

ELECTIVE INTIMACIES

Beyond the Thunderdome

ANDREW V. UROSKIE



George Shire, *Performing the Ontological Turn* (2017), sonic performance and lecture within *I'm not who you think I'm not #1*, Berlin Biennale, July 17, 2017.

Donna Kukama, *Chapter P: The-Not-Not-Educational-Spirits* (2017), durational performance within *I'm not who you think I'm not #1*, Berlin Biennale, July 17, 2017.

Courtesy Berlin Biennale. Photo Credit: F. Anthea Schaap.



Last summer, Europe witnessed something like a contemporary reinvention of the 17th century “Grand Tour.” Documenta—the quadrennial German survey of contemporary art that has spawned a hundred progeny even while securing its premier status amongst the art world cognoscenti—happened to coincide with both Skulptur Projekt Münster and the equally unmissable Venice Biennale, even as the exhibition itself had metastasized beyond provincial Kassel—and even Germany—to dozens of sites scattered in and around the Greek capital of Athens. Documenta curator Adam Szymczyk had envisioned the scheme as a way of confronting an increasingly divided and polarized Europe in general, and a particularly toxic situation between Germany and Greece in particular. But if Documenta’s prior iterations had already generated criticism regarding its unviewable scale, the combination of thousands of works splayed out widely across four cities left even the most enthusiastic viewers overtaxed and exhausted, the works often submerged by the weight of curatorial ambition.

The 2018 edition of the Berlin Biennale was conceived as an antipode to this maximalist vision of engagement, with South African curator Gabi Ngcobo and her team, Nomaduma Rosa Masilela, Serubiri Moses, Thiago de Paula Souza, and Yvette Mutumba, self-consciously choosing to finance a comparatively small range of local and international artists—most of whom operate under the radar of blue-chip art market—and produce a scaled-back exhibition that could speak to urgent social and geopolitical problems in a more intimate register.¹ Writing for *Artforum*, Benjamin H.D. Buchloh concluded his typically pessimistic assessment of the future of radical art practice by proclaiming that if such a practice has any future, it may lay solely in retrieving, “alternate histories, different forms of existence, incommensurable models of constructing subjectivity and social relations.”

Such alternative histories—of individuals, of social relations—are central to Ngcobo’s vision, but her Biennale’s inclusion of long-marginalized voices from the Global South does not come packaged as a polemic. *We Don’t Need Another Hero*, the exhibition’s subtitle, certainly signals an uncompromising



rejection of the new autocratic populism metastasizing across the European and North American body politic. But in referencing Tina Turner's negative vision—"We don't need to know the way home / All we want is life beyond the Thunderdome"—it understands ethnonationalism as necessitating a perpetual state of war within which identity must be consistently reproduced in the form of the Other. But Ngcobo's Biennale refuses to traffic in positive declarations of identity. *I'm not who you think I'm not*, her title for the events program, might be parsed: "I am neither that which you imagine me to be, nor that which you imagine me not to be." Against a persistent colonialist mentality that can only envision humanity as essentially warring tribes, Ngcobo imagines a more encompassing sense of community emerging from diversity itself, by showcasing works that solicit not group identification, but an intimate encounter with individuals and their stories.

Natasha A Kelly's film *Milli's Awakening* (2018) is exemplary in this regard. In 1911, the German Expressionist Ludwig Kirchner painted *Sleeping Milli*, depicting a naked African woman in his studio, resting on the fiery red divan. Was she a paid model, or an aspiring artist? How did she come to be there? History left us nothing about this "exotic" woman save her name. *Milli's Awakening* allows eight women artists of diverse generations, sexualities, and ethnic origins to tell their own stories:

about living and working in a nation with which they strongly identify, even as it persists in regarding them as strangers, and about respecting the complexities of their heritage and identities without having their artistic practices be defined by them.² In a particularly moving section, one artist describes how being designated "intersex" as a child eventually led her to investigate all the forms of hybridization and hermaphroditism that exist within the botanical world. Black and white, fifty minutes in length, and nestled into a corner alcove, it does not capture our attention by means of color, definition, scale or pace, but calmly solicits our attention through the intimacy of its narratives.

Mario Pfeifer's *Again—Noch Einmal* (2018) also concerns the lives of German immigrants, but its aesthetics could not be more dissimilar: twin high definition color projections play against a massive angled screen, while 5.1 surround sound subsumes a range of other works within the open-plan exhibition of the Akademie der Künste. Working in what has quickly become an established genre of forensic reenactment—notable examples include Lawrence Abu Hamdan's *Rubber Coated Steel* (2016) at the Gwangju Biennale, and Forensic Architecture's *77sqm 9:26min* (2017) at Documenta 14—Pfeifer reconstructs a headline story from 2016 that had become a Rorschach test about the country's attitudes towards immigration. A young Iraqi man had come to Saxony seeking medication for mental

Mario Pfeifer, *Again—Noch Einmal* (2018), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist. Copyright Mario Pfeifer Studio. KOW. 2018

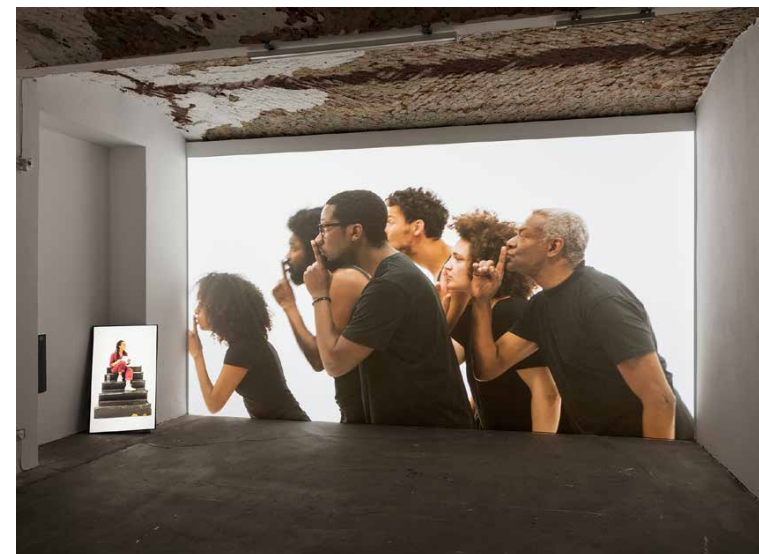


Natasha Kelly, *Milli's Awakening* (2018), installation view, Berlin Biennale, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. Courtesy Berlin Biennale and Natasha A. Kelly. Photo credit: Timo Ohler.



Grada Kilomba, *Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus* (2018), installation view, Berlin Biennale, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. Courtesy Berlin Biennale, Grada Kilomba, and Goodman Gallery Johannesburg/Cape Town. Photo credit: Timo Ohler.

Grada Kilomba, *Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus* (2018), performance still. Courtesy Grada Kilomba. Photo credit: Kathleen Kunath.



illness, and had become distraught in a grocery store after not understanding how to recharge his phone card. Four adult men intervened to drag him from the store, beat him, and tie him to a tree. Video of the incident went viral, where the men's actions were alternately seen as "civic courage" or "vigilante justice." The men faced trial and were acquitted, but not before the young Iraqi was found frozen to death in a nearby forest. Using eyewitness reports, as well as photography and video bystanders recorded at the scene, Pfeifer analytically reconstructs the events of that day—not to didactically adjudicate guilt or innocence, but to question the ways we see and act towards each other in public spaces. Somewhere between the genres of forensic analysis and prime-time talk show, Pfeifer captures individual expressions of

sorrow and fear, rage and helplessness that speak to the current zeitgeist around one of the most pressing issues of our time.

Affective intimacy remains a central concern even when the focus shifts from verbal narrative to bodily movement. In different ways, Grada Kilomba, Okwui Okpokwasili, Tony Cokes and Sondra Perry all ground their spectatorial entreaties in forms of kinesthetic identification. Kilomba's *Illusions Vol. II, Oedipus* (2018) retells the archetypal story of confused and mistaken identity through a life-sized projection of a dance troupe and a single narrator seated to the side. Mirroring Sophocles' text, the dancers' movements are as beautiful in form as they are tragic in content, with the dancers' dark bodies set against stark white background, and the bloodshed abstracted into a kinetic

choreography of long red ribbons. The abstraction leads to a sense of archaic timelessness, somewhat reminiscent of Pasolini's Moroccan locations for his magisterial *Edipo re* (1967). But in its concluding sequence, Kilomba wrenches the work into the present, speaking directly about the colonial legacy towards which Pasolini's film had only implicitly gestured. Shifting from story to interpretation, the narrator enlists Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) in recasting Sophocles' tragedy as an allegory for the psychic trauma of the African diaspora.

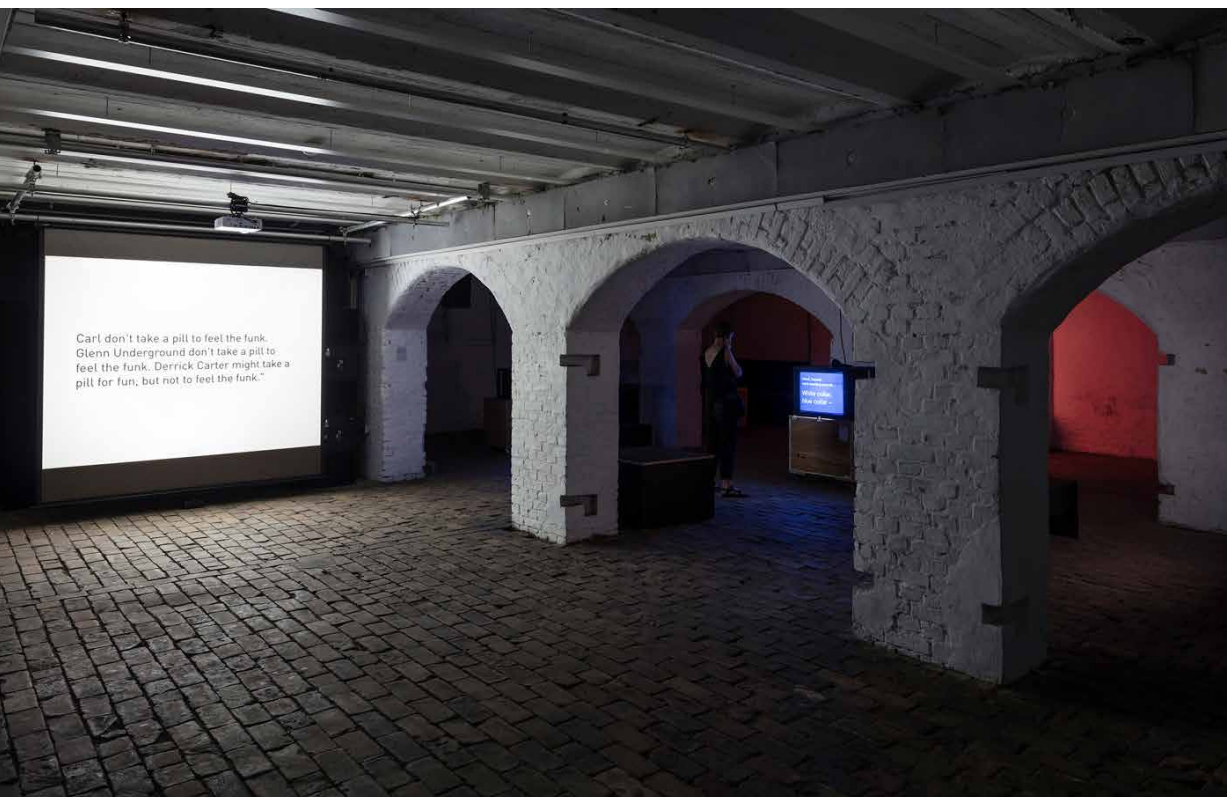
A brilliant curatorial pairing at the KW Institut places the works of Kilomba and Okpokwasili in close proximity, where they complement or even complete one another. If the kinesthetic identification in *Oedipus* remained implicit and

ultimately cognitive, Okpokwasili's performance installation *Sitting on a Man's Head* (2018), "an unfolding score for a collective utterance, the ongoing making of an I, you, we, and us," solicited viewers directly as participants. Her title might have been more colloquially rendered, "Sitting on The Man's Head," since its reference is to the 1929 "Women's War" / "Women's Dance" of Nigerian anti-colonial resistance, and the subsequent public demonstrations intended to shame colonial officials into listening to their concerns. Okpokwasili recasts this historical cry for visibility into an opportunity for affective encounter, asking only "that you bring something of yourself into the space." Her collaborators gracefully joined and extended whatever that was, in a ritual of their own co-creation. As expected, a number of world-



Okwui Okpokwasili, *Sitting on a Man's Head: an unfolding score for a collective utterance, the ongoing making of an I, you, we, and us* (2018), performance still, Berlin Biennale, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin. Project design collaborator Peter Born. Courtesy Berlin Biennale and Okwui Okpokwasili. Photo credit: Timo Ohler.

Tony Cokes, *Mikrohaus, or the black atlantic?* (2008), installation view, Berlin Biennale, ZK/U Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, Berlin. Courtesy Berlin Biennale, Tony Cokes, Greene Naftali New York, Electronic Arts Intermix New York. Photo credit: Timo Ohler.



weary spectators refused the gesture entirely, perhaps cynically finding it more akin to a therapy session. But a number who did seemed to emerge quite dramatically transformed by the encounter, which perhaps bespeaks a collective need for therapy—one which is not individual, but connective.

Black Celebration (1988), the installation of videos by Tony Cokes in the basement of the ZK/U would seem to belie any genteel notions of a therapeutic encounter, especially so for the aggressive industrial music of Skinny Puppy that booms over the newsreel footage of the 1965 riots in Watts, Boston, Newark and Detroit in the work. But his *Mikrohaus, or the black atlantic?* (2008) reveals him to have more in common with Okpokwasili than might be initially surmised. Both are interested in the representation of forms of emancipatory struggle, and both—despite Coke's discursive emphasis on critical theory—ground their interest in forms of kinesthetic empathy. Music is here the bridge by which a deep cultural history is imprinted and conveyed. Anchored by Paul Gilroy's landmark study *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Harvard, 1993), which upended established nostrums of artistic Modernism and the tidy regionalism of much cultural studies, Mikrohaus explores the appropriation of black music within the German electronic music scene. Its story is not simply one of cultural theft, but of hybridized re-articulation. Like Hito Steyerl's concluding section within *The Factory of the Sun* (2015), it gestures towards a certain utopian possibility in the heterogeneous mixing of bodies and cultures that can take place on the dance floor—as anyone familiar with Berlin's famous club scene will doubtless recognize. The junction of text and image has been a stock-in-trade since the rise of Photoconceptualism in the late '60s, but here the power arises from a juxtaposition of text and music: photographic imagery is conspicuous in its absence not only from Mikrohaus, but from all of the other twelve video works in the exhibition. We read and we listen on headphones, just as we might more comfortably do at home. Most of the music even consists of popular songs we may already know by heart. But Cokes' installations give these two forms of experience unusually equal weight, and this juxtaposition imbues even the most familiar songs with complex and often critical resonances.

If Cokes enlists the power of popular music, fellow African-American artist Sondra Perry turns to a different, if equally popular form of kinesthetic interaction to explore a more intimate form of

Notes and citations are online at
http://www.mfj-online.org/uroskie_elective_intimacies/

Sondra Perry, *IT'S IN THE GAME '17* or *Mirror Gag for Vitrine and Projection* (2017), frame enlargement. Courtesy Berlin Biennale, Sondra Perry, Bridget Donahue New York.



MIRIAM DE ROSA is Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications at Coventry University (UK), where she also is an affiliate to the Centre for Postdigital Cultures. She is the author of *Cinema e Postmedia* (2013) and she co-edited with Vinzenz Hediger *Post-What? Post-when? Thinking moving images beyond the post-medium/post-cinema condition* (Cinéma & Cie, 2017). Her research is focused on theories of cinema and visual arts, screen media and experimental cinema. As an independent curator, she authored *Digital Premonitions* (2017), the first exhibition and film program on desktop cinema (MMC Luka, Pula; Museum of Contemporary Art Zagreb, Croatia).

FAITH HOLLAND is an artist, curator, and educator whose multimedia practice focuses on intimacy with technology. Her work has been exhibited nationally and internationally at venues such as The Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), NRW Forum (Düsseldorf), Fotografisk Center (Copenhagen), Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art (Boulder), Boston Cyberarts Gallery (Boston), the Philips Collection (Washington, D.C.), Human Resources (Los Angeles), DAM Gallery (Berlin), and File Festival (São Paulo). Her work has been written about in *Artforum*, *The Sunday Times UK*, *Elephant*, *Hyperallergic*, *Broadly*, and *ArtSlant* among others. www.faihholland.com

MIKE HOOLBOOM is a Canadian media artist and writer. His most recent book is *Jorge Lozano: Reports*, published Spring 2018 by the Canadian Film Institute and Pleasure Dome.

STEVEN JACOBS is an art historian specialized in the relations between film and the visual arts. His other research interests focus on the visualization of architecture, cities, and landscapes in film and photography. His publications include *The Wrong House: The Architecture of Alfred Hitchcock* (2007) and *Framing Pictures: Film and the Visual Arts* (2011). He teaches at Ghent University and the University of Antwerp, Belgium

KIM KNOWLES is Lecturer in Film Studies at Aberystwyth University, Wales and Experimental Film Programmer at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. She has published widely in the field of experimental cinema, including the monograph *A Cinematic Artist: The Films of Man Ray* (Peter Lang, 2009; 2012). Her recent work focuses on technological transition and the politics and poetics of obsolescence.

ALAN RUIZ is an artist whose work explores the way space is produced as both material and ideology. His work has been included in exhibitions at the Queens Museum, The Storefront for Art & Architecture, The Kitchen, TG, Nottingham, and

the Bronx Museum of the Arts. Alongside his visual practice, his writing on art, architecture, and the politics of form has been published in numerous journals and magazines. Ruiz received an MFA from Yale University and was a fellow in the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program.

CASPAR STRACKE is a German filmmaker, visual artist and curator living and working in New York City since 1993, in Helsinki since 2012 and Berlin since 2017. His film and installation work and research is situated around the politics of architecture and urbanism, sociology and cinema. His works have been shown in numerous exhibitions, retrospectives and festivals throughout North and South America, Europe and Asia. From 2007-2013 he co-curated along with Gabriela Monroy video_dumbo, an annual festival and exhibition on contemporary Moving Image in Dumbo, Brooklyn. From 2012-2017 Caspar taught as Professor for Moving Image at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki. He is currently editing the book *Godard - Boomerang* on contemporary artists working with concepts and writing on and by Jean-Luc Godard to be published by Uniarts, Helsinki, fall 2018.

NYC-based artist and researcher **RACHEL STEVENS** writes about media art and visual culture, and makes work that investigates geographies and ecologies. Stevens teaches in the Integrated Media Art MFA program at Hunter College and is an editor of *Millennium Film Journal*.

ANDREW V. UROSKIE is Associate Professor of Modern Art and Media, and Director of the MA/PhD Program at Stony Brook University in New York. He is the author of *Between the Black Box and the White Cube: Expanded Cinema and Postwar Art* (Chicago, 2014), and his numerous essays on film, art and visual culture have been translated into five languages. His forthcoming book, *The Kinetic Imaginary*, was selected for the Arts Writers Foundation 2018 book prize. A second work-in-progress, *Remaking Reality*, will focus on video art in the age of social media.

RACHEL VALINSKY is a doctoral student in Art History at the CUNY The Graduate Center.

SETH BARRY WATTER is a film and media historian. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Grey Room*, *Camera Obscura*, *Seeing Science*, *Cinema Journal*, and *NECSUS*. He lives and teaches in New York.

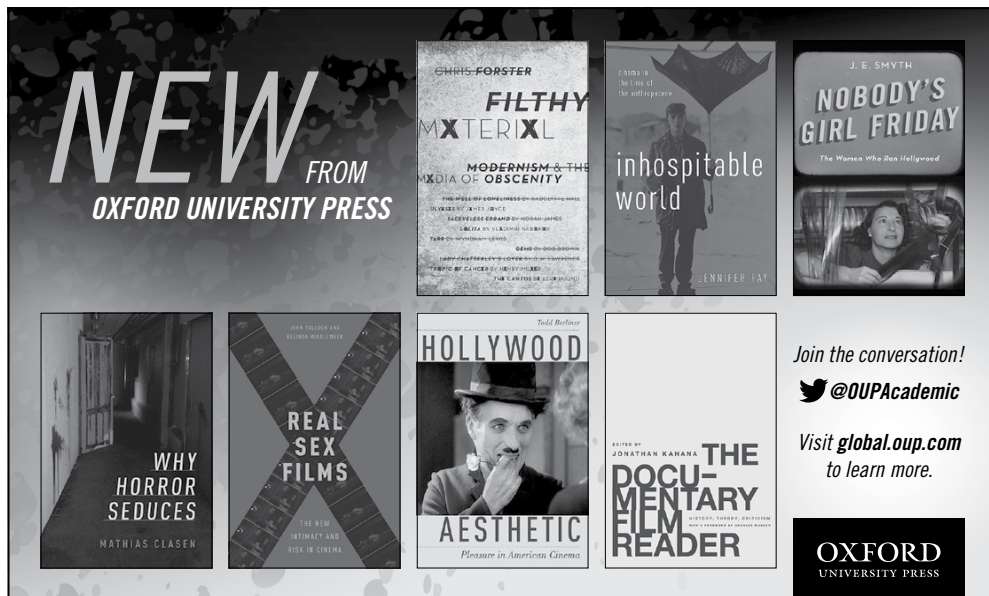


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Dustin Grella at Dusty Studios.

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Theo Triantafyllidis, *Studio Visit* (2018), installation view.

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