Invisible artifacts: public impasses, filmic intimacies

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INVISIBLE ARTIFACTS: PUBLIC IMPASSES, FILMIC INTIMACIES

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Film and Video Production in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER’S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

Carl Elsaesser

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts
in Film and Video Production at the 2018 May graduation.

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To exploration without resolve.
PUBLIC ABSTRACT

This essay mirrors the structure found in my thesis film—a series of small vignettes—but does not emulate one for the other and vice versa. The essay is an experiment that seeks to allow rather than define and imagines a world already in place rather than built by the accumulation of reading and writing this text; the vignettes serve as a witness to this world rather than symbols building up a system of signs.

I’m interested in expanding the conversation around political personhood towards a receptive stance; a politics of receptivity. This doesn’t serve as a counter to any narratives around a politics of action, activism and social justice, especially one that is needed now more than ever with the current political climate. Instead the text pays close attention to the daily, the individual, and the banal, not as an apathetic or reactionary stance, but as one charged with potential. In casting off an overarching relationship to narrative and resolve in the text, which does not deny narrativity found in the moments and individual vignettes, I posit a self of inconclusive gestures, pregnant moments and the feeling of something meaningful happening in a world of interviews, speculative text messages, portraits of binge watching tv, video essays, and case studies.

The potential pitfalls and failures of a piece of this nature is to read each vignette as a simple projection of a stable self, that a stable I is seeing himself in all that is around. And while this writing encourages one to hold up a mirror and see oneself in a vignette it is also a piece that explores these affective limitations and symbolic acts of violence. There is the critique that non-narrative potential filled space creates a problematically uncomplicated relationship to the subject matter and viewer.

This is a notion further developed in Maggie Nelson’s book, The Art of Cruelty
that thinks through arts capability to enact change through often violent or problematic means. In discussing the work of artist Alfredo Jaar in which he rebukes Newsweek’s headlines with his own headlines about the Rwandan genocide, she writes, “since the artist has predetermined what it is, exactly, that we should have been looking at… what is the use of our looking at all?” (Nelson 26). By avoiding the possibility of critique or question to the piece by supplying the question and answer, Jaar’s work, she argues, becomes problematically tame. The receptive stance taken aims to keeps questions at the forefront rather than answer them. It is a writing that tries to keep the question, “What is left? What is still there after?” churning, full of potential and charged.

It’s a piece that presumes a self always in the wake of, as Bergson writes with beautiful images of cones in his book *Matter and Memory*. It is a piece that also assumes a self that is always becoming, as Spinoza suggests with his famous line, “No one has determined what the body can do”. (Spinoza 87). Despite the contradiction of a self pulled to and from, past and future, this piece presumes that selfhood is formed on the basis of both simultaneously. Similar to how CA Conrad articulates his rituals creating space for himself, the text permits associations and cross readings in order to find some kind of residue to reside in. While this residual space from the accretion of texts rubbing up against each other is one in which I’m identifying a receptive selfhood, this space is one that also radically permits another.

Kathleen Stewart articulates a similar position in her fantastic ethnographic study of coal mining communities in West Virginia, *A Space on the Side of the Road*. In it she writes,

“In the effort to track something of the texture, density, and force of a local cultural real through its mediating forms and their social uses, it tears itself between evocation and representation, mimesis
It here could be both the text and an understanding of selfhood. This polemic of constructing a self through an affective refuge of experiences is one that is not a transaction. The vignettes, unless themselves an exchange, are complete onto themselves. They are curated and designed, but through their excess, unresolved nature and individuality they stand alone, while their impact secrete.

I cannot say how the wake of the piece will be felt or what action comes from political passivity. But, as the Vipassana teacher Michele McDonald teaches, I know that in order to act first one has to understand where we are acting from. In this way the piece performs a similar purpose to Raymond William’s, *Structures of Feelings* that maps out affective terrains. This piece attempts to map, but never seeks to pin point or locate. There is no single source to find for one’s internal landscape, but there might be a way to witness where and how impact occurs in the radically passive personhood, the same way focusing on the breath allows one to witness when and how awareness shifts to thought, sensation or emotion; it’s about a continuous how, rarely about fixing a why.

In lieu of the film one can think of the text as a bin system for video editing software. The folder in which this text is archived would be titled, potential. The text moves similarly to scrubbing through material. Then there is | |. I’m hesitant to pin down and strictly label the significance of | | but maybe thinking of it as a direction; | | is a whispered, “now,” or a pinched now, or a hand on the back with a warm now, but most importantly it is a continued now that respects critical/emotional distance. This sign is riddled throughout the text- in some moments performing an experience of time, time passing, or time severed, or performing the self addressing self through the correction of speech and grammar. At times it reveals an emotional temporal sense where the
subjective experience extends or shrinks the actual.
“Change is an impact lived on the body before anything is understood, and it is simultaneously meaningful and ineloquent… It’s like winning the lottery, getting a wash of money you haven’t earned: being possessed by coming into possession of possessions, [one is] shocked into something impassive.” Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*. Pg.108
There’s a man at a desk to write
there’s no way to tell what it says
there’s the hope of a soft duration
something longer than a | he plays *Hejira*

| it worked in the past | the hibiscus plant could use some water |
| his cheek still on his knee | he wonders when he can go |
there’s the thought of mouths smacking close to his ears
he moves his tongue to imitate the sound

| white walls |
| smile |
| sweat |
| smack |

She tells you about a book she read where

at some point a boy
stands next to a cornfield | the corn is tall
and ready

the sound gets close

and then gets small

[the boy stands still]

|looking ahead|

|it’s v important that he looks ahead|

|something static where the vibration|
|just beyond sight|
|changes the|
|in comings and goings and|

you can’t do shit but look

ahead.

|rectangular|
|tractor is to sky|

|sound| |
|is to coke on the dashboard|

|the writing desk is too flat|

|the Combine is not seen but is just as close.|

|come to|

|is to fall.|

What if self comes forward in a gesture

away from our form and understood as shapes|

|reach is to|
Yeah| |uh| |while at work as| |tech support at a university| |I’ll submit FOIA requests to sites of mass shootings and obtain|heavily|redacted footage of empty hallways| |conference rooms| |theaters| |the footage is totally innocuous| |I’ll than take the footage and pass it onto online contractors that I’ll typically work with if I have a media related project that needs some help| |I’ll ask the contractors to help beautify the images cause| |I mean they are quite boring|whatever suggestions they come up with I’ll agree to| |so the results reveal this kind of invisible rupture to these things that are designed to not be acknowledged| |3-d animated people in Columbine’s hallway| |lens flares in Sandy Hook’s conference room| |whether it’s these aesthetics that supposed to make something more beautiful| |or it’s these institutional spaces that are designed to have people pass through without leaving a trace| |Now both have to reconcile| |their own inability to be invisible any more like a kind of effigy to the violence of forgetting and cleaning up.

The lens flare and the institution| |The bland emotional design and spectacular rupture.
What if self comes forward in a gesture away from our form but understood as shapes
What is yours role?
What does you do? internal / external

I found this note on the desk.
There was as much silence|took several naps in the hanging
hours, watched my hand float in a chamomile bath|

| all the water lit|

| made it move and rise out of the tub.|

| there’s the weight of a
sentence|or a body lying on his bed with eyes on the open window and the lace shade.

The rest falls in|

I wanna say this is the same body.

You is in muscle memory|

| touching all over| today|

| salt baths with lavender| still

in the office| your voice comes up

the file Wes swimming 2012 in a folder of collected water sounds.
I'm not going to tip this over if I jump? no. Then peeking, then water, then a minute more.
I asked to film your portrait as you were hanging out of the front seat of the car deep in a storied love with the afternoon air.

We had just left the theater and were making our way home. You said you had never seen a movie like that, one that had required all of yourself to participate.

When you started posing like the film man I focused on your shadow sliding through the pavement. You in your film. I'm on ours. And it doesn't take much to participate in a shape that can know us all as pleasure, or if I'm being honest own us all as self. We had a story and a shadow like a kind of negative where we could at least pertain to the same filmic land. I thought that with just enough thinking we could both work our ways out.
Shape: you.

This guy’s name was Wes

|from Des Moines|
|Thick and sweet accent|

|I guess he had seen my car parked overnight and asked if I

had a light| |he said|I am too sensitive to electric signals|when I asked

about being filmed|

|I had backed off and I think he noticed and said he

wanted to help but couldn’t|I was admittedly looking for something real|

|some kind of decent shape| |the one that sneaks out in front of the man and

kisses you first| |you know|but I had to be taken down a notch|

|I had to check myself|

|I had to hold a contradiction| |that I thought I knew him in some respect before

there was even a sound and admittedly even after there was as well|

it had been chilly, late fall. He had a bag on his back full of books.

I offered a ride that I didn’t really want to give and thankfully he turned it down|

|I drove down that skinny road to the fat sounds of a 1990 Toyota Camry|I imagined

that the browned oak leaves falling everywhere were sailboats with their masts pulled tight
and watched them get caught in any place above the ground.

Have you been to Malaga Island? In Casco bay? Did I tell you about it?

It was once an interracial fishing community.

It was small enough to shout across.

   It was one of the last islands before the open sea but still close enough to land
to make it ideal for fishing and living.

40 families. 1912.

It was the effect of eugenics put into policy by a racist governor

Governor Frederick Plaisted

It was exhumed body by body and transferred to mass graves.

It was put in institutions for the feeble minded. It was generations deep and still growing.
Rob Stanford came in an-eh said| Are you a real Darling| And I said well yeah I am|haha|I am a real darling but my maiden name was Darling too| And he said|Will you come with me| And he took me over and he just started pulling out all these cases of little pieces| of| buttons and hooks and| and|uh pieces of ceramic|one of the last articles written| was| that when they went to inspect the island it looked like no one had ever lived there| and| when he| laid this all out| to me|and he said|this is from Malaga Island| and I star| I just| started to cry and I said| then nothing is left| to show that anyone| lived there.
We decided to fix the camera to the canvas to film the shadows

so that in a sense the camera does not move in relation to what is being shot

but instead it is the world that passes through unstuck It is the shadow of Malaga Island that passes through. It is the trees that overhang a graveyard that was once there.

It passes through like a weightless mark.
I would transfer the files from the camera or memory card to the hard drive and from there I put all that was shot on the timeline at once I shoot and edit as I make the movie so there's a back and forth between what I see and what else I need and what to shoot and knowing during shooting what I already have in the edit and what shapes to look for so all the video files are on the timeline and I scrub through to take what I need, and then I cut a shot when the eye has enough time to scan the entire frame each file counts as One but when on the timeline I export the timeline to make a new One this new file is then put into the timeline and renamed it becomes a new One so it is this operation from the Multiple to the One the One with other Ones that were multiple before the operation making new Ones allows me to generalize movements within a frame as a single movement to count differently when I watch the frames I can analyze the movement in and out of the frame and see its general shape and what other shapes may relate or not relate to it when I shoot I shoot as if I am simply adding to existing Ones to come or just a new Multiple.
I don’t know how to tell you that

it’s more than about making| making making| It’s about untangling too and that’s just a too.
I had to check myself
In Contact, the 1997 film by Robert Zemeckis, the character, Dr. Ellie Arroway goes on a great adventure to the outskirts of the universe and visits an alien colony. However, when she returns there is no evidence of her trip. The external world at the end of the film is the same as the beginning. I’ll argue that this narrative performs a kind of mimetic shift in the viewer’s position. From one of unchecked privilege presuming the role of an omniscient god to a limited albeit humanistic perspective. This isn’t the first time a film has used the narrative arch of a grand adventure that only the main character and audience are privilege too (Spirited Away, Labyrinth, Nightmare on Elmstreet) But it is irrefutably the strongest.

All things have an origin in the film. This is one of the great traits of Hollywood filmmaking in the 90’s and it’s overtly displayed with Dr. Ellie Arroway, expertly played by Jodie Foster. Ellie is driven because of her dad; she is searching for aliens because she’s trying to fill the void left in her after her dad dies. Drumlin – the antagonist - presumes that his destiny is to make first contact with the aliens but since this film is not about him he gets exploded half way through so that so that Ellie can be the one to ride the alien space craft. In this single origin narrative, where time functions in a linear way, significance is not only hinged to a symbolic understanding but likewise to a layer of narrative resolve, so that when we see an object, phrase, or camera angle dotted on we know that it must have a use later in the film. Film scholar David Bordwell calls this “compositional motivation.”
At the end of the film Ellie holds the whole universe in her hand. The universe fits in her hand! She has been changed.

At the beginning of the film a great expanse holds Ellie in its hand. Establishing the self is a porous event; holding one’s own reading and the being held by a reader cannot be unhinged from each other.
Take for instance the compass. The way in which we understand the compass by the end of the film is entirely removed from the object but rather it is understood by its symbolism. This is a point made clear in the last shot whereby the compass comes into view blurred before being recognized. The compass is not used for its utilitarian purpose, i.e. significance is not determined by its object-hood but rather by its narrative function: 1. of love 2. emotional baggage 3. broken trust and finally 4. Of acknowledged trust in the alien technology that the stupid world of men made her doubt.

By restricting the symbolic world of the film to a handful of signs read narratively, the film sets up the viewer to use a minimal amount of effort to know and empathize with Ellie… all of her. And here the word ‘all’ feels like an insult because the film suggests that it would be much harder to empathize with Ellie if she felt representatively or narratively incomplete, or laboriously complex i.e. Ellie does not spend any of her time masturbating on the internet and she doesn’t half way through the film decide that she’d rather pursue a career in dentistry to have a more stable income. Instead, everything that exists out of line does not exist in the film so that we can have it all, or at least feel like we do. Empathy here is an act of violence, treating Ellie similarly to property that we inhabit through a reductive reading of codes that make it so easy to
project ourselves onto.

However, things take a turn when she returns from travelling lightyears away. No time has passed on earth, and there is no documentation of her trip. In front of a federal investigation and when asked the impossible question, “Given the lack of evidence regarding your alien adventure can you prove you experienced what you say you did?” the soul establishes itself. It’s a self the viewer can no longer easily inhabit without reconciling the doubt and questioning that is brought up in the courtroom. In the same way Ellie must address herself as individual now we must address our own individual desires to empathize with her without complication or hesitation. To long to understand, or long to be a part of and identify with, so often slips into the role of a one sided inquiry so that we become the federal investigation here.

Why won’t you let us project all of ourselves onto you?

“Because I can’t”.

But this is the only way I know how to relate to others.

I’m sorry.

Okay okay, but then how can I relate to you or trust you without feeling ownership?

Just let me do my thing. I’m a complex and contradictory human.

Ahhh.

“I wish_____that I could share that with everyone”.

Me too, me too.

I remember us dancing|
we're in the front yard of your apartment back in Boystown,

or on the long slope to the bay at Ostermen’s point|yeah|we’re

quiet when we dance and we keep|kept our clothes off|
you bring the cell phone close to our ears so we’ll hear the music| |I just can’t remember the
sound|the sound leaves dust|he|ha|ha| I had you down on rock|older sixties stuff|

|I|there was room to roam meaning no one was gonna peep|

|our|our|skin and the open sea|we found something|

|later you told me to turn my back to the land because the greyness of the ocean gives| |gave
us something further|I| |think| |because the shadows there made us feel too close|you needed something
to let go through| |yeah, I knew you were
cute even before the clothes came off| |and I’d have gladly kissed you then|

|It’s hard enough to say more| |but it’s there somewhere thick

and outside of us.
And and touch Um full body touch you know, body to body um exploring exploring each other um what does exploring mean exploring their entire body You know with my hands perhaps with my lips um but touching all over.

That’s the mystery of the future that’s all we know that That our happiness will lie with God how he does that now the body comes into it we’re not angels and this human body has to be transformed the The new testament writers have difficulty saying exactly what it was they wanna say it’s the same body that’s one thing that they wanna get clear but it’s different.
|empty couch|
|iced windows|held breath|
|thaw|an empty lake|footsteps

on the grizzly top |and if

    that murky ice loses pressure| hold that echo like a shiver

    |each step|each step further out|each step further out to the middle|

    |we were on the bridge|

Cedar Rapids River in the middle

of January|thick ice shapes came

past in a constant drawl|

You called them Burgie Bits|we poured Schlitz on Burgie|

|you said|

One of my biggest fears is to become another person's narrative obstacle.

I can’t stop picking at back of my head|

Oil gets caught under my finger nails|
| built up scabs from wearing a hat in the constant cold |
| thick siren |

thick soup |

| I’m pouring left overs into narrow mugs to store |
| you taught me to keep the pot up off the lid. |

The soup pulls towards the middle as it falls through the air so it won’t hit the sides of the lid|it’s not my gesture|it’s Aaron’s|

| I take that|I take that with me|I take that with me cause there’s never enough and always more|

| it’s the only way I know. |
I wanna say it’s the same body

|Body, again, a shape: you|Cicada in the afternoon|clothes still on the floor|
|the moisture of feet on the window|oblong burrito weighted on the city|
|waiting for Sam with feet across the Charles River and covering Cambridge|And me in it and yet|like the smudged
wine glass left in the corner of the elevator | or the finger print on the mirror

| To be alone | to be alone | to be alone. I wanna say that this is a memory of you |

| and you aren’t even here | but your voice is out and can’t be resolved | is turned away |

| the sound can’t help but try | to place you |

Into | hallowed | ground.

That there is something more spatial about the clash |
constrained to the bus heading towards Chicago.

That all the square windows have marks like brush strokes,

usually the size of ping pong balls,

but sometimes as large as cantaloupe.

They’re blurring the Iowan cornfields.

They are without smell

but I can| |The one beside me is not mine|

Your what| crosses and blends below an emergency exit.

I read about a plane that caught fire on a runway in O’Hare;

the cantaloupe smudges on its window lit up or wait| |before the glass did. And so many men| |The one sitting next to me slowly

leaves his weight on my shoulder. His name passes

through and gets stuck on the glass. And I asked

if I could take a picture of his neck| |He

smiles and turns away from me| |between

the thought of your forehead or was it sleep?
and this fat man’s fat pretty neck peeking out of his polo
t-shirt like a fish rising.

There’s this thing you once told me
or did I tell| that you saw
a scene all at once. I had you in the moment.

We were walking down Embarcadero| I needed time
couldn’t wait until you noticed each small part singing its own sign|

|waiting for the

bus|

|The surprising thing I want to say|

|That the smell of your hair|

|already home|

|why does it seem wrapped up in a welcomed neglect|

|That the desire for change is converse to the seas of corn|

|That it’s just like a
movie

[That it’s a]
This text is only a beginning. It is speculative in its undertaking and has only begun to trouble the waters of diffuse selfhoods. Of course, there is more to say and never enough as any non-narrative space of potential has trouble putting a period at the end of a thought or sentence. It’s sunny outside. It’s 60 degrees for the first time in what feels like ages. I came home last night, and a mocking bird was still cooing after the sun had gone down. Twice in the last week someone casually used the word inculcate which I have never heard before or since. The hibiscus plant needs some water. I don’t how to tell you that these things matter—
Works Cited


