

Museums

Candice Breitz's art videos ask: Who has time for details these days? Apparently, we all do.



Stills from "Love Story" by Candice Breitz, featuring Jullianne Moore (top row) and Alec Baldwin (second row from bottom). (Candice Breitz/Kaufmann Repetto (New York) + Goodman Gallery (Johannesburg/London))

By **Kelsey Ables**

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A product of shrinking attention spans, the abbreviation TLDR (Internet shorthand for “Too Long, Didn’t Read”) is both an admission — I couldn’t make it all the way through your post — and a request: Could someone give the Sparknotes version? As the title of Candice Breitz’s exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art, those four words are also a provocation, calling out those who construct opinions from headlines and tweets, while asking: What will anyone actually pay attention to these days?

Each of the two works in the show — multichannel video installations that the museum has moved to an [online presentation](#), while it's closed during the [coronavirus](#) shutdown — open with a buzzy, entertaining video to lure viewers in: “TLDR” uses theatrical staging; “Love Story” features Alec Baldwin and Julianne Moore. Those are followed by interviews, ranging in length from about a half-hour to more than three hours, with individuals from groups that are often voiceless: sex workers and refugees. Breitz, a white South African, seems less interested in giving us the TLDR cop-out than in prompting even the most scrupulous among us to beg for one.

The Web presentation changes the work significantly. In a physical space, where museumgoers would encounter the videos organically, a visitor can drop in and out of endlessly looping videos. But the online presentation requires more intentional engagement, asking the viewer to start at the very beginning of each interview and sit for (potentially) several hours. In this environment, even the posted running time — almost 3½ hours, in the case of a former child soldier — becomes as much a part of the show as the video itself. Like a social media platform bargaining for eyeballs, Breitz bargains for our time. Online, the way we negotiate how much of it we're willing to spend becomes uncomfortably explicit.

Narrated by a precocious 12-year-old boy named Xanny, and featuring a Greek chorus of South African sex workers carrying signs emblazoned with acronyms such as “WTF” and “OMG,” the opening video in “TLDR” recounts [a 2015 feud](#) between Amnesty International and Hollywood celebrities, who argued against the organization's proposal to decriminalize sex work. Breitz critiques the way the workers themselves had been silenced in the debate by exaggerating the noise that often surrounds such Internet controversies. At emotionally salient moments, the workers cover their faces with emoji masks. It's a play performed in the language of BuzzFeed.

Ironically, Xanny’s monologue about how no one listens to the perspective of sex workers doesn’t actually create a forum for their voices. His tone veers toward self-righteousness at times. And underlying Breitz’s implicit commentary on misguided Hollywood activism is a subtle act of politically correct posturing — one in which the defender of the marginalized takes on more importance than the marginalized themselves. Xanny, it seems, re-creates the very problem he claims to scorn.



Stills from “TLDR” by Candice Breitz. (Candice Breitz/Kaufmann Repetto (New York) + Goodman Gallery (Johannesburg/London))



A still from “TLDR” by Candice Breitz. (Candice Breitz/Kaufmann Repetto (New York) + Goodman Gallery (Johannesburg/London))

This staged, sometimes patronizing video is in stark contrast to the honest, engaging stories of the confident, but never condescending sex workers themselves: One phone sex worker speaks about falling for a client; a woman named Zoe muses on the therapeutic aspects of her work. In “TLDR,” honesty and stream-of-consciousness storytelling wins over contrived drama.

In “Love Story,” Breitz hands off the stories of refugees to actors Baldwin and Moore, who retell them in first-person narration.

When Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts showed the work in 2018, their performances were [hailed](#) as “gripping” and the work was praised for raising questions about who deserves our empathy. Today, in a culture with mounting impatience for celebrity privilege, the performance feels hollow, robotic, even uncanny. Regardless of how skilled the acting may be, a white actor mouthing the narrative of a black child soldier from Angola or the story of a woman who fled from Syria comes across as awkward, even fraudulent.

Breitz calls attention to the question of perspective: Moore’s teary eyes look cold as glass, her voice a little too broken. Baldwin always sounds on the edge of a joke, his gesticulating arms as choreographed as a dancer’s. They’re not so much vessels for empathy as they are incarnations of the performative nature of the entertainment industry’s concern for marginalized groups.

With their focus on entertainment, these videos call attention to what we value in storytelling — clear narratives, scannable emotions and familiar faces — over the story itself. But Breitz offers no solutions. When it comes to the real interviews, she leaves them intimidatingly long, shrugging off the role of editor, as if to ask, “Who am I to decide what’s important?”

But what to make of almost a day’s worth of interviews?

At one point in “TLDR,” after explaining that the celebrities never even read Amnesty International’s proposal about decriminalization of sex work, Xanny asks, rhetorically, “Who has time for details these days?” The answer, Breitz suggests, as those of us in lockdown scroll through Twitter or re-watch an episode of “The Office” for the 57th time, is us.

Where to watch

Candice Breitz: Too Long, Didn't Read

artbma.org/tldr .

Dates: Through July 12.

Prices: Free.



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