I've been afraid of fires raging and oceans rising
Afraid of powerful politicians lying
Afraid of hungry children crying
Afraid of my favorite animals dying*

I didn't put that verse in *I've Been Afraid*, and yet those fears are huge to me.

J: I'll jump to something else because I also wanted to talk about your address in your movies. Who do you make them for? Your work is now famous on YouTube and TikTok, but it is also shown in much more confidential scenes, fancy film or art video festivals... How did you want to share your work when you started?

C: I make my works really for myself, hoping that women (and men) will find some inspiration and comfort in them. Early on there were film festivals, but *Possibly* got picked up by several traveling shows, so I didn't have to do much to promote it. *Not a Jealous Bone* (1987) got in every festival I sent it to. Some pieces do well, and some not so well. It is the same online. Some of my favorite pieces are not hot in the land of YouTube but do well in the festival circuit. Or not... I was indifferent to YouTube when it first came out, but early on a friend told me "more people will see your work on YouTube". She must have been super intuitive. She put an excerpt of *Possibly in Michigan* on YouTube, and from there it made the front page of Reddit. Then she uploaded the full version of *Possibly* and *Beneath the Skin* and *Not a Jealous Bone*, and all the others in due time. How or why my work has such a following online at all is a story I am not in the position to tell or even understand. I believe there are uncertainties in my work that feel honest and unsettling that somehow keep people coming back. But every piece makes its own history and goes where it goes. YouTube has given my work a place to be, and I appreciate that, as I find it difficult breaking out of my own silent, private world. But mostly I work, I make art for women: that's very serious to me, that center. I work for women and talk about the part of myself that's a women. Because men talk. A lot. And they talk loud, and they define the stories that the world hears. The art system has silenced women, and minorities.

J: Yeah, and the fear silences too, right ? I believe I have a much less violent story than you, still I recognize that the fear you talk about in your movies, and I guess most women can relate to that fear. I think I was raised to be afraid. It takes so much of my time and my energy. I think we women have a harder time finding our voices because we are constantly resisting being paralyzed by fear.

C: Fear can be so debilitating, and anger can eat away at you and hide in your body and make you sick. I am sure that that is one of the reasons I make art. We sure can feel lost, swimming at a sea that is so male dominated, we must take heart or we could drown.

J: Most people who reenacted *Possibly in Michigan* on TikTok are not cisgendered men, right?

C: Yes, I think that is true. I know some things about some of the people who write to me, but it is not really a conversation, so often I don't know their identification ... But, those who identify as men look at my work too, and like it. Not as many though.

J: And why do you think feminist work is not read, heard nor listened to more by men? I feel like men were not raised to hear women's voices, or were raised not to. The other day I was asking a friend "Why don't you read more female authors?" He said "Because they're not talking to me." I don't know what to do with that... I find it disingenuous but, feminist content does address and reach women first.

C: Well, I obviously have read books by men, and from them I learn to see their world, and see who we are, and who we are not. But from women writers, we can see that we have been fed lies, or half-truths. Now that's a story that must and will change, because it is not the whole story. It is not the whole truth, and sometimes not true at all. It takes a chorus of women's voices to change that story, but in my lifetime, it has changed enormously. All I know for certain is that women writers and artists have always meant everything to me. They helped me grow up, find a voice, and stand on my own two feet. Maybe now it is close to a time to not always identify as a woman or a man but a person, a they or them...

J: Let's talk a little more about TikTok. I read an article about the person who first uploaded your video on TikTok. That person wrote to you, telling you they wanted to make videos and didn't know where to start. You answered something like "But you already did!"

C: Well there are a lot of TikTok videos that are adventurous and creative, some of them are really special.

J: Your work has a lot of visibility online right now, which sort of happened by accident... Obviously it is not by accident that people like your work, but it is sort of by chance that they would find it, since you never intended to spread it that way. I always feel like it's hard to share artworks outside of the art field, because, well, most people are not really interested, and we don't use the same channels, nor the same language, the same aesthetic...

C: I don't understand the magic algorithm of the internet. I find it amazing that anyone discovers my work online at all, but they do. There's a lot of disconcerting things about the internet, what it says about video art, and what it does to the art world, and to me personally. I fit in somewhere or other. It seems like a good place to be, though clearly it is not for everyone.

J: I know I can get frustrated by this in my own work, I try to question how I share it, with whom, and why it should be art at all... Do you think that, in a way, TikTok makes art irrelevant?

C: Irrelevant? Hummm. No, but, but it does make me look at art differently. It has changed me and how I see art. I go to museums, and I find myself thinking that some of it feels quite dated, irrelevant at times. But then I watch an old black and white video of a performance artist raising a foot in the air for half an hour: up and down, up and down... And find it a profoundly freeing, humorous and gutsy voice, trying to pull away from formal artistic conventions. I do sometimes wonder, though, if being creative must always correlate with the preciousness of making art. And I find myself questioning more often what does it mean to be an artist. I think the performance level of TikTok did put a lot of performance art to shame. It is so alive and fun and consciously, blatantly meant to catch a moment of glory. Perhaps, that is what we all do as artists anyway, trying to hold a moment in time when we can be seen and heard. On TikTok, people can sometimes break with the confines of their homes, families, streets, and towns to make new friends, new networks, and find freedom to be themselves. I think it can be a powerful tool to survive the life we are born into. It offers possibilities. On a personal level, the internet has taken a lot of pressure off the responsibility of my being an artist, and from my once busy life of managing my life as a professor and mother. And it is exciting to post new work. It is so immediate. It has none of the baggage and rigmarole of art promotion for me, as I have done nothing to promote it on TikTok or YouTube. Even *Possibly in Michigan* took off without me knowing

it. A young performer named Vris Dillard did the first TikTok performance of *Possibly*. She had thousands of followers, and some of those had thousands of followers. Then somehow YouTube noticed and started recommending it to people, to watch. YouTube has been a solid accomplice in spreading my work. It has taken some time to get used to it all. A personally wild ride, not always easy, sometimes thrilling, sometimes responsibility.

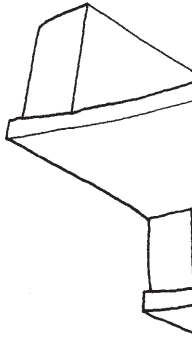
J: I have a conflicted position towards those platforms and their algorithms because they get me stuck in a bubble, I always see things that I already like or that look like things I know... But somehow you broke that, you infiltrated the algorithm.

C: I know how addicting it can be. I have to tell you this one story that shows the internet at its best though. I was walking in the Audubon Center outside Milwaukee, and there was a woman filming birds. I like birds, and also cameras, so we started talking. I told her that I'm a filmmaker and she asked, "Would I know your work?" And I said joking, "No, not unless you're thirteen or so", and she said "Well, I have a daughter who's thirteen", and so I started singing the line from *Possibly* that goes "No, no, no, no, no, no, silly, to dry it..." and she finished the verse singing "But it exploded/And they were both found dead..." She said that her daughter and she knew all the words and sang them together.

J: Well it is catchy! I watched a lot of the TikTok reenactments of *Possibly* this week and I've been waking up with the songs in my head every day since.

C: That's cute! I hope you find it enjoyable and comforting. People tell me they do. Even the woman I met in the park said it helped her and her daughter somehow. I think we all need comforting, particularly right now. There's a lot to be afraid of. And as you know, I have been afraid, much too much.

Cecelia Condit's videos can be found on her Youtube account @ceceliacondit, as well as on her website ceceliacondit.com



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