

“Not the exotic anymore, but the endotic”: Georges Perec and Performing the Ordinary

In 1973, French novelist and essayist Georges Perec declared that we should found our own ‘endotic anthropology’ in reaction to our ‘pillaging’ of the exotic through the mass media (2008 [1973]: 210). His critique was a reaction against the media’s privileging of the trauma of the ‘other’ (‘the front page splash, the banner headlines’) and the consequent value placed on trauma over that of everyday events. Perec saw the excessive documenting of the ordinary in daily life – the ‘infra-ordinary’ or the ‘endotic’ – as an antidote to this. Through an obsessive and meticulous accounting for everything and anything in one’s immediate surroundings, this ‘endotic anthropology’ would actively attempt to uncover the unimportant and the insignificant.

In an online global world where value is increasingly linked to publicity (e.g. viral memes and videos, ‘tweets’ and vlogs) it is perhaps time to consider the significance of valuing the ordinary (rather than the traumatic, the shameful, the voyeuristic and the spectacular: areas encouraged by the ‘click bait’ of online social media). In giving significance to such events it is ‘as if what speaks is always abnormal [...]’ (Perec [1973] 2008: 209). In giving value to the ordinary we, in turn, begin to value the space of our own identity and everyday ‘normal’ experience that lies outside of commercially predefined trajectories.

In her book, ‘Ordinary Affects’ (2007), Kathleen Stewart also adopts this pursuit of the ordinary in an attempt to isolate the ‘forces’ that ‘bring into view’ overarching representational terms such as ‘neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, and globalization’ (Stewart 2007: 1). She claims that these terms currently do not ‘begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in’ (ibid). By documenting the ordinary, Stewart attempts to gently frame the literality of the everyday in a way that might frame the ‘flows of power’ that are linked to these arbitrary terms. Stewart describes an ordinary affect as ‘still life’ and how this ‘can be experienced [...] as an empty pause [...] or a profound disorientation.’ (Stewart 2007: 2). Disorientation is meant here as that which disturbs the habitual forgetting of ordinary inhabited experience. Being still to this flow wakes us up (in a sense) and, also, makes us noticeable to ourselves.

Stewart’s attention to the ordinary is not a reaction against a media world of trauma but an attempt to see the playing out of power and ‘affect’ on a micro level of the everyday. However, through their pseudo-anthropological practice, both Stewart and Perec do appear to draw towards a ‘[...] wish for the simple life that winks at us from someone else’s beautiful flowerbeds’ (Stewart 2007: 12). There is something in the ordinary that comforts, heals and restores by resisting bigger ideologies of what it is to ‘be’. For both Perec and Stewart, access to this ordinary lies in the interaction with, and careful analysis of, the object as event.

In 1967 Michael Fried’s famous essay “Art and Objecthood” argued against any significance in the materiality, or ‘literality’, of the object. His essay was written as a reaction against the tendency of Minimalist art to draw attention

to the time and space of the viewer, rather than the conceptual space of the art itself. Fried claimed that by drawing attention to an object's literalness a theatrical relation is set up between the viewing subject and art object. Theatricality is essentially a double space – a space of audience and performer, witness and witnessed. The doubleness of space when viewing a work is always present but in non-theatrical work the viewer is encouraged to forget, or overlook, the viewing space in favour of the conceptual or fictional space. Fried argued that Minimalist art was theatrical in that it had an 'anthropomorphic value' where the object seemed to 'look back' at the viewer, thus drawing attention to the viewer's act of looking. In such a situation, the temporal and random physical space of the viewer and act of viewing is brought into consciousness and forms part of the appreciation of the work itself. It is in this way that the object, when framed in such a theatrical fashion, can slow down a viewer's attention to their everyday interaction with the physical world, drawing significance to the ephemeral moment.

While theatricality may have been objectionable to Fried within the context of conceptual art, the marking of the ephemeral moment through the re-framing of the art object was of great value to the Performance Art of the 1960 and 70s in the West. At this time, Performance Art commonly rejected any fictional or representational space in search of a radical presence that was seen to be more authentic to the interrogation of subjecthood than tradition theatre. This interrogation often involved the framing of the body as object to investigate where the object stops and the subject begins. In order to frame the body as object, performers had to find ways to overcome problem of intentionality that was seen to be intrinsic to the narrative of subjecthood. Performing artists therefore often worked with rules, gameplay and constraints in order to provoke unintentional action during the performance event.

Perec's attraction to the 'ludic', such as palindromes, lipograms, pangrams, anagrams, isograms, acrostics, and crosswords (2008 [1973]: 142) and textual constraints, such as the task of writing a whole novel without the use of the letter 'e' (*A Void* written in 1969) were his strategies for provoking a liberating new narrative of the self. These strategies give partial authorship of work to the literal objectness encountered by the subject, from which the subject emerges. When introducing game play (or 'constraints') performance art artists were also trying to find resistance to oppressing narratives: to find ways to write new narratives about the self and the concept of self. "Why do I need to write this text?" says Perec. "Who is it really intended for?" (ibid: 165). To have 'access to my own story and my voice [...]' (ibid: 172). The structure of the game attempts to take away the intentionality of the self in order to be able to allow new narratives of the self to take shape.

So, in order to identify Perec's challenge in performance practice, performers (or artists) have to have noticed the unnoticeable: '[...] [W]here is it? [...] the banal, the quotidian [...] how to give them [...] a tongue to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are' (Perec, 2008 [1973]: 209-210). It must therefore be a performance that gives a voice to the quotidian – one could go so far as to say, to discover a kind of agency of the object. But can this be realized through constraint and gameplay alone?

In the theatrical structure discussed above, there is a *performative* relation between the subject and object. In some performance practice, even where rules or gameplay occur, there is also a social or *affective* relation between subjects. This social or emotional bias, I argue, shifts more towards prewritten narratives of the social self. In an affective relation, the doubleness of theatricality is composed of a subject and a subject, whereas in a performative relation doubleness occurs between the subject and the object. Where there is an affective relation, what guides and frames a work is the subject and his or her intention, desire or emotion. Careful consideration must be taken with how the work is both generated and exhibited. Later, I conclude that the work must be presented more like a performative document, as the presence of a performer in the work does not easily allow for a performative relation. But first, let us consider the issue of an affective relation.

Although Stewart's anthropology of the ordinary offers clues towards a methodology for the production of a resistant and restorative space, her strategy for noticing the ordinary is guided by *affect*. *Affect* is an emotional response that Stewart links to 'public feeling' (Stewart 2007: 5). Stewart uses the word 'we' to reflect this 'public feeling' that she attempts to make 'habitable and animate' through her 'ethnographic attention' (ibid: 4). In one of her ethnographic accounts she states that: 'A "we" of sorts opens in the room, charging the social with lines of potential' (ibid: 13). This is therefore a feeling that, without being able to articulate, 'we' are all agreed on. But although Stewart compares this to the notion of Roland Barthes' 'third meaning' I would argue that this 'agreement' is always cultural and even though we cannot articulate it semantically, it can still pre-exist as a cultural language that is learned. *Affect* can therefore be seen to be a social encounter embedded in cultural narratives, narratives that often come from the mass circulation of the commercial value system.

So, it seems that Stewart's method of selecting ordinary events is to make a judgement of value based on her own emotional response to a situation. One could argue that there is something beyond culture in the experience of affect. However, when using emotional judgement to select the 'ordinary' it is not a neutral strategy. The key mechanism for salience, the property of something being noticeable or important, is, according to Ronald DeSousa (1987), emotion. That is, we only notice things because of an emotional agenda. DeSousa asserts that emotions are learned like a language and have a dramatic structure (he calls these 'paradigm scenarios'). In other words, emotions exert directive power over perception because our emotions have content (DeSousa 1987: 332).

An excellent example of an affective theatrical relation can be seen in Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* (2010). Here, Abramovic carries out constraint in a durational piece where she sits in a chair and has her audience sit opposite with a table between them. The rules are: she sits for hours with no food or drink and intensely gazes at the viewer. In her performance, there was said to be a silent 'energy dialogue' between her and the spectator. This exchange has been reported to have been intensely emotional for those who

experienced it. 'Audience members who took turns across from Abramovic laughed, frowned, smiled, wept, and fell in love' (Hornsby 2013: np). The power of the eyes staring into the eyes of another often evokes an emotional response. In this two-way exchange we are transported out of the ordinary into the world of emotion – love, drama, violence – the well-trodden 'paradigm scenarios' of the subject. Because of this, the ordinary act of sitting opposite someone is radically transformed due to the intersubjective power of affective theatricality. While this is indeed an exemplary work of art, it is not a place where the ordinary can be evoked or framed.

Dan Graham's *Performer/Audience/Mirror* (1977) should, in principle, be an ideal example of a Perecian approach to the interrogation of the ordinary. Graham sets himself the task of attempting to capture a basic performance situation (one performer in a room with an audience seated opposite) by continuously verbally describing the ongoing situation. Graham describes his every move, members of the audience's every move etc. But from viewing the video documentation and from reading the transcript of the event Graham produces, there is a very different outcome to that of Perec's. Unlike Perec's methodical surveying of place and others, the people in Graham's piece were identified as audience and were therefore not only conscious of being surveyed but also *affected* by the process itself. They were agents in the same game, working with Graham to produce what the 'now' was and even, how it was to be interpreted. In this way the theatrical situation was social, that is, it involved more than one person. Hence, this particular theatrical relation was between subject to subject.

Graham's privileging of the social experience also comes into view by the fact that, although he does focus on objects, he rarely mentions the place or architecture or items that surround him and others as stand-alone features. The objects to which he refers are invariably personal – or of the person – the body, or clothing or that which identifies, or adorns the person. He identifies people according their relation to each other "at the back," "in the center". Although Graham exudes a calm and almost clinical exterior his piece is affected because of the reception of these observations: evidenced by his red face (which he refers to), and outbursts of laughter and huffs of impatience from the audience. The situation is filled with anxiety, self-consciousness, and assumptions that are dressed within the guise of technical neutrality and simplicity.

It therefore seems that the artist, when creating the work of the ordinary, and the viewer, when experiencing it, should be alone: in being alone there is more of an opportunity for the object to 'look back' rather than the subject, thus creating a performative theatrical relation.

When discussing performance documentation, Philip Auslander states that there are two types of documentation: 'documentary' and 'theatrical'. The difference, according to Auslander, is ideological: the 'documentary' frames itself in a way that encourages the viewer to read it as a supplement to an historical event; while the 'theatrical' asks the viewer to accept the document as an art object in itself. It is therefore the ideological framing of the document

that determines how it is received. For example, following Jon Erikson, Auslander states that black and white images taken as documents of a live performance encourage the viewer to see this documentation as a 'supplement' to the performance. Perec's documents, however, are presented in a way that evokes the conscious performance of the reader. He tells his readers how their eyes are like a pigeon, pecking (2008 [1973]: 176).

Perec therefore exhibits his work as a 'theatrical' document. His work has its focus firmly in the present, in the time of making, acting or doing, and as such takes the reader to the present, *performative* moment. In this way Perec's work generates a space for the present moment of its reader – his work is only completed by the present activity of a reader. Auslander goes on to assert that:

Documentation does not simply generate image/statements that describe an autonomous performance and state that it occurred: it produces an event as a performance [...] (2006: 5)

Each reading of Perec marks an event, a theatrical encounter between subject and object. Perec's methodology of creating his work is therefore also reflected in the viewer's encounter with the work itself: a solitary experience of reading and reflecting. The object must therefore have autonomy – a document that is exhibited as a performance.

Vito Acconci's set himself very clear and basic rules for documenting a city street in his project *Blinks* (1969):

Holding a camera, aimed away from me and ready to shoot, while walking a continuous line down a city street. Try not to blink. Each time I blink: snap a photo. Acconci, *Blinks* (1969)

The outcome (the work exhibited) resulted in twelve photographs of a city that detailed tall buildings, signs, street lamps, a road and a path or sidewalk – no people featured and so the streets seemed 'silent'. When examining the photos there are some iconic images that are of their time like the cars and some signs that encourage a 'documentary' reading. But the work remains 'theatrical' in its performance of the ordinary. What is immediately noticeable is the imagined movement between each take, movement marked by the difference in the location of buildings and objects between one photo to the next. This movement is clearly framed as my own – in moving my eyes over the images, I witness my own production of a gestalt – like the slowing down, or freezing of a film. Rather than 'see' the photos (or immerse myself) I am encouraged to 'read' them, as they are arranged like sentences, four per row over three rows, moving from left to right – my reading movement, mirroring the imagined movement. It is as if my movement is being 'second guessed'. I also notice an eerie feeling from the over-arching buildings – the feeling of being positioned as I notice how, as well as the view finder, the architecture of the street dictates the positioning of the shot. Acconci's work positions me, just as the streets positioned him. And my activity is ghosted by his (my imagined) movement. But more than this, I am encouraged to re-read the 'sentence' of this movement over and over. And something in that activity, repeatedly performed, slips away.

In remaining effectively 'out of the picture,' Acconci has captured something profound in the mundane. If there was a subject present in the shots, or if we were encouraged to imagine that Acconci had chosen each shot carefully, then there is little opportunity for this to happen as we assume the pre-narrativised point from which the other 'looks' – i.e. 'public feeling'. 'Constraints' therefore promote, or facilitate, a theatrical relation between the subject and object, but one where the object resists (or exceeds) its status as object – where it is given a kind of agency to complete a new conception, a new narrative of everyday experience.

We are permanently looked upon by the unknown other – namely, the ordinary, the endotic. Noticing the object looking back is actually to recognise a thing we already are aware of somewhere in our subconscious: that meaningless hosts meaning. However, bringing this to consciousness can promote fear – or at least some uneasiness. Perhaps Perec avoided this emotional narrative *by* counting, ordering and gameplaying? Being alone, the fragmentation of the whole and the agency of the object are the key components of Sigmund Freud's 'Uncanny'. However, going back to DeSousa, if we *can* view this usually highly emotional state as just another narrative, then perhaps we are left with a state of 'profound disorientation' that gives a voice to the endotic part of ourselves.

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