

Art

The Desire to “Undo” Giving Birth

Videos of a birthing in reverse in Candice Breitz’s “Labour” document the process of mothers undoing the moment they gave birth to men who would become tyrants and dictators.



by Eliza Levinson

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Candice Breitz, *Labour* (2019), four single-channel videos, color, sound, loop, approximately two minutes each. Installation view at Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (photo by Jens Ziehe)

BERLIN — With her new installation, *Labour*, at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.), South African video artist Candice Breitz addresses reproductive justice and power. Upon entering the exhibition, gallery assistants inform visitors that the show can only be seen in groups of three, and, due to the sensitive content of the installation, phones will be held for the duration of their visit. Entering the installation’s small gallery feels overwhelming: it’s dark inside, and a warped chorus of moaning, fast-paced, whooshing beats and high-pitched cries spiral from all corners of the room.

Labour is a series of four short, single-channel video loops played in reverse. Each is hidden behind a gray curtain, so only one person can see the videos at a time. Once parted — perhaps a yonic gesture? — the curtains reveal intimate documentary footage of women giving birth. Opening with a baby cradled in a woman’s arms, the videos end with screaming, blood, and a newborn pushed inward.

HYPERALLERGIC

From the disclaimer before entry, plus the sounds of moaning and crying, I was apprehensive about what lay behind the curtains. Some of the videos were shocking, and at times voyeuristically uncomfortable and startlingly gory to watch, but I feared worse. Though not all visitors to *Labour* are as squeamish as I, Breitz does effectively and powerfully capture birth in its exquisite joy and breathtaking pain.

When the baby is no longer visible, single letters in white text flash on a black screen, accompanied by a strange, underwater-sounding thumping: *M-I-K*, reads one; *N-I-T-U-P* reads the next; the other two read *O-R-A-N-O-S-L-O-B* and *P-M-U-R-T*.



Candice Breitz, *Labour* (2019), four single-channel videos, color, sound, loop, approximately two minutes each.
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In order to properly engage with *Labour*, Breitz has provided her viewers with a printed document, repeated as a wall text: the “MATRICIAL DECREE,” proclaimed from a matriarchal futuristic society, the “Secular Council of the Utopian Matriarchat” (S.C.U.M. for short, likely a reference to Valerie Solanas’s radical feminist “SCUM Manifesto” from 1967). According to the manifesto, which uses cyborg-feminist lingo (“... for the immediate attention of all post-umbilical subjects”), birth-giving and motherhood are posited as “our deepest obligation,” an act of “sacrifice” embarked upon for the good of the people. Still, the decree explains, S.C.U.M. maintains the right to “the undoing of labour,” particularly when “deliberate sabotaging of Reproductive Justice” is enacted.

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As such, these videos of a birthing in reverse document the process of mothers undoing the moment they gave birth to men who would become tyrants and dictators. As expressed in an artist statement, Breitz began the project with *P-M-U-R-T* a few days after the President's inauguration in 2017 — the letters onscreen are the names in reverse. It is a work in progress, with possible additions featuring the “undone” births of Assad, Orbán, Erdogan, Duterte, and Modi to come.



Candice Breitz, "The Matrix" (2019) (image courtesy n.b.k.)

Breitz's concept is interesting, provocative, and clever, but a link is missing between the execution of the videos and the confident imaginary world of the “MATRICIAL DECREE.” Since the replayed birth videos document actual births happening in the present-day, they feel visceral and genuinely emotional — highlighted, perhaps, by the ways in which the n.b.k. works to preserve the privacy of the subjects, which forces the viewer outside of the speculative fiction of the S.C.U.M. project. The sci-fi scenario in which an “undoing” takes place thus feels tacked onto a larger conceptual project on reproductive justice — and human rights, generally — threatened under neo-populist leaders.

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Labour is an immersion in extremes: obfuscation and intimacy; authenticity and fantasy; fantasy and politics. Moving through *Labour*'s world, one is forced to reckon with both the profound power of life-giving and the challenges of speaking truth to power through mythos, as horror plays out in the present.

Candice Breitz: *Labour continues at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (Chausseestrasse 128/129 Berlin, Germany) through October 25.*