

**strangely familiar**

[ to accompany film ]

06.03

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that makes It possible  
to pay atteNtion  
to Daily work or play  
as bEing  
noT  
what wE think it is  
but ouR goal  
all that is needed is a fraMe  
a change of mental attItude  
amplificatiON  
wAiting for a bus  
we're present at a Concert  
suddenlY we stand on a work of art the pavement.

- JOHN CAGE

[Junkerman 1994, 136]

This film investigates the spectacle of the everyday. The conventional context of spectacle as a large, lavish display has been substituted by a subtler interpretation of spectacle, one that is concealed within the everyday and revealed by a camera's 'artful gaze'. Drawing on collective knowledge of daily life, routine acts unfold as objects of wonder and the mundane shifts towards the marvellous.

Actions knit body, object and space together to make up the everyday. This film questions passive and generic modes of living, which accept the everyday as banal and without reference to art. The act of locating moments of spectacle in the routine of everyday life alters the way one sees and engages with the world. Perception, which can be both selective and distracted, is explored through various camera and editing techniques. Our engagement with daily life is understood in terms of the known, the habitual and ritual, as well as the unknown, which includes learning through invention and improvisation. This film proposes an interior defined by our actions and perceptions celebrated within the subtleties of daily life.

"...that it [space] is first of all heard (listened to) and enacted (through physical gesture and movements)." [Lefebvre 1991, 200]

**'wash** the dishes...'

**'do** the laundry...'

**'clean** your teeth...'...these imperative phrases of the everyday conjure up negative connotations of duty and repetition. Routine actions, performed in an automatic and unconsidered manner, viewed and carried out as 'chores' or 'tasks', sustain daily life's reputation as mundane. This film unravels seemingly tedious tasks and represents them as playful and evocative. When these routine acts are 'performed' as apposed to 'done' the marvel of the mundane is exposed instead of overlooked. Performance is redefined as any action carried out with a consciousness to itself, enabling routine acts to be considered worthy of special notice and therefore spectacular. [Schechner 2002, 25] The spectacle is found within "the performative quality of all seeing", proposed by Peggy Phelan who states that every action is performative, not only that which involves a script, definite audience and actor. [Phelan 1993, 147]

Daily routine is therefore approached intuitively, inspiring a sense of individual creativity rather than nurturing the normative. This film advocates a step forward for the passive conformer who dwells in the safety of the collective norm. The continual making, unmaking and remaking of social norms, and the potential for slight alteration within this repetition, is explored through the film's perception and active engagement. Similarly, preconceived notions of the 'correct' or 'proper' in relation to common behaviour and routines are challenged. In terms of the home, the image of the functional is traded with that of the dysfunctional, "possibly subverting this everyday space that in the past has 'promised' its inhabitants a normative life." [Ingraham 1998, 46]

The interior of the home was chosen as the site for this investigation for its deep sense of familiarity; however, the themes and actions of the film are common to all everyday spaces.

To draw out the wonderment in daily life means to shift away from the comfortable collective, but also to refocus towards participation. Deriving wonderment, the awe aroused by something strange and surprising, from daily life is a way of interpreting life as a form of art. The "asymmetrical network of surprises" [Krauss 1981, 232] or touches of wonder found in daily life are made spectacular through interaction. We need to allow our bodies to literally be the protagonist in the spectacle of the everyday. The individual, who embraces responsibility to discover what will or could happen, plays the dual role of both spectacle and spectator. The artificial separation of participant / spectator, art / life, has been criticised by many writers and artists, for example, John Berger spoke of subverting the idea of the spectacle being "the game that nobody plays and everybody can watch." [Berger 2001, 13]

The active engaged individual learns and grows through invention and experiment rather than verification of existing conditions. Named a “Heuristic”, Gregory Ulmer defines this strategy for learning as; to invent, discover], helping to discover or learn: sometimes used to designate a method of education in which the pupil is trained to find out things for himself. [Ulmer 1994]

“We’re making something, something that has material and historical limits, something that is inherently the product of collaboration and compromise, a practical experiment in living, regardless of whether we are philosophers or architects.” [Grosz 2001, 6]

“To see things properly, it is not enough simply to look. People who look at life – purely as witnesses, spectators – are not rare; and they contemplate life with less understanding and grasp of its rich content than anyone else. There really is no substitute for participation!” [Lefebvre 1992, 237]

This film is an analysis into my own behaviour, as a specific sampling of collective cultural knowledge of the everyday. The camera allows me, to analyse my behaviour in relation to the material world, to be both spectacle and spectator. This self referential way of working can be compared to the work of Vito Acconci who sees his main interests lying “not in another person as an outsider observing my behaviour, but more sort of seeping into what’s inside my behaviour, seeping into my experience, and my sort of sinking into his.” [Ward et al 2002, 95]

Acconci’s inquisitorial and poetic action uses his body to infiltrate his ideas to an audience.

“Performance was the literal embodiment of an idea; it was a way of denying mind / body separation; it was as if the performer were saying: look, I have this idea, but talk is cheap, so don’t believe me, don’t trust me – instead, step right up and touch me, my body is proving my idea by going through the motions.” [Ward et al 2002, 125]

One of the key initiatives for the film was to adopt Ulmer’s technique of learning through invention rather than drawing on existing knowledge. Undertaking daily routines in an impromptu manner exposes that which has never been considered whilst at the same time highlighting the deep entrenchment of our conditioned behaviour.

For example, in the sequence on nail clipping [REF. FILM 04:03 > 05:03], the nails are trimmed using improvised implements in an unrestrained childlike manner. However, the tools still perform their prescribed function: to snip, to shave, to peel, to sand, to bite, to chop.

The comic films of Charlie Chaplin embody improvisation as well as the relationship between the body, the material world and the social world.

“Naive, physically adept but spiritually innocent, Chaplain arrives in a complicated universe of people and things with fixed patterns of behaviours...

Always surprised, always delighted by the strangeness and richness of things, always awkward when faced with ritualised practices (essential behaviour, necessary conditioning)...

He comes as a stranger into the familiar world, he wends his way through it, not without wreaking joyful damage. Suddenly he disorientates us, but only to show us what we are when faced with objects; and these objects become suddenly alien, the familiar is no longer familiar.” [Lefebvre 1992, 10]

“Too often we are purely passive users of these everyday spaces and structures, adapting our activities and movements to that which has already been designed. And too often we do exactly what we are told.” [Borden 1996, 84]

“What appears as uncontrolled frivolous play – whether in the child, the unconscious, the primitive, the insane, or the untrained – becomes the foundation of the most serious transformation of society.” [de Zegher + Wigley 2001, 35]

A willingness to play, to take chances allows one to uncover and rediscover the element of art missing in our everyday life. The artists of the Fluxus group were adamant that art and design could contribute progressively to society. Joseph Beuys, in particular, wanted to see a ‘better world’, of which art was the main contributor; “ an art that you can live in, not look at the art as an object, more to learn to live in the element of art.” Similarly, as designers, it is our responsibility to work experimentally to show that we are not “makers of actualities, but makers of possibilities” that will help rather than hinders society’s development. [Schechner 2002, 25]

“Playful and willing to allow what might happen.... to see if something might be interesting – playful in that sense.” [Kaprow + Watts 1999, 88]

An exploration of the unknown, the inventive, the intuitive, uncovers our dependence on what is familiar. Familiarity provides a sound knowledge base for one to draw from, but to depend solely on that which is already known can only produce reiterations of past or existing ideas. The known should be only a starting point from which, through play and discovery, the unknown can be explored. Illustrated in the film are probing instances of the unexpected within the typical routine of daily life.

The Ancient Greeks claimed that philosophy should be an activity that co-exists with life insisting “That life lived with a certain focus is philosophy, as in our time it has been claimed that life lived with a certain focus is art.” [Warr 2000, 210]

Diogenes was a great hero of this tradition, and subsequently he has become a fundamental prototype of today’s performance art. He undertook challenging public behaviour as a kind of ‘performance philosophy’, which was designed to “subvert the habitual motivation systems of his viewers.” [Warr 2000, 210]

“Thrusting at the cracks of communal psychology, his tiny and quiet gestures laid bare a dimension of hidden possibilities which he thought might constitute personal freedom. His general theme was the complete and immediate reversal of all familiar values, on the ground that they are automatizing forces which cloud more of life than they reveal.” [Warr 2000, 210]

The sequence where dirty washing is neatly folded and placed in the washing machine [REF. FILM 02:03 > 02:54], is an example of the strange becoming familiar and the familiar becoming strange. [Borden et al 1996, 9] This sequence is not immediately noticed as unusual, for we are so accustomed to seeing clothes neatly folded. Henri Lefebvre describes the weird and the bizarre, in the same way that this sequence poses confusion; “An ambiguous mixture of the know and the unknown which confuses thought and meaning without actually revealing the unknown to the mind or the senses, without producing real enigmas or problems, without ever really being disturbing or worrying, such is the momentary experience of the bizarre.” [Lefebvre 1992, 118]

Touches of the unexpected housed within the routine framework of the everyday is what many artists and theorists have considered essential to life. In this film we notice the unexpected because we are given the normal, the accepted, the expected behaviour as comparison. For example, the act of brushing ones teeth [REF. FILM 00:46 > 01:45], resides in the set of customary and often mechanically performed procedures that make up the days routine.

“The power of seeing the mystery traced like a watermark beneath the transparent surface of the familiar world is only granted to the visionary.” [Lefebvre 1992, 107]

“What unifies what I do is the phenomenon of taking something that is crystal clear to me, something I seem to know, and finding that the closer I get and the more carefully I inspect it, the less clear it becomes.” [Friedman 2001, 1994]

This film utilises the camera as a device for qualitative research, in order to offer a new perception of routine acts, providing a means by which one can ‘listen’ to the everyday. The

routine acts of daily life have become so familiar, so automatic, so normal, that they have slipped from our visibility. The camera becomes a 'selective eye' for without it "we only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice." [Berger 1972, 8] This film removes a veil of numbness from our view of routine acts to expose an element of wonder captured by the camera's detailed frame.

"By close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieu under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action." [Benjamin 1973, 236]

In this series of close-ups only a limited viewpoint is permitted. Our everyday peripheral vision has been purposely excluded. This method forces one's imagination to piece together the rest of the scene, possible because the action is so familiar to us all. This montage depicts a typical day as a moving fabric of collective routines. The intricacies in the way these frames overlap, repeat and move in and out of a prescribed framework show the fluidity and potential for play within daily life. [SEE FILM 00:00 > 00:45]

The details are plucked out of their camouflaged comfortable surrounds, and juxtaposed against other glimpses in order to enhance or highlight that which is overlooked, or is noticed only in, what Walter Benjamin termed, 'a state of distraction'. [Benjamin 1973, 239] [SEE FILM 00:00 > 00:45]

This example highlights the way routine acts within the built environment drop into the recesses of our everyday familiar backdrop. Benjamin suggests that distraction refers to the "type of flitting and barely conscious peripheral vision." [Taussig 1992, 143] He applies this concept to our experience of the built environment; "while other media are experienced in a state of focussed, but often submissive, concentration, architecture is experienced in a state of distraction. The attention of the user is seemingly focussed on everything but the architecture." [Hill 1998, 144] This film offers a new focus, a 'peripheral focus', of that which is overlooked in the distraction of the everyday. Our everyday has been focussed away from narrow task orientation, towards a subtler sense of perception experienced through distraction and tactility. Benjamin also wrote of 'distraction' with reference to film "the distracted element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assault the spectator." [Taussig 1992, 143] [SEE FILM 00:00 > 00:45]

Benjamin's interest in the "everyday tactility of knowing", as well as this film's probing of common habitual knowledge, offers new ways to engage with the spatiality of everyday actions. [Taussig 1992, 144]

This film's analysis of everyday routine acts, reinterprets the way we engage with our everyday environment, both visually and actively. The unexpected found within the familiar calls for a move away from the prescribed 'use' of space, towards a body centric spatiality of actions. I propose an environment moulded by the action of its inhabitants, that intertwines form with the spectacular qualities of the everyday it surrounds. Bernard Tschumi has written extensively on the duality of form and occupation, stating that, "Architecture is defined by the actions and events which occur within it as much as the walls that mark its dimensions." [Hill 1998, 145]

This film's exposure of the strange within the seemingly familiar everyday is comparable to Jonathan Hill's perspective that "so often we assume a place is empty, when it is actually full of what we do not see." [Hill 1998, 150]

"Space is occupied, form is not. Space is particularly seductive because it is so hard to grasp and define ... instead I propose architecture in which actions rub against spaces. Feeling the taste and texture of the building on the tongue. Licking the loose pigment until nothing remains." [Hill 1998, 150].

Moments of wonder, normally glanced over but in this film exposed, remind us of the tactility in which we experience the everyday.

"In rewiring seeing as tactility, and hence as habitual knowledge, a sort of technological or secular magic was brought into being and sustained." [Taussig 1992, 144]

Can this newly found 'peripheral focus' that exposes the tactility of the everyday help to enliven our sense of creativity? Can an awareness of our tactile perception help us to live life artfully and therefore consider the everyday spectacular?



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