

CLOSE-UP

THIRST TRAP

LAURA McLEAN-FERRIS ON KEN OKIISHI'S *VITAL BEHAVIORS*, 2019





This page and opposite:
Five stills from Ken Okiishi's
Vital Behaviors, 2019,
 HD video, color, sound,
 64 minutes. Brian Altemus.

“I FEEL A BIT, LIKE, DARKER TODAY,” says actor, model, and SoulCycle instructor Brian Altemus at the beginning of Ken Okiishi’s video *Vital Behaviors*, 2019. The premise is straightforward: Standing in front of the artist’s camera, Altemus replicates shots of himself on his Instagram feed. Okiishi, meanwhile, sits behind a mostly stationary lens, filming him for the duration of the roughly hour-long work. The setup is not immediately apparent, nor are the dynamics between artist and model; Okiishi interjects only sporadically, briefly. What *is* apparent, from the beginning, is that we are here to watch Altemus.

For the occasion, it was agreed that Altemus would create a playlist to conjure a distinct “mood” for each shot, much as he would for his SoulCycle class. Yet the vibe also has a discernible current of erotic tension. Altemus is hot, and, along with Okiishi, we watch him undress several times, hanging out and chatting. If the scenario suggests a fashion photographer with his model, it also evokes the more mythic scene of a sculptor or painter with his sitter. But the clearest parallel might be with Andy Warhol’s Screen Tests: those virtuoso displays of the self as a performance for the screen. As in Warhol, the aesthetic is an anti-aesthetic. The light is flat and white, Okiishi’s New York studio is cluttered with cardboard boxes and other detritus, and Altemus improvises his outfits from a suitcase of the artist’s clothes and random packing materials lying around the room.

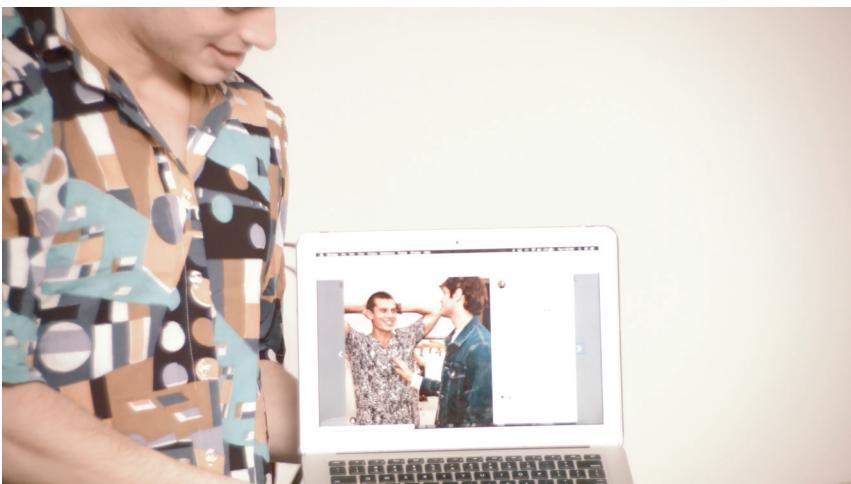
Beginning in high spirits, Altemus works himself into various configurations. As he puts on a moody glower for the camera or strikes a pose, it is alarming how easy it is to imagine the drab studio falling away and the rest of the absent image materializing around him. When he tips his chin slightly and pouts, holding on to the lapels of a black jacket and sharpening his look in a way that suggests “business casual,” I fill in the blanks and imagine a banal and cheery campaign for Gap. When, wearing a backpack, he faces away from the camera, I envision him on vacation, gazing at a distant landscape like the hero of Caspar David Friedrich’s *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, that ur-image of Kantian self-reflection.

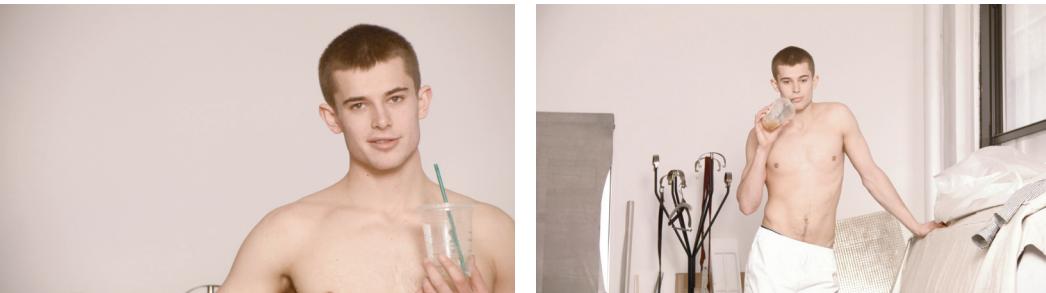
In this sense, *Vital Behaviors* extends a Pictures-generation critique of representation. Just as, say, Richard Prince cut out figures from the backgrounds of print advertisements to reveal the conventions of style unmoored from mass media, Okiishi foregrounds the degree to which the presentation of oneself as a snack for the camera, and the wholesale investment of one’s self and soul in that endeavor, is both embodied and hardwired.

About halfway through the video, Altemus starts to emotionally stutter. Dressed only in white shorts, he begins to reflect on friendship, and as his tone changes, we hear the plaintive strings of Max Richter’s “On the Nature of Daylight.” The picture he is re-performing, he explains to Okiishi, was taken on the beach with a longtime friend with whom he can discuss deeper life questions. His modeling-industry friends, who “love the whole image thing,” don’t always jell with his older friends like this one. Something is happening to him. “Life,” he says, “feels very weird right now.”

All of a sudden, Altemus begins to assume the affect of a lost young boy and sucks goofily on the straw of his iced coffee from the side of his mouth. “I feel like I’m losing the light behind my eyes,” he concludes, like a small child in some interior swirl of thought. He has failed in his task of reconstructing himself in his own image, happy on the beach. Like Mario Montez in Warhol’s *Screen Test #2*, 1965, who unravels in vulnerability and shame after being subjected to Ronald Tavel’s humiliating casting-couch directions, Altemus self-disassembles. But Okiishi’s piece has more

We are watching a psychological journey—a deprogramming—
that is absolutely genuine and “live.”





Opposite page: **Four stills from Ken Okiishi's *Vital Behaviors*, 2019**, HD video, color, sound, 64 minutes. Brian Altemus.

Above, from top: **Two stills from Ken Okiishi's *Vital Behaviors*, 2019**, HD video, color, sound, 64 minutes. Brian Altemus. **Richard Prince, *Untitled (four single men with interchangeable backgrounds looking to the right)*, 1977**, mixed media on paper, 19 × 23".

Below: **Ken Okiishi, *Death and the College Student*, 1999**, video, color, sound, 31 minutes. Ken Okiishi.



of a therapeutic, talking-cure imperative, discernible in the artist's role as a mostly quiet witness to the actor's "work." Altemus's struggle is to square his current subjectivity with the image of his former self. He asks Okiishi to excuse his body several times for not being as muscular as in past shots, reminding himself to get back to the gym. In this moment, we become aware that we are watching a psychological journey—a deprogramming—that is absolutely genuine and "live," as Altemus faces his entrapment in the image world and the forms of alienation he has had to adopt to live inside it.

IN THE 1954 VERSION of *A Star Is Born*, Judy Garland as Esther Blodgett sings "Someone at Last." Dressed in a pink shirt and dark tights, she careens around an apartment using whatever comes to hand as the pretend props and equipment of a film set. Garland cycles through a kind of "world tour" repertoire of studio-movie tropes, many of which involve some kind of racist stereotyping. "China!" she shouts, placing a lampshade on her head and putting her hands in a prayer position. "Africa!" she yells, emerging in a leopard skin for a Tarzan movie. She picks up a telephone, the worried expression on her face recalling the matinee-star clichés Cindy Sherman would later emulate in her "Untitled Film Stills," 1977–80. In these moments, it isn't only a history of harmful imperialist caricature that passes through the body of the actress and her character, but a whole infrastructural glut: a commercializing logic that includes the studio system itself, which at the time of filming had forced an amphetamine prescription on Garland to keep her weight down. "Now here comes a big fat close-up," she says, mid-song. Splaying her hands into stars out in front of her, with the tips of the thumbs joined, Garland mimics the camera zooming in on her, pulling her hands in under her chin to frame her face. This gesture, in which the actress's body describes its own enclosure within a frame, her eyes gazing into the elsewhere of the image world, appears on the movie's poster.

When I first saw *Vital Behaviors* in October of last year at a screening in Paris, I was moved by its depiction of an improvisational spirit and the youthful energy expended in the service of the image. During lockdown in New York, however, that anti-aesthetic of Okiishi's studio became the dominant look of all the Zoom conversations I was having. The backdrops of my world seemed cut away, replaced by that one room, with neutral walls. I too have scrolled back through my Instagram feed, trying to recall what looks like a formerly vibrant life. I've also felt that I didn't recognize my own face.

In Okiishi's *Death and the College Student*, 1999, the artist used a movie poster for *The Matrix* (1999) and a Furby toy to stage an apology from Keanu Reeves to the late River Phoenix, his costar in 1991's *My Own Private Idaho*. These similarly lo-fi materials and production values convey the economy of means, or unequal power relation, by which an individual subject meets the powerful identity-shaping forces of cinema, but they also suggest the role play of the therapist's office. In *Vital Behaviors*, we watch this process turn inward, so imbricated is contemporary identity in the images of itself that it makes. Doing it for the 'gram is not new, nor is the mass capitalization on our ambitions to be corporate images or spokesmodels. But at what point does the self become schizoid? When does the image gain the lion's share of life?

"Where's the frame?" asks Okiishi at one point. Altemus checks the reference image and stretches his arms to create a frame for himself, beginning a few inches above his head and finishing below the knee. He describes a box around himself. We all know its dimensions. □

LAURA McLEAN-FERRIS IS CHIEF CURATOR OF THE SWISS INSTITUTE, NEW YORK.