

IS HE FOLLOWING? by WENDY VOGEL

ON CECELIA CONDIT'S *POSSIBLY IN MICHIGAN* (1983)

November 16 – December 21, 2020



Cecelia Condit, *Possibly in Michigan*, 1983 (still). Video; 11:45. Courtesy the artist.

Image description: A white woman wearing plum lipstick is laying down, eyes closed. Her face is framed by long, brown hair, flowing in many different directions, and scatters roses. The roses are boysenberry and white.

BIG WINDOW

Throughout spooky season October and the lead-up to the presidential election, I watched Cecelia Condit's *Possibly in Michigan* (1983) on loop. I can think of no better artwork for this moment of political vanquish of a predator-in-chief than the lo-fi feminist music video-as-gothic-fairy-tale-as-revenge flick. *Possibly in Michigan* tells the tale of Sharon (Jill Sands) and Janice (Karen Skladany), two perfume-loving friends who are stalked in a mall by a man named Arthur. Donning a series of disturbing masks—in the guise of animals and a blond-haired man—Arthur follows Sharon to her house, where he transforms into Prince Charming. A romantic encounter turns quickly violent. Channeling the Big Bad Wolf, he gives Sharon two disturbing options: “One, I will eat you now. Or two, I will cut your arms and legs off one by one and eat them slowly,” he recites in a distorted voice. “Why?” a female voice sings. “For love,” he replies. “But love shouldn’t cost an arm and a leg,” the woman retorts. Janice saves the day, shooting the attacker dead. In the final scenes, Sharon and Janice proceed to carve and cook Arthur, savoring their meal in the nude and smoking cigarettes. Outside the kitchen window, the would-be murderer (or his ghost) blinkers into the scene briefly and fades away. As the credits roll, a garbage collector flings bags of Arthur’s remains into his truck.

This synopsis does little justice to the video’s unnerving effect, in which Midwestern wholesomeness—it was filmed in Cleveland, Ohio—gives way to desperation and brutality. The cut-rate creepy props juxtaposed with the suburban glamour of the mall, the clash between the soundtrack’s girlish singsong and the haunting story, enmesh fantasy and reality. In fact, Condit always bases her works on women’s true stories, with *Possibly in Michigan* weaving together two anecdotes told to the artist by her friends: one woman discovered that she had been in a long-distance relationship with a cannibal; another survived a rape and dreamed that her perpetrator gave her the “choices” of being consumed whole or limb by limb. Rather than straightforward accounts of violence, however, Condit’s videos reveal how traumatic events are mediated through cultural filters, from fairy tales and playacting to lurid news reports. There’s a childlike quality of improvisation in her videos—the sense of women using whatever is at hand to make the world anew. Indeed, she credits her repeat collaborators Skladany (Janice), who wrote and performed the soundtrack, and Sands (Sharon), an artist herself, as essential to her work.

Condit arrived at her feminist approach as a real-life survival tactic. *Possibly...* serves as a follow-up to her first video, *Beneath the Skin* (1981), in which she tells her true story of innocently dating the murderer Ira Einhorn. A former Philadelphia environmental activist, Einhorn fled the United States days before his 1981 trial and lived for twenty-three years as an international fugitive. With a gossipy, incredulous tone, Condit’s voiceover unspools the grisly details of how “Ike” killed his unnamed former girlfriend during the course of his relationship with Condit. He concealed the mummified body in his closet for two years—undetected by the artist, who had temporarily lost her sense of smell. Eventually, police were contacted after the downstairs neighbors smelled a rotten odor. Condit heard about the arrest only in hindsight, and frequently interrupts her video’s narrative with statements of disbelief. “It never was real,” she insists. “It was a bizarre story that somehow happened to my life.” Yet the protective mechanism of dissociation is only a cover for deep identification with the victim. Condit pairs her running monologue with looped images of Jill Sands on an outdoor swing, in a flickering dissolve with a mummy photograph, laying prone with another woman’s face projected on hers. Fact and fiction seem to coalesce, as do the stories of Condit and the murder victim. The eerie duet “GI Joe” by the Guyettes (Alice Malloy and Karen Skladany) only reinforces the morbid ur-narrative of violence against women, told like a playground drama starring Barbie and Ken: “First you’re dead, you’re back to life. It’s a doll life. It’s a doll life. We get killed and we stay dead. That’s real life, no ideal life for me...” Condit’s voiceover concludes with a nightmare that she describes as more vivid than reality. “I dreamed that it was me and not her that he killed two years ago. And that’s another story.”

That tale picks up with *Possibly in Michigan*. If *Beneath the Skin* is a fractured confession, *Possibly...* is an all-out reckoning. Skladany’s throaty opening lyric makes this clear: “I bite at the hands that feeds me, slap at the face that eats me.” The video acts as a corrective to stories that strip women of agency in the fight for their lives. Sharon is introduced not as a victim, but rather as a femme fatale. As the narrator (once again, Condit herself) explains, “Sharon attracted violent men. Strangely, she had a way of making the violence seem like it was their idea.” While Condit lost her sense of smell in real life—a sense associated with

animalistic instinct—all the characters in *Possibly* possess keen olfaction. Arthur's sense of smell becomes predatory, whereas aroma becomes nostalgic for Sharon and Janice. At a perfume counter, they reminisce about the scent of "mother's crazy sister Kate," who microwaved her poodle. (Condit lifted this detail from a newspaper article.) "She couldn't have been that crazy!" they reason. Later, the video intercuts the dramatic confrontation between Sharon and Prince Charming with footage of the same actress from *Beneath the Skin*. The images are looped and rewound, suggesting a reincarnation of the previous video's fatality. The video's irreverent conclusion, celebrating the women as nudist cannibals, displaces the central concern from the threat of male violence. No longer are Sharon and Janice fretting over their sex appeal, as they did in the mall, where Sharon lamented, after remembering a past rendezvous with a killer, "Now only dogs will follow me!" And asked, a beat later: "Is he following?"

At the time of its making, this playful indifference to men's approval riled up conservative political forces. Baptist minister Pat Robertson showed clips from *Possibly in Michigan* on *The 700 Club* in 1984, substituting its soundtrack with poetry by a gay male author. He railed against the National Endowment of the Arts's support for the video's lesbian and "anti-male" content. The antagonism only fueled the artist's fire—she has produced more than fifteen videos in the decades since about women's experiences, with topics ranging from aging to nature's mysteries to reproductive rights. Based in Wisconsin without New York gallery representation, her work attracted a kind of cultish following among the art set.

In the past five years, however, Condit's work has found a new, widespread audience, thanks to the star-making system of social media. A YouTube clip from *Possibly in Michigan* went viral after posted on Reddit's r/creepy forum in 2015. In 2019, a seventeen-year-old posted audio from the film's soundtrack on the lip-synching platform TikTok, where it found an enthusiastic audience of amateur Gen Z performers. As of this writing, the TikTok hashtag #PossiblyInMichigan has garnered eighteen million views. The video's full-length version, on Condit's YouTube channel, has racked up over two million views.

The artist, now seventy-two, has been amazed by the enthusiasm over her video from kids young enough to be her grandchildren. Critics have also parsed Condit's newfound appeal. In *T* magazine last year, John Chiaverina traced the similarities between her videos and the humor of popular shows such as "Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!"¹, which traffic in nostalgia for media artifacts like cable-access television. Writer Orit Gat, for *Frieze*, posits Condit's feminist politics as a way for teens to transgress the gendered expectations of social media use: "The darkness that remains [in Condit's work] is a way for some teenagers to participate in an app full of their peers performing their sexuality in song and dance, while they maintain a sense of individuality." Gat likens these teen performers to decades-old outsider characters like Winona Ryder in *Heathers*, or Ally Sheedy in *The Breakfast Club*—"with terrifying makeup and possibly a clown costume on."² This analysis reaches to the heart of Condit's practice, in her fundamental wish to rewrite the world from an outsider's point of view.

Condit's most recent video, *I've Been Afraid* (2020), brings her practice full circle, exorcising her demons from the time she was in the womb. It opens in typical fashion, with a juicy hook in the voiceover: "Mother said my twin brother kicked me so hard that I was raw. Then he was born. Then I had other things to be afraid of." Singing in her own voice as a MeMoji, autotuned and set to a thumping bass, the artist lays out a litany of fears, of animals, men, even herself: "I've been afraid of what you might do. I've been afraid that I might kill you!" Against an animated tapestry of horrors, Jill Sands's figure from *Beneath the Skin* appears, resurrected once more, to reclaim her narrative in an age disillusioned with white patriarchal power. The chorus is triumphant: "I'm not afraid of you anymore."

1 John Chiaverina, "How This 71-Year-Old Video Art Pioneer Became a TikTok Star," November 6, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/06/t-magazine/possibly-in-michigan-tiktok-artist.html>

2 Orit Gat, "How Cecelia Condit's Video Art Became a Viral Curse for Teens on TikTok," *Frieze*, July 26, 2019: <https://www.frieze.com/article/how-cecelia-condits-video-art-became-viral-curse-teens-tiktok>