
The Feeling of Freedom, Planetary Affect, and Feminist Emotion

Recent Work by Video Artist Cecelia Condit

ABSTRACT Video artist Cecelia Condit's recent work offers a rich visual and sonic poetics of feeling, engaging multiple varieties of sensation, affect, and emotion. Drawing on Erin Manning's theory of preacceleration, this essay provides a close reading of Condit's beguiling *Within a Stone's Throw* (2012) as an environmental piece and in the context of her other work and her life. It argues that Condit's solitary video work in Ireland's rocky region resulted in a feeling of freedom that not only enabled her to create *Within a Stone's Throw*—part environmental artwork, part performance piece, part impersonal self-portrait—but also served as a catalyst for feminist emotion that explodes in triumph in *I've Been Afraid* (2020). Paradoxically, then, in *Within a Stone's Throw* we find the emergence of "planetary affect," a mode of being on Earth that doesn't center human subjectivity in forceful psychological and social emotions, but does enable them. **KEYWORDS** affect, close-up, embodiment, emotion, environment, self-portrait, sensation

What do you do when your world starts to fall apart? I go for a walk.
—Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015¹

It's been like that for the whole of her life.

Sometimes you could cut the fear with a knife.

So now she has changed things

She goes her own way. . . .

All doors are open, just like a dream.

And here is her story, how freedom was earned.

Better late than never, she got her turn.

—Cecelia Condit, *Oh, Rapunzel*, 1996/2008

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FIGURE 1. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.

Consider two still images from Cecelia Condit's video *Within a Stone's Throw* (2012), shot in the severe and sublime landscape of the Burren in Ireland (fig. 1). We see a woman (it is Condit herself) walking carefully, consciously balancing her body as she makes her way across an enormous rock formation. Later we see her running across the heath and down toward the sea. I understand these two images as points in the plot of *Within a Stone's Throw*—Condit's breaking free to run in a larger field of life.² At stake is the feeling of freedom to strike off in the directions she chooses in tandem with the environment—magically, on the rim of the planet, and prosaically,

through the fields.³ The life of the landscape is key, as is the sensation of the body in motion. Attuned, landscape and body animate and enliven each other, sharing an affective energy in earthly encounters.⁴

“A body is defined,” the philosopher Brian Massumi says, referring to Spinoza, “by what capacities it carries from step to step.” Affect, he notes, “is simply a body movement looked at from the point of view of its potential—its capacity to come to be, or better, to come to do.” Sensation discloses affect, “the passing awareness of being at a threshold.”⁵ For Massumi, the potential for change exists in the movement of affect and the affect of movement. In the enigmatic and strangely down-to-earth video that is *Within a Stone’s Throw*, affect materializes in the rhythm of movement and rest, in the interaction of the landscape and the body of the woman. The affect? It is, I think, the affect of possibility or potentiality itself. For even as *Within a Stone’s Throw* presents us with the insistently concrete, there is something mysteriously abstract about it. It offers us a conceptual poetics of affect.

Far from a passionate drama of the primary psychological emotions of love and hate, or their precipitants—grief and guilt, hope and despair—affect in *Within a Stone’s Throw* is associated with non-discursive sensations—visual, aural, and kinetic.⁶ Affect is also associated with the planet, with what I will call planetary affect, both testifying to the long duration of the planet *and* holding out the promise of its persistence into the future by virtue of life itself, both human and nonhuman, including the geologic as a fundamental force.⁷ As we will see, the elegant images of the rocky environment resolve themselves into a spare narrative of sorts, prompting us to regard them in wonder and to hold close some of the beguiling images themselves. I can personally confirm this. Many of the images—as still images and as sequences—have remained in my memory for almost a decade now. They are part of my visual archive of the Anthropocene, and depart profoundly from a vision of catastrophe even as *Within a Stone’s Throw* offers a sense of planetary change over a long time. As I walk in my neighborhood, as I think about the Earth, I consult these images—Condit in triplicate in a swirling red dress on a rocky slab, or Condit striding on the rim of the planet—adding them in my mind’s eye to the environment, transforming it (fig. 2). I find they provide an energy that is heartening, far from the often empty if always well-intentioned exhortations of hope routinely found in work on climate change.⁸

In the first part of this essay, I consider the narrative of *Within a Stone’s Throw* as a kind of improvisational vernacular dance co-created by Condit and the landscape, with rocks and stones—insensate inorganic objects—



FIGURE 2. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.

playing the key roles as partners. I explore the permutations of geographical scales and multiple dimensions of temporality that the video foregrounds even as it forgoes the convention of the close-up of the face. And I invite us to think in terms of both aesthetic affects and geoaffects—planetary affect—as well as the foundational affect of possibility embodied in Condit's very movement through the landscapes.⁹ I proceed methodologically in great part by interpretive description and an evolving, recursive repetition that I hope captures in a meaningful way the rich and largely inscrutable layering of image and sound and how it may affect us. I have not seen anything else like *Within a Stone's Throw*.

In the second part of this essay I shift to Condit's video *Pulling Up Roots* (2015), also shot in the Burren, which I understand as a hinge between the planetary affect of *Within a Stone's Throw* and the feminist emotion of Condit's most recent video piece, *I've Been Afraid* (2020). The two Burren videos, as I call them, are strikingly different from Condit's previous work. For the first time here, Condit is not only visually predominant; she is also the only human figure.¹⁰ In the videos that have followed, Condit returns to being one among others or is altogether absent from the screen. Thus the Burren videos are in some sense *her* narratives, although they are not cast in a conventional autobiographical mode. I see them as belonging to a hybrid genre—part environmental art, part performance piece, part impersonal self-portrait.

By “impersonal,” I mean that the psychological dimension of subjectivity is absent. But as we will see, in *Pulling Up Roots* there is a striking sequence where Condit departs from an impersonal stance and surprises us by performing intense emotions. How can we understand this? For guidance I will turn to her earlier work as well as her life and the question of gender. I conclude with *I've Been Afraid*, which returns us to the foundational *feeling* of being free we find in both of the Burren videos, but now in the form of the psychological *emotion* of feeling free, an emotion shared by many of the

women Condit was in touch with while making the piece. A freedom that is feminist. My point is that her solitary experience in the landscape of the Burren—the *affect* of movement generating a sense of potentiality that is pre-psychological and pre-political—provided a foundation for the development of a feminist *emotion* of possibility, one that spurred her to definitively leave the patriarchal enclosure in which she had lived for many years.

PART ONE

I have been referring to *Within a Stone's Throw*, a work seven minutes and thirteen seconds in duration, as if it were a single video. In fact, although most people who have seen it no doubt accessed it on their laptops, tablets, or phones, it was originally screened in 2012 as part of an ambitious immersive installation at the Madison Museum of Contemporary Art in Wisconsin. The show consisted of a three-channel video on large-scale screens, enormous photographs (twelve feet long by five feet high), and a two-minute single-channel video entitled *World*. Occasioned by a residency in Ireland in 2010, *Within a Stone's Throw* was shot on the southwest coast of the Burren (meaning “great rock”), an austere landscape marked by glacial-era limestone and steep cliffs overlooking the Atlantic, uplands and lowlands populated by strange, huddled rock formations and grasslands, as well as occasional medieval towers and other long-empty structures. Condit tells me that she shot footage five hours a day for six weeks. And then began the editing.

A Body Moving

Within a Stone's Throw opens visually with Condit framed by two moss-covered stone walls, centered at a distance from us on a single screen (fig. 3). She is circling slowly around a tight cluster of trees in the shadows, holding on to their slim trunks as if they were partners. Then she breaks away, leaving what we now see is a large fortress-like stone tower and striding out to the open vista.

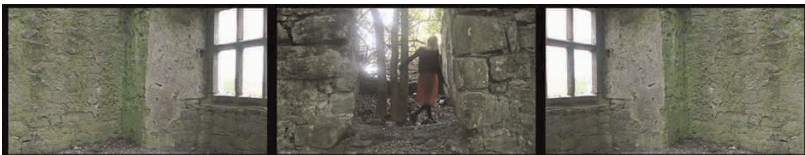


FIGURE 3. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.



FIGURE 4. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.

I understand this sequence as a staging of “preacceleration,” as cultural critic and dancer Erin Manning defines the term. In *Relationships: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (2009), Manning writes of preacceleration as “the virtual force of movement’s taking form. It is the feeling of movement’s in-gathering, a welling that propels the directionality of how movement moves.”¹¹ From Condit’s measured opening movement in tandem with the trunks of trees arises the impetus to explore the landscape, to move through it and with it—embracing a rocky slab in a caress as if it were an intimate, balancing on top of a limestone formation, finding her way down a difficult slope, acknowledging other beings (the cows, the dogs) although she is not in the frame with them, pausing in a grotto, picking up velocity, running faster through a grassy heath, slowing down, walking briskly, coming to rest, sitting on the cliff’s edge (fig. 4). As Manning notes, “Taking the next step gathers force for becoming.”¹² *Within a Stone’s Throw* articulates possibility and potentiality with body and landscape in mutual relation, offering an enigmatic sense of belonging even as the sound of waves and wind grows harrowing and cacophonous, and even as water floods the space of a grotto. There is throughout the video a sense of forward motion. But there is also the sense of rest realized in the performative tableaux, for example the one of Condit at rest with the rock. In the end, a sense of harmony and repose is achieved without a hint of sentimentality, or sensationalism, or seductiveness.

Rocks Flying

The choreography of Condit’s movement through the landscape is a co-creation with the environment—and the camera and the long and meticulous process of editing that is Condit’s practice. I began by tracing her movement. But the landscape itself is in motion. The waves. The clouds. And the rocks. Especially the rocks! It is predominantly through Condit’s interaction with rock in *Within a Stone’s Throw* that a partnership in movement—it is a dance—is created. Rock forms the geologic infrastructure of the planet,



FIGURE 5. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.



FIGURE 6. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.

infrastructure so clearly visible in the Burren, with its slabs and boulders and stone. Conventionally understood as immobile, as lacking in vitality, in *Within a Stone's Throw* rocks come alive. In one of the most remarkable sequences, Condit picks up a rock and hurls it into the air as if launching it into orbit—and in fact the moon (that orb of rock) soon appears in the sky on the screen (fig. 5).

And the rocks keep flying. They zoom unexpectedly across the screen from left to right. And from right to left. We can hear them clattering as they skip down the rocky slopes in what is perhaps the most unusual and significant sound in the piece; the sound of a small rock falling near Condit's feet is among the last of the sounds we hear. We see Condit collecting rocks, carrying them in the folds of her dress. In another arresting series of scenes, we watch her fingers inserting stones into a formation that appears to us, as humans, upside down; she is sculpting the landscape, decorating it, caring for it.¹³ In the final scene, as she sits on the edge of the cliff, from out of the sky comes a hand-size rock, choosing, it would seem, to leave its orbit to join her, landing in her hands, her body only partially in the frame (fig. 6). Is this the same rock she threw into the sky? Have she and the rock been moving in tandem, calibrating themselves to each other so that they can come back together? So it would seem. Donna Haraway has written wonderfully of dogs as a companion species, insisting they are our kin and that together humans and dogs co-create forms of knowledge and being.¹⁴ In *Within a Stone's Throw*, rocks are Condit's mineral companions.

What is clear is this: rock that is stationary only ever appears so for the time being. In this landscape—and, by extension, the planet—mineral matter is on the move.¹⁵ A product of geological time, the rocky landscape is alive with affective energies.¹⁶ It is a force field charged with kinetic vitality—movement that is further animated through Condit's rapid cutting of short takes, disconnected yet ultimately all of a piece, displayed from similar but distinctly different points of view on three screens.

Feeling Affect, Aesthetic Affects, Planetary Affect

Much recent work on both affect and emotion has focused on their social dimensions, most significantly how they arise and take shape in relation to other people. In *Within a Stone's Throw* Condit eschews the social world of the human, although we do encounter a few references to local communities—in the figure of a cow and in the sound of a dog barking, spare signs of the domestic and everyday life that are for the most part kept rigorously out of the frame.¹⁷ Condit also strictly avoids close-ups of the face, cinema's long-practiced convention of revealing the emotions of individuals, with psychological emotions and moods understood as hallmarks of interiority and subjectivity. In fact, only one scene in the piece allows us to briefly scrutinize Condit's face, and it would not be classified as a close-up. On the right-hand screen we see her from the chest up, and on the left-hand screen we see a girl, positioned similarly and wearing the same red dress and black sweater, perhaps meant to signal a younger Condit (fig. 7). Both are turned toward what seems to be the sun. Condit's eyes are closed as if basking in its warmth, a further refusal of the close-up as a window into the emotions and a concomitant emphasis on sensation.

Diametrically opposed to the close-up, many of the shots of the figure of Condit are long, some very long, her figure barely distinct, only a dot of red (interestingly, the only close-ups of her body are of her hand picking up a rock and of her fingers introducing stones into a rock formation). In one



FIGURE 7. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.



FIGURE 8. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.

of the most striking scenes, she is shown only from the waist down, her dress whipping in the wind around her legs as she stands on a rock-covered plateau on all three screens. In a long sequence toward the end of the video she is distanced from us as she runs and runs and runs toward the sea (fig. 8).

What is thus at stake in *Within a Stone's Throw* is not emotion but rather the sensory nature of experience, earthly encounters in the site of the Burren, which ultimately comes to stand for the planet itself. Significantly, this sensory experience is neither sensuous or excessive. Rather, it is conceptual and epistemological, as if a dancer were exploring the landscape of the Burren—which in fact is exactly the case. The video works to ensure that as spectators we do not establish any kind of identification with Condit as an individual. *Within a Stone's Throw* is not personal. She is not at the center of this world. Rather, she is absorbed in and by this world. Rather, she and this strange site are in fundamental relation to each other, with the site's strangeness growing familiar over the video's duration.

Songs are central to most of Condit's videos, with lines of rhyming words often serving as the source of their inspiration. *Within a Stone's Throw* is a radical exception to this. There is no song at all, and only eight words in total are spoken, these in voice-over by Condit. But sound is as important to the sensory experience of the piece as is the visual dimension. In fact, the video begins with the strong pulsing of the sea and the whistling of the wind, indexes of the force of nonhuman affect, accompanied only by a black screen. At times the sounds are overwhelming—haunting, crashing, thundering. At times the entire world seems to be vibrating. More sparingly, we also hear birds, a dog, a cow, crickets. Footfalls. Waves washing up and back. A kind of rhythm of sound and quiet, if not silence, comes to obtain. If *Within a Stone's Throw* cannot be said to be a sound object, it comes close to that.¹⁸ Listen, as I have, to the soundscape unaccompanied by the visual track.¹⁹

Importantly, the sensory experience of *Within a Stone's Throw* also encompasses aesthetic contributions to the environment by Condit, both as



FIGURE 9. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.

a figure in the piece and as the artist who has made it. In addition to her gently, delicately, intimately adding stone to the rock formations by inserting them into the clefts of boulders, consider the haunting sound of a female voice (barely identifiable as human) as if in harmony with the wind, the clouds, the waves, and the clattering of the rocks, deepening their resonances with one another.²⁰ Consider as well the striking red of Condit's dress, diaphanous as it whirls in the wind against her legs clothed in black tights, animating the gray and green of the landscape, heightening its vibrancy in our eyes, the human bringing the vitality of color in motion to the landscape. Condit brings energy to the rocks, which in turn move in animated ways, unpredictable and lively (fig. 9).

How might we describe the affect of the totality of this aesthetic world? The political theorist Jane Bennett has coined the term "geoaffect" to describe affects that are not specific to humans and other organisms but instead to vegetables, minerals, winds, and other entities.²¹ I am drawn to her distinction. But I am also persuaded by the aesthetic world of *Within a Stone's Throw* that to understand the experience of the environment it presents—the sensory site that is the planet—we must stretch the meaning of geoaffect to include *human as well as nonhuman* vibrations of the planet. I propose to call this ensemble of affects *planetary affect*. It is an affect and an effect of the whole, and it includes sound, motion, and the visual, all of which are vividly front and center in *Within a Stone's Throw* itself. I will return to this.

Scales Shifting, Temporality Expanding and Condensing

In *Within a Stone's Throw*, Condit refuses to establish a connection between the individual and the landscape in terms of the psychological emotions. Instead she creates a wondrous sense of the planetary wherein potential and possibility exist. At times and as if magically, scale shifts, as does directionality. I mentioned earlier that in one of the many compelling scenes, Condit



FIGURE 10. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.



FIGURE 11. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.

picks up a rock and throws it into the sky. What I did not say is that jumping scales is here decisively at work. We see Condit's hand—monumental in size!—reach into the frame of the right-hand screen to pick it up. Elsewhere in the video, a rock we know to be hand-size looms like a gigantic boulder, dwarfing her figure (fig. 10).

At one point, the disjointed arc of a rocky formation—it suggests a horizon—cuts to an unfinished circle, an orb that simultaneously evokes the entire planet and is comprised of the landscape that is the Burren—that is, is site-specific (fig. 11). Suddenly and marvelously, we see Condit in miniature—and multiplied! There are two of her—one to the left and one to the right—walking on the planet's rim. Through the affordances of video, proportions among bodies undergo radical transformation. Condit is distanced from us, appearing infinitesimally small in scale, and yet in relation to the scale of the planet, her figure is colossal. With its radically differing scales,



FIGURE 12. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.



FIGURE 13. Cecelia Condit, *Within a Stone's Throw*, 2012. Three-channel video, color, sound, 7:13 min.

Within a Stone's Throw is thus speculative, raising questions about how we might see—and understand—the world anew and inhabit it differently. In addition, the strictures of gravity according to human experience are overturned throughout. What may seem upside-down from our point of view—the sea suspended above as well as located below the cliff—is merely the orientation of the planet from another perspective. As viewers, we grow used to it (fig. 12).

Similarly, multiple measures of temporality—all of them elemental to the planet and its life—are conjured in *Within a Stone's Throw*. The landscape of the Burren itself speaks of temporality in geological terms, with the rocks on the surface dating from the Carboniferous age. In the two-minute looping video entitled *World* that accompanied *Within a Stone's Throw* in the installation, we see the orb of the planet cycle rapidly through the seasons, over and over, referencing if not an eternal return, then an ongoing cycle of immemorial duration. In *Within a Stone's Throw*, signs of human societies long vanished register in the early medieval towers constructed of stone and in the row of old gray gravestones that come occasionally into view, a mark of the conjoining of the human and the geologic. Contemporary communities are implied in the keeping of cows (fig. 13). And the figure of Condit as well as that of the young girl reference the life span of the human species. *Within a Stone's Throw* thus conjugates four fundamentally different dimensions of temporality: geological, seasonal and rotational, historical and social, and

species-specific. They coexist, condensed into this world, a portal through which we may subtly apprehend differing planetary timescales, as historian Dipesh Chakrabarty calls them.²²

Chakrabarty describes the affect—for him it is a sensation with an epistemological edge—of coming to understand the catastrophic implications of the Anthropocene through the collapse of different timescales into each other as akin to the feeling of falling. For him, it also entails a shock of recognition that we humans are not central to the life of the planet but instead are a part of processes so much larger and *other* than ourselves.²³ Chakrabarty draws on the Heideggerian notion of mood, explaining that here mood is not psychological but rather phenomenological in nature, disclosing the world—in this case, the urgency that is the Anthropocene—in ways that are more fundamental than reason. His reference to the phenomenological tradition of knowledge resonates with what I have been exploring in Condit's *Within a Stone's Throw*. But what I am calling planetary affect in that piece has another valence altogether. Instead of a disorienting feeling of falling or a fearful shock of recognition, it offers instead the foundational affect of possibility and potentiality through earthly encounters in the practice of mutuality, allowing us to envision the possibility of the persistence of life on the planet into the future.

Sensation, understood in great part as perception, is the mode of these encounters with the elements of the planet. A fundamental first step is the apprehension—the subtle knowledge—of the interplay of radically different scales of temporality, condensed in the mutability and mobility over time of even the most grounded of rock. *Within a Stone's Throw* offers a vision of the planet as an ensemble where co-creation, including co-evolution over time, among all the elements involved, ranging from rock to sea, from trees to humans, is essential to the whole. Condit does not invite us into a dreamy space of reverie, or an emotionally charged space of fear and despair, hope and optimism, climate grief and Anthropocene anxiety.²⁴ *Within a Stone's Throw* does not dramatize climate change or issue a call to action. But beautifully, as an aesthetic object, in a way that is paradoxically both abstract and concrete, it works to stir us to the edge of thought, modeling imaginative, active, and reflective ways of orienting ourselves to the planet, listening to it, tuning our bodies to it, running with and in it, envisioning our lives in tandem with the environment differently.²⁵

Earlier I noted that only eight words occur in *Within a Stone's Throw*. They are spoken in voice-over by Condit midway through the piece as she

walks, balancing herself, on top of a rock formation in the middle screen and then—cut!—in a dramatic change of scale, she is walking rapidly, almost running on the rim of the planet. “One, two, three. Everywhere I go is me.” What are we to make of this curious statement? I understand it not as narcissistic—that the environment is a mirror to her—but rather that the two are mutually attuned. Anthropologist Anna Tsing, tracing the gathering of matsutake mushrooms in forests around the world in her inspiring book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), remarks, “Being in the forest this way might be considered dance: lines of life are pursued through sense, movements, and orientation. The dance is a form of forest knowledge.”²⁶ I think of *Within a Stone’s Throw* as a kind of dance in the landscape of the Burren that begets a form of planetary knowledge, inspiring a vision of the whole that persists over geologic time, bodies and rocks mutually attuned and in balance.

Massumi has often referred to Spinoza as understanding affect as the power “to affect and be affected.”²⁷ And in turn many scholars in affect studies have quoted the phrase as if by itself it communicates a theory of affect, when affect is in fact deployed by so many in so many different ways. I confess that for several years now I have found Massumi’s approach to affect, especially as signaled by this phrase, to be an empty formulation. But Condit’s piece illuminates it for me, allowing me to see *Within a Stone’s Throw* as an event, a performance that arises out of Condit being radically situated in her environment, one that speaks to the imaginative possibilities of being affected by the vitality of this landscape, revealing the planet *qua* planet to her, even as she affects it, aesthetically, and creates a video world from it and with it. To affect and be affected. Yes.

PART TWO

I opened this essay by referring to a feeling of freedom in Condit’s *Within a Stone’s Throw*. To what extent might we understand this feeling in terms of gender? Let me be clear: I do not bracket the life of an artist in relation to their work and what it might mean for us, although the latter is a critical stance not unfamiliar in affect studies, especially for those who distrust the very category of the individual. I do not. Rather, I hold fast to the illuminating power of an artist’s experience, persuaded that the aesthetic and the personal are political. Thus for me one way to approach this question is to consider the place of both *Within a Stone’s Throw* and *Pulling Up Roots* in

Condit's work and her life. They represent a stunning departure both from her previous work and from the work that followed. I see them as marking a period of change and growth in her work and life distinguished by what she has called "a meshing together" of the two.²⁸

Condit has described herself as a storyteller, characterizing several of her videos as "feminist fairy tales" that explore "the dark side of female subjectivity."²⁹ Her first videos—*Beneath the Skin* (1981), *Possibly in Michigan* (1983), and *Suburbs of Eden* (1992)—are explicitly feminist, dark, even crazed stories about the violence that characterizes relationships between men and women. *Possibly in Michigan*, for example, features cannibalism on the part of two women who destroy a threatening male; it recently went viral, having been discovered by a much younger generation. Explicitly feminist as well are her two most recent pieces. Through an imaginative quasi re-creation accompanied by a signature Condit song, *We Were Hardly More Than Children* (2019) memorializes the brutal experience in 1969 of a young painter whose illegal abortion almost resulted in her death; feminist anger is the subject. Condit describes her most recent piece, *I've Been Afraid*, as drawing on a blend of stories by women who have been menaced by men. Hypnotizing in its rhythm and refrain, it is an almost shockingly direct feminist piece characterized by a hybrid aesthetic, including animations that are altogether new to her work. But in the two Burren videos we hear no overt echoes of this feminist stance. It is fascinating to me that when Condit chose to focus on herself visually for the first time in her work—not only as the primary figure but as the sole human figure—the explicit exploration of feminist concerns disappeared. So, too, did a story, although a narrative structure remains in both.

What was the immediate impetus for *Within a Stone's Throw*? Condit had long held an interest in what she earlier called nature, and later, the environment. But more immediately, the recent experience of making a video that covered the last four years of her mother's life kindled in her a desire for large spaces and for old things, things that persist (her mother, Annie Lloyd, died in 2008 at the age of ninety-two). For the last eleven years of her life, her mother lived in a continuing care retirement community, her final years in a single room. As Condit says in the moving video that is *Annie Lloyd* (2008), "I collect stories. Mother's stories." In *Annie Lloyd* she recounts these stories—her mother's dreams and memories, fascinations and pleasures—in an aesthetic of magic realism, far from the mode of conventional documentary.³⁰ As she does, the psychic life of her mother takes on depth and meaning, and so too does the bond between them. "When her world shrank

to the size of her small bed, mine shrank too,” Condit said in 2012. “I thought that my next piece should be about huge spaces. And old things—like rocks and water. Ireland’s Burren, with its rocky coastline, was perfect. I could turn my thoughts to time (both past and future) and space, as it pertains to our planet.”³¹ As we have seen, in *Within a Stone’s Throw* she collects stones and rocks, nonhuman inhabitants of the planet. Bedrock of the planet, they are her mineral companions. Something solid to hold on to. To relate to. To dance with.

Escaping the Tower

Condit also turned her thoughts about the past and the future to herself. Away from the routines and habits of everyday life, which are so difficult to undo, free to improvise her own path through the landscape and sites of the Burren, she created completely new work in tandem with it. But she also drew on iconography that pervaded her previous work, including, notably, the tower as a prison. Recall that *Within a Stone’s Throw* begins with her leaving a fortress-like stone tower—and she never returns to it. This image is central in particular to her extraordinary earlier video *Oh, Rapunzel* (1996, reedited in 2008), which like *Annie Lloyd* is about her mother. *Oh, Rapunzel* ends triumphantly with her mother leaving her longtime home, figured at times as an imprisoning tower.³² As an epigraph to this essay I quoted a few lines from the unforgettable song that concludes *Oh, Rapunzel*:

So now she has changed things
She goes her own way. . . .
All doors are open, just like a dream.
And here is her story, how freedom was earned.
Better late than never, she got her turn.

Oh, Rapunzel closes on this feeling of freedom as her mother, in her early eighties and using a walker, is seen moving to a retirement community. It is exhilarating. Seriously.

Condit returned to the Burren several years after she made her first video there. She chose to film not in a vast landscape but rather in a circumscribed site, a housing construction project in the countryside that was abandoned after the 2008 financial meltdown (fig. 14). The windswept terrain is empty except for the wild grasses and uninhabited gray houses, their roofs caving in. Central to its narrative is the action of pulling up plants by their roots—they are tenacious and it is hard!—and finally tossing them all aside.



FIGURE 14. Cecelia Condit, *Pulling Up Roots*, 2015. Single-channel video, color, sound, 7:33 min.

Aesthetically, *Pulling Up Roots* has much in common with *Within a Stone's Throw*. The horizon of the planet is there, and so is the sky and the wind of the Burren. Condit is again alone in the site. But this Burren video cannot be read as an unequivocally environmental piece. Moreover, unlike *Within a Stone's Throw*, *Pulling Up Roots* has a manifestly if mysteriously psychological dimension, with Condit heard in voice-over speaking enigmatic short sentences in the third person. I take the words to be both autobiographical and a reference to women in general. She repeats them in another, operatic register, lending them aesthetic gravity, even a sense of tragic grandeur.



FIGURE 15. Cecelia Condit, *Pulling Up Roots*, 2015. Single-channel video, color, sound, 7:33 min.

We see Condit assembling a large sheaf of yellow wild flowers, roots and all, which she carries as if to balance herself while walking on a concrete ledge (fig. 15). It is a moment of preacceleration, a preface of movement to come, movement “on the verge of expression,” in Manning’s words.³³ As in *Within a Stone’s Throw*, in this scene we don’t see Condit’s face. But we do hear her voice, deliberate and declarative in tone. Once you have heard this voice, you will not forget it. “Everything she is, she isn’t.” We see her tasting the roots—a carrot, a beet. “She said that she shouldn’t . . . wouldn’t . . . and couldn’t, but that doesn’t mean that she won’t.” We see her running. “She said that she tried, but she didn’t, she lied.” We see her flinging the flowers to the ground. The piece concludes with her slipping under a broken fence, escaping the enclosure of the uninhabited gray houses that are all boarded up and falling apart, tiptoeing away (she took off her shoes earlier and is in her stocking feet), balancing herself with her arms as she goes (fig. 16). Left behind are the heavy black shoes. Preacceleration. A feeling of freedom.

Performing the Emotions

Surprisingly, toward the end of *Pulling Up Roots* there is a sequence of close-ups of Condit’s face looking into the camera—concentrating, crying, laughing, smiling in certainty, perhaps even conspiratorially, referencing intense emotions that are clearly psychological in nature although we aren’t provided any context for them (fig. 17). They are strangely disconnected from the



FIGURES 16. Cecelia Condit, *Pulling Up Roots*, 2015. Single-channel video, color, sound, 7:33 min.

environment. *In fact, they don't belong to it.* But they do have a narrative of their own, one we can trace from confusion and grief to elation and perhaps even, as she looks directly at the camera, the sly pleasure of solidarity.

What are we to make of this disorienting sequence? Where did these emotions come from? I turn to biography for an answer. For the emotions Condit performs in *Pulling Up Roots* are connected not to the Burren at all, but to her domestic life in the United States. The environment of the Burren provided her with the space both to create new work and to express these emotions of grief, anguish, and elation. *Pulling Up Roots* is a rehearsal in



FIGURES 17. Cecelia Condit, *Pulling Up Roots*, 2015. Single-channel video, color, sound, 7:33 min.

retrospect, a practice of preacceleration, movement on the verge of expression. Condit has told me it was during the filming of what became *Within a Stone's Throw* that she realized she had to leave her longtime husband. And she did! She pulled up roots, a process she literalized visually in her second Burren video, escaping the boarded-up buildings, ducking under the fence, and running toward the future. She accelerated and achieved escape velocity. She moved out. She was sixty-eight. Two years later, she retired from teaching film and video at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Since then she has been leading a new and very different life, one she embraces wholeheartedly.³⁴ It is a life that has seen a flourishing of new work, feminist at its core, created in tandem with the stories other women have shared with her.³⁵

I think of the wide-open, geologic environment of the Burren as providing Condit with the space and time for encounters with the earth—embracing a rocky slab, walking on the rim of the planet, uprooting plants, escaping an abandoned habitat. These encounters served simultaneously as catalysts for creating captivating new work and a new life that *are* that work and life. According to Manning and Massumi, sensation, as an interface that discloses affect, materializes in movement, with affect marking the potential for change. This is what we see in the narratives of both *Within a Stone's Throw* and *Pulling Up Roots*. In the environmental artwork that is the former, what I have called Condit's improvisational dance with the landscape is underwritten by principles of relationality that are foundational to ecological environmentalism. These principles—interdependency, mutuality, and interconnectedness among them—are also foundational to feminism. And as we see in both Burren videos, the feeling of freedom is fundamental.

The Feminist Emotion of Freedom from Fear

Fast-forward to *I've Been Afraid*, which had its world premiere online to a global audience on May 21, 2020.³⁶ As indirect and subtle as is *Within a Stone's Throw*, with Condit absorbed in her encounter with the landscape, and as undecidable as is *Pulling up Roots* with regard to the emotions in particular (where did they come from?). *I've Been Afraid* is unambiguous and uncompromising. The personal is clearly political—and aesthetically so. The narrative is condensed into the attainment of an emotional state, one of self-possession and a total and exultant lack of fear. The first line of the song that begins the video is, "I've been afraid of being me." Retrospectively, we understand with more clarity Condit's words in *Within a Stone's Throw*—"One, two, three. Everywhere I go is me." There she feels at home in the world—even on top of the world!

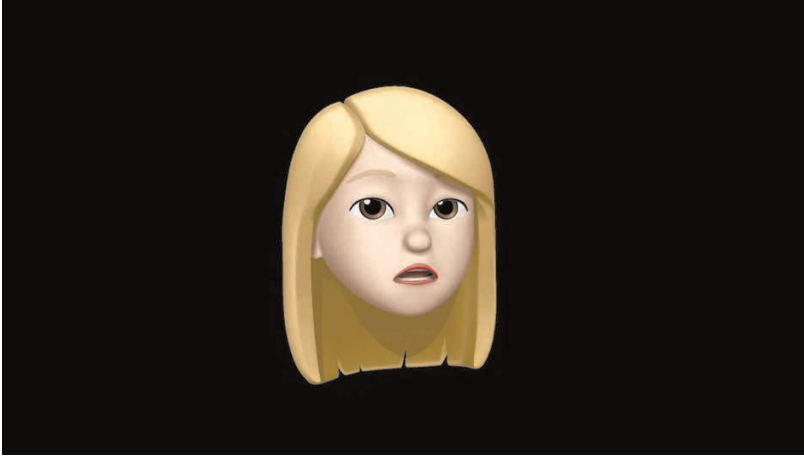


FIGURE 18. Cecelia Condit, *I've Been Afraid*, 2020. Single-channel video, color, sound, 6:38 min.

Visually, Condit appears sparingly in *I've Been Afraid*. We see her fleetingly from the back dressed all in black, and twice she heads briefly across the screen, walking alone in tall grasses, two sequences shot in black and white. But we hear her voice throughout. Marvelously, the opening and closing lyrics of the framing song, which she sings, are voice-synced by an animation—the head of a young blond woman (fig. 18). A Memoji, an avatar for Condit, serves as an animated generic close-up! Thus is the aesthetic risk of falling into sentimentality or melodrama virtually eliminated. At the same time, *I've Been Afraid* succeeds brilliantly as a quasi auto-ethnographic portrait. What have she and other women been afraid of? Of men. “I’ve been afraid of what you might do.” Of intimate violence of all kinds. And the lyrics that conclude the video? And the sound? It is a kind of TRILL followed by a low-register, flat-out, definitive “anymore.” Incredible.

But I'm not afraid of you,
Or you, or you, or you. No, no, no, no,
I'm not afraid of you. Anymore.

The sound? It is the feeling of escape. Of freedom. Feminist freedom. ■

KATHLEEN WOODWARD is Lockwood Professor in the Humanities and a professor of English at the University of Washington, where she also directs the Simpson Center for the Humanities. She is the author of *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of Emotions* (Duke University Press, 2009)

and *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* (Indiana University Press, 1991). Her essays in the cross-disciplinary domains of the emotions, women and aging, and technology and culture have appeared in *American Literary History*, *Discourse*, *differences*, *Generations*, *SubStance*, *Journal of Women's History*, and *Cultural Critique*. From 1986 to 1995 she coedited *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*.

NOTES

want to thank Jennifer Bean, editor extraordinaire, for her welcome invitation to participate in the enlivening working conference on affect and feminist media held at the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington in March 2020 and for her astute comments on my essay. I'm also exceedingly grateful for the helpful comments by an anonymous reader.

1. Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1.

2. Condit is an experimental video artist who also works in the mediums of photography and song. The recipient of awards from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the American Film Institute, she taught in the Film, Media, Animation and New Genres department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee from 1986 to 2017. A grant from the Lighton International Artists Exchange Program made it possible for her to spend five weeks in 2010 at the Burren College of Art, where she shot the footage for *Within a Stone's Throw*. See Condit's website to access her work as well as for other information: <https://www.ceceliacondit.com/>. On Condit's earlier work see Patricia Mellencamp, *The Alarming, Charming Video Art of Cecelia Condit: A Monograph on Fairly Tales* (n.p.: Pell-Mell, 2012).

3. In her introduction to the spring 2020 issue of *Feminist Media Histories*, guest editor Jennifer Peterson provides a valuable consideration of the relation between the environmental humanities and feminism, citing a bracing and far-reaching essay by Jennifer Hamilton and Astrida Neimas that shows how feminism is often unacknowledged even as it provides an important foundation for the environmental humanities. Peterson defines "environment" "in the broadest possible terms to mean the habitat and matter that surround us on our planet," including "the built environment." Jennifer Peterson, "In Deep Water," *Feminist Media Studies* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 1. In this essay, I've chosen to use the terms "environment" and "landscape" interchangeably, wanting at times to draw on the connection of the "environment" to the environmental humanities, with its activist stance, and at other times to underscore the specificity of the landscape at stake in *Within a Stone's Throw*.

4. "Earthly encounters" alludes to Stephanie Clare, *Earthly Encounters: Sensation, Feminist Theory, and the Anthropocene* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019). I follow her lead in focusing in great part on sensation as an interface that carries its own mode of knowledge.

5. Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 4, 7, 10.

6. Much important work that has contributed to creating what has been called the turn to affect uses the terms "affect," "emotion," and "feeling" interchangeably, in the

full understanding of the different theoretical traditions that have formed them. See, as an excellent example, Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 4. In my essay, by contrast, I intentionally distinguish between affect and emotion. I follow the theoretical tradition of affect stemming from Spinoza and Gilles Deleuze and developed by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi as a pre-cognitive capacity, underwritten in great part by sensory experience; emotion I understand as psychological and social. See Erin Manning, *Relationships: Movement, Art, Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Massumi, *Politics of Affect*; Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). This distinction between affect and emotion informs my book *Statistical Panic: Cultural Politics and Poetics of the Emotions* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), where I engage with theories and narratives of emotions, including anger, grief, and shame, and contrast the cultural work of the emotions with what I see as the negative work of the intensities—the affects—of panic and anxiety, of which what I call “statistical panic” is a prime example. In this essay, in contrast, affect—as potential that is released in movement where one step will lead to another, and as planetary affect—carries altogether positive connotations. As for the term “feeling,” I am drawn to Cvetkovich’s association of feeling with its vernacular quality, and I use “feeling” in precisely that way here.

7. See Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, “Toward an Affective Ecocriticism: Placing Feeling in the Anthropocene,” in *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, ed. Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), 1–22; their introduction provides an impressive overview of the different strands of affect theory deployed in ecocriticism, with *Affective Ecocriticism* focusing primarily on literature and film of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. See also Kara Watts, Molly Hall, and Robin Hackett, eds., *Affective Materialities: Reorienting the Body in Modernist Literature* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2019); Heather Houser, *Ecocriticism in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). My essay joins this work in emphasizing materiality and embodiment. Like Houser, who underscores what she calls the power of *narrative affects* (3), I call attention to the affective formal qualities of *Within a Stone’s Throw*.

8. As I note in my essay “Aging in the Anthropocene: The View from and beyond Margaret Drabble’s *The Dark Flood Rises*,” in *Aging in Literature*, ed. Elizabeth Barry and Margery Skagen (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 2020), 37–63, books on global warming, climate change, and the Anthropocene inevitably close rhetorically on a note of hope that often feels empty. Remarkably, in addressing the subject of environmental change aslant, as it were, *Within a Stone’s Throw* allows us to entertain the possibility of a balance being achieved in the future without resorting to what are often empty rhetorical moves.

9. I borrow the term “geoaffect” from Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 61.

10. There is one exception. In *Within a Stone’s Throw* a young girl appears fleetingly, as if she were a younger version of the artist.

11. Manning, *Relationships*, 6.

12. Manning, *Relationships*, 59.

13. Space does not permit me to engage in any depth with the question of the haptic—with touch—in *Within a Stone's Throw*, but I do want to remark that the sensorial experience of touching rocks is key to it. See Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017). “To think with touch,” she writes, “has a potential to inspire a sense of connectedness that can further problematize abstractions and disengagements of (epistemological) distances, the bifurcations between subject and objects, knowledge and the world, affects and facts, politics and science” (97). She calls attention to the reversibility of touch; in *Within a Stone's Throw* reversibility is thematized in Condit's embrace of rock and at the end with a rock, a partner, returning to her hand.

14. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003).

15. Jason Groves, *The Geological Unconscious: German Literature and the Mineral Imaginary* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), shows how nineteenth-century German-language writers deployed countless images of mineral matter on the move, an index of a new way of thinking and writing about the planet. See also Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), which the author describes as a “thought experiment, attempting to discern in the most mundane of substances a liveliness” (6).

16. On the powers and roles of the geologic in planetary life see Elizabeth Ellsworth and Jaime Kruse, eds., *Making the Geologic Now: Responses to Material Conditions of Contemporary Life* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2013). It is an inspiring collection of essays, many of which focus on artworks.

17. As a prime example, consider Sara Ahmed's emphasis on *the circulation of the emotions* as an affective economy. As she writes in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), in affective economies, “feelings do not reside in subjects or in objects, but are produced as effects of circulation” (8). One of the effects of affect theory is that for many cultural critics interiority became suspect, with emotion identified, in Massumi's words in *Parables for the Virtual*, as something “owned,” “old surprises to which we have become more or less accustomed” (220–21).

18. See James A. Steintrager and Rey Chow, eds., *Sound Objects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

19. See Kate Galloway, “Listening to Indigenous Knowledge of the Land in Two Contemporary Sound Art Installations,” *Feminist Media Histories* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 176–206. She writes, “By opening up our bodies and knowledge of the environment to how installation sound art collaborates with the sensory inputs of site, these emplaced and embodied acts of listening reconnect human bodies to the land” (177). This resonates with my sense of what the immersive experience of the installation of *Within a Stone's Throw* must have been like.

20. The sounds of the rocks were recorded by sound artist Annie Killelea near Long Island Sound in Branford, Connecticut. Surprisingly, much of the soundtrack issues from the vagaries of an old record player Killelea possessed. As she explains, “The rest of

the music is a multitrack recording of a wonderful record player I used to have that had a broken motor and so it would take about twenty-thirty minutes to warm up to the 78 rpm (but the speaker worked fine). I recorded this with a microphone to the speaker—the low swooning sound is just the needle moving very slowly and unevenly over the record as the motor struggles to get up to speed. And then I sang along and mixed that in there along with some other live ocean sounds.” Email from Killelea to the author, May 15, 2020.

21. See Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*.

22. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Anthropocene Time,” *History and Theory* 57, no. 1 (March 2018): 5–32, where he distinguishes three timescales—geological time, the time of the evolution of life on the planet (species time), and the time of human history or world history—and argues that our epoch is characterized by the radical entanglement of the three for the first time. Regarding *Within a Stone’s Throw*, I do not draw on the timescale of species. I do add the timescale of the life span of the human, understanding life span to be the greatest age that humans have obtained (on the order of 120 years), as opposed to life expectancy, which varies according to myriad factors.

23. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Human Condition in the Anthropocene,” Tanner Lectures in Human Values, delivered at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, February 18–19, 2015, available at <https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/Chakrabarty%20manuscript.pdf>.

24. Nicole Merola coined the phrase “Anthropocene anxiety” to describe an admixture of resignation, melancholia, and anger. See her essay “‘what can we do but keep breathing as best we can this / minute atmosphere’: Juliana Spahr and Anthropocene Anxiety,” in *Affective Ecocriticism*, 25–49.

25. In affect studies the relationship between affect/emotions and action has long been a major concern and matter of much debate. With regard to film, see Alexa Weik von Mossner, ed., *Moving Environments: Affect, Emotion, Ecology, and Film* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2014). Several essays in that edited collection explicitly address the distinction between production and reception in terms of affect and the emotions. See especially Janet Walker, “Moving Home: Documentary Film and Other Remediations of Post-Katrina New Orleans” (201–23). Her excellent essay focuses on the ways in which the cinematic strategies of three different post-Katrina documentary films, all of which rely on testimony from individuals, elicit different affective responses; she concludes that “testimonies grounded not only heartfelt memory and desire and not only in the concrete foundation of individual homes, but also by collective embodiments of the planning process are most capable of restoring ‘the affective fecundity of place.’” (217). In *Within a Stone’s Throw* we find ourselves far from the genre of the environmental documentary.

26. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 241.

27. Massumi, *Politics of Affect*, ix.

28. Cecelia Condit, YouTube, April 17, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCWNQTjY-xI>.

29. Cecelia Condit website, accessed May 9, 2020, <https://www.ceceliacondit.com/biography>.

30. I write about *Annie Lloyd* in Kathleen Woodward, “Assisted Living: Aging, Old Age, Memory, Aesthetics,” *Occasion* 4 (May 2012): <https://arcade.stanford.edu/occasion/assisted-living-aging-old-age-memory-aesthetics>.

31. Cecelia Condit quoted in Kat Kneevers, “Space and Time ‘*Within a Stone’s Throw*,’” *Shepherd Express*, July 16, 2012, <https://shepherdexpress.com/arts-and-entertainment/visual-art/space-time-within-stone-s-throw/>.

32. See Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). Environmental studies scholar Alaimo understands nature—in particular the pastoral ideal—“as an imaginative space for equality and freedom” (18), a thematic echoed in Condit’s work.

33. Manning, *Relationships*, 14.

34. Cecelia Condit website, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://www.ceceliaccondit.com/biography>.

35. See Kathleen Woodward, “Performing Age, Performing Gender,” *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (2006): 162–89, in which I explore what I call feminist aging in the work of several artists, including Rachel Rosenthal and Louise Bourgeois. While Condit has explored aging in women in several of her videos—notably the early brilliant (and violent) video *Not a Jealous Bone* (1987) and the later beautiful (and tender) video *Annie Lloyd*, she doesn’t take aging up in relation to herself in the three videos I discuss here.

36. There is no space in this essay to consider the matter of audience affect, but I do want to note that I was present at the world premiere of *I’ve Been Afraid*, sponsored by Screen Slate in conjunction with Electronic Arts Intermix and carried live on Twitch TV, and was thrilled by the explosion of overwhelmingly positive affect in the chat (there were no negative posts), ranging from “wowowow” and “omfggggg” to “This is a bangaaaa. I love this” and “new rockstar!!”