

LAB RESULTS:

Three Artists' Residencies in the Sciences

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For several years Kennedy trained and worked in a scientific imagining laboratory, in close contact with molecular and microbiologists, where she acquired skills that she would translate into her artwork. She often uses scientific imaging equipment such as the microscope and endoscopic camera to explore invisible forces and our organic and psychological relationships to the unseen environment. In a series of earlier work, for example, Kennedy used the endoscope, a tiny microscopic camera used in exploratory surgery, to inspect the interiors of walls, airducts, and pipes of commercial buildings and reveal the organisms residing there. She then edited the images she captured with the endoscope and projected them as a video on the wall at enormous scale, immersing viewers in an environment typically invisible to them. These videos were inspired in part by the artist's own experience with environmental illness. Employing scenarios from such science fiction films as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Kennedy exposed a growing danger that lurks beneath the surface of everyday reality, one that's all the more sinister for existing undetected.



Shannon Kennedy, DVD still from *Untitled #3*, 2000

Kennedy obfuscates the documentary nature of her footage during editing, transforming it into a fictional state divorced from everyday experience. In another recent series of videos made in the New York subways, the artist turned her attention to human behavior within confined environments. Surreptitiously using a handheld video camera on the crowded trains and platforms of the city's teeming underground subway system, she recorded the gestures, expressions and movements of its riders. Kennedy edited the works to just several minutes each, slowed down the footage, and added a soundtrack of echoey industrial noise that accentuates the detached airlessness of the subterranean environments. These subway videos conjure a discomfiting world, overcrowded but void of real interaction.

into an hallucinatory, slow-motion, color-saturated video, the resulting work reveals Kennedy's fascination with the movement and behavior of these common denizens of our everyday environment, as well as her particular identification with these creatures' sense of peril in an alien and enclosed environment.

Kennedy worked on the piece in the weeks following the September 11 attacks on the United States. As she filmed the insects, she could not help but draw parallels between their basic impulses to escape harm and seek shelter and those individuals at New York's "ground zero" (a site only two blocks from the artist's studio). There, the workers' attempts to clear the area of debris sometimes seemed to her as futile as insects undertaking to move a mountain.

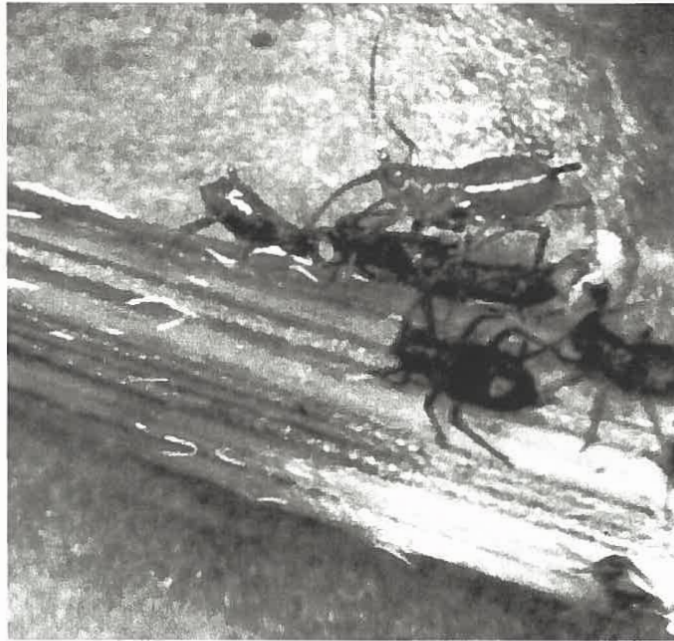
For her *Lab Results* project, Kennedy has created a video projection in collaboration with Dr. Mary Kay Sanford and students in her Physical Anthropology lab. The video is culled from more than 5 hours of close-up footage of beetles, crickets, millipedes and daddy longlegs filmed within a terrarium. Assembled

HOW DO THEIR APPROACHES DIFFER?

Exaggerated to a scale of ten by sixteen feet and projected in a darkened gallery, the video creates an altogether different encounter for the viewer. The projection bears comparison to Japanese science fiction movies of the 1950s and '60s, in which giant mutant monsters rampaged the earth and its inhabitants. That genre can be seen as an aesthetic reaction to the real atomic horrors at the close of World War II. Extending this military connection, Kennedy created the video's soundtrack from sonar and echolocation recordings, surveillance tools which are developed and employed by military/intelligence agencies.

In her large-scale projections, Kennedy exploits cinema's scale, aural accompaniment and darkened setting to create a claustrophobic womb-like environment in which she plays on our base fears and anxieties. Her deft employment of scientific imaging technologies prompt not only these subconscious anxieties, but also reality-based fears triggered by the often alarming capabilities and possibilities of scientific and technological developments.

During Kennedy's interaction with Sandford and her assistants, the artist and anthropologist reveled in the dialogue and exchange of ideas that took place, particularly around their mutual fascination with disease and illness.



Shannon Kennedy, DVD still from *Bugs*, 2001-2002

In Sandford's forensics lab on the final day of her residency, Kennedy snaked the endoscope into 15th century leg bones (Sandford conducts research into disease in prehistoric peoples), then through the nasal passages of the skull of one "Jane Doe," whose unidentified remains were recently discovered. Gathered around Kennedy's LCD screen, Sandford and her laboratory assistants marveled at how valuable the endoscope could be in their labwork and bioarcheological fieldwork, which often takes them into restrictive spaces.

True collaboration is mutually reciprocal, a sustained state of dialectical exchange. While this project is modest in scope, it did highlight the kind of interdisciplinary creative thinking that generates flexible minds well-versed in both right and left brain intelligences.

The artists who took part in *Lab Results* gained access to technical

information and know-how through the scientists with whom they collaborated. For the scientists and students who participated in this project, working with an artist gave them the opportunity to consider their fields of study and their individual work in new ways. Sandford summed up her collaboration with Kennedy by saying, "The convergence of her work and mine recall the historical roots of physical

anthropology in natural history and human anatomy. In both areas, there is an emphasis on detailed observation and a close relationship (at least historically) between the arts and the sciences. This suggests that scholars would truly benefit from more creative collaborative work—that by exchanging information about how we apply various ways of knowing we can all gain perspectives that would normally escape us." ⁵

Artists use information as a prism for refracting their unique views of things back to us. Their often iconoclastic approaches can produce surprising results. Sometimes their interdisciplinary investigations make accessible a shared body of meaning that only they can reveal. Through their work they extend art's possibilities for artists, participants and viewers alike.

Ron Platt, *Curator of Exhibitions*