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Snapshots of the Everyday

My overarching idea with this project was to capture specific moments in time through the medium of language, similar to the way that a photographic snapshot captures moments visually. I began a similar project nine years ago, when I was sixteen years old and attending high school in Illinois, but ended up abandoning it not long afterwards. Our studies of Everyday Life Theory this semester led me to once again start thinking about my long-discarded project, and I began working with my collected writings, rewriting, adding to, combining, and juxtaposing them to create a textual montage of my everyday life. Ultimately, I chose to combine a prose piece with four poems for my creative performance piece, all of which in some way engage with the subject of love. The prose piece, *Remember*, is to be read by one performer, while a second performer simultaneously reads the four poems in the following order: *Remember*, *Impotence*, *Deer Hunters*, and *The Ghost of You and Me*. In the background, a collection of short, vulgar animations done by my friend and colleague Chris Miller are to be projected silently.

For Benjamin, “the theme of distraction becomes something that might characterize both the lived experience of everyday modernity (the multifarious pulls on attention) and the forms most productively able to articulate it” (Highmore 68-9). My decision to have these texts read simultaneously, along with the bizarre and disturbing animation component, is inspired by this idea of distraction and the multifarious pulls on attention. Montage is “the most crucial

representational form for the everyday,” for our actual lived experience is a constant bombardment of the senses (Highmore, 30). As I sit here writing this, for instance, I am distracted by dozens of things: the sound of birds chirping outside, footsteps and thumping from the apartment next door, the buzz of a plane overhead, the cat crying for her breakfast, the sight of the dog licking his foot in my peripheral vision, the open windows letting in fresh air and sunshine that make me long to be lounging by the pool, the rough fabric of my favorite armchair against my back, the lure of my internet connection, television, and cell phone tempting me to procrastinate, and always my own whirlwind thoughts, stresses, and anxieties.

Everyday life is never just one thing at a time, so the articulation, the creative or critical engagement with the everyday, seems to require aesthetic engagement with the fact that we are constantly processing a multitude of sensory images, thoughts, and emotions. “Benjamin describes his project as being ‘[T]o detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, individual moments,’” which could also describe my intention with Snapshots (Highmore 61). I have combined pieces of writing that capture specific moments, emotions, and events, with the intention of creating a self-reflexive performance piece that arrives at a deeper understanding of myself and my overall experience of love. The prose piece *Remember* tells the story of my first love, a boy whom I never gave a chance, and my first lover, a woman, while the poem *Remember* is about my first sexual encounter with her. *Deer Hunters*, the only piece that doesn’t deal with romantic love, tells of a particular experience that encapsulates my strained and distant relationship with my stepfather. *Impotence* is a bitter piece about the failure of my first real relationship with a man, while *The Ghost of You and Me* deals with the end of my relationship with my ex-fiancée, the woman from the first poem.

Benjamin seems uncertain about the idea of exposing a foundation that would make sense of the everyday. For him, “to bring everyday material together in a productive juxtaposition seems to look more like a chance encounter than a methodological procedure, a daring wager rather than a ‘sure thing,’” (Highmore 61). My creative juxtaposition of these works is methodological but also in some ways just a product of chance. From a pool of a couple dozen pieces of poetry and prose, I selected these somewhat at random. They are linked by a thematic similarity, but were also chosen for aesthetic purposes: I liked the way they sounded together, and their rhythms and length are well matched. It is somewhat of a ‘daring wager,’ as Highmore calls it, but I believe this method also aesthetically represents the experience of the everyday itself. We do not get to choose the combination or order of stimuli life throws at us. Our thoughts, even, jump from one thing to the next seemingly at random. The things that weigh heavily pop up at inopportune times, like the juxtaposition of a traumatic childhood experience or the remembrance of an abusive relationship in the middle of reminiscence about the joys and challenges of finding and losing love.

Everyday life theory is an attempt to deal critically with the everyday in a way that is self-aware enough to admit that it has no real idea how to do that. The everyday is a slippery and elusive ‘field of study’ that has only recently been conceived of as being available for critical attention. Everyday life theory wants to make visible what is normally invisible to us because we experience it inattentively. It is also in some ways creative of everyday life, “the product that is generated by the kind of inquiry that I will be looking at” (Highmore 32). To give critical attention to everyday life is necessarily to change it. If we think about it differently, we change the way we experience the everyday, in the same way that the way we act changes when we know we are being watched. In everyday life as on the stage, we play to our audience. Everyday

life theory seems to say: the everyday, as the essential and inescapable experience of human existence, is important and deserving of critical attention, but how do we give that kind of attention to something that is such an integral part of who we are? It attempts to look at this thing, the everyday, which we cannot quite see because we are so deeply enmeshed in it, from different angles to see if it is possible to make rational, critical sense of the results.

Michael Taussig questions our means of sensing everydayness, proposing it as an “embodied and somewhat automatic ‘knowledge’ that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational” (Taussig 141). The way that we know the everyday, then, “not only challenges practically all critical practice, across the board, of academic disciplines but is a knowledge that lies as much in the objects and spaces of observation as in the body and mind of the observer” (Taussig 141-2). I can find no flaw in this conception of the everyday and everydayness, and it seems to me that therefore the best way to express, understand, and examine the everyday is through art. Performance art in particular is necessarily imageric and sensate, and it is very much of the body and mind of not only the observer but the creator and the performers as well. Everyday life already is a performance. We perform our genders, our jobs, and our various roles in relation to the people in our lives. I cannot count the number of times I have heard someone use the phrase “fake it ‘til you make it,” as the best way to get through grief or heartbreak. We are expected to perform, to uphold certain societal standards for acceptable behavior that say it is not always appropriate to express our true feelings or to be ourselves. Performance is already a fundamental part of our everyday, lived experience, making it an ideal medium for communicating that experience.

“The grave concern of a growing number,” says Kaprow, “is to try to make sense out of the countless disconnected, and sometimes very dangerous pieces of our culture and to rediscover the whole,” which sounds remarkably similar to Simmel’s aesthetics of the everyday as a microscopic that suggests the macroscopic, an everyday “made to register vividly the social totality from within” (Kaprow 216; Highmore 37). There is a duality in everyday life theory; it is both an attempt to present our fragmentary existence to the light of critical inquiry and also to find or create wholeness from disparity. The disconnectedness, however, seems to be an intrinsic part of the expression of the everyday, to shock us into paying attention. It is also the disparity of our human condition. We are at once individuals and part of a collective whole, at once base instincts and the capacity for abstract thought, playing multiple roles simultaneously with all the different people in our lives. I switch from daughter to sister to student to friend and back again through these and dozens of other hats that I wear every day. Everyday life is a constant balancing act among the competing forces that make up who we are, and yet most of us manage to maintain a sense of unity and wholeness within ourselves in spite of it.

“No form of discourse is ever going to be proper (appropriate) to everyday life,” suggests Highmore, leading him to conclude that “the search for the perfect fit between a form a representation and its object (the everyday) needs to be called off. Instead we might say that different forms of representation are going to produce different versions of the everyday” (Highmore 21). The everyday is personal. It is our actual, lived experience. It is the totality of all the little moments that make up our lives, and it is different for each of us. We can only examine the everyday from within, because it is not possible to get outside of our own experience. We cannot detach ourselves from something that we are an inherent part of and that is also an inherent part of us. It encompasses essentially everything, the totality of human existence, and

the broadness of it makes it a challenge to pin down what a study of that phenomenon should be or what it is.

Just as different forms of representation will produce different versions of the everyday, every person has his or her own unique experience of the everyday. A multiplicity of forms of representation is thus essential to the study of everyday life. To capture something so wide-ranging necessarily requires a variety of approaches. There really doesn't seem to be any right or wrong way to approach the everyday, no way to say that any particular approach is any more or less valid than any other. Everyday life theory needs to examine the everyday from as many different angles as possible, always with a critical eye tuned to making sense and finding meaning. The everyday is "precisely what becomes remaindered after rationalist thought has tried to exhaust the world of meaning" (Highmore 19). Highmore suggests that aesthetics, which is "concerned with experience and the form such experience takes when it is communicated" is "crucial for theorizing the everyday" (19). Theorizing the everyday is itself concerned with experience and how to communicate that experience.

Allan Kaprow's article "The Real Experiment," presents lifelike art as "not a 'thing' like a piece of music or a sculpture that is put into a special art container or setting. It is inseparable from real life" (Kaprow 204). He cites two cases that might not normally be considered as such and brings critical attention to them, calling them art. This concept of lifelike art redefines art itself as "a weaving of meaning-making activity with any or all parts of our lives" (Kaprow 216). My meaning-making activity for making sense of everyday life is the written word. I write journal entries, poems, and short stories in an attempt to find meaning and make sense of my experience of the everyday. The need to create is there within all of us, be it in the forms that we traditionally consider to fall within the realm of art or not. Some of us write or play music. Some

of us design card games or build houses. Some of us fix old cars or bake pies. Our creativity is an integral part of what makes us who we are, and it is in our creative expressions that the everyday is to be found. What we create reflects who we are and what is important to us; more than that, creation is a tactile, sensory experience that is at once part of and holding a mirror to the tactile, sensory experience of everyday life.

The forms of communicating experience are practically endless, as are the topics up for investigation under the umbrella of everyday life theory. Michel Leiris examines his childhood in search of the sacred in his everyday and concludes that

if one of the most ‘sacred’ aims that man can set for himself is to acquire as exact and intense an understanding of himself as possible, it seems desirable that each one, scrutinizing his memories with the greatest possible honesty, examine whether he can discover there some sign permitting him to discern the *color* for him of the very notion of sacred. (Leiris 31)

In an amusingly literal sense, I could say that the color of my sacred is blue: the intense blue of my first lover’s eyes, the almost-black blue of my stepfather’s police uniform, a symbol of his complete authority over me, which inspired “that combination of respect, desire, and terror that we take as the psychological sign of the sacred” (Leiris 24). My performance piece, like Leiris’ self-reflective writing, is also about my sacred. It is in the poem *Deer Hunters*, which looks back on one of my very few happy memories of my stepfather teaching me how to track deer in the woods, then broadens out to comment on the dysfunction of our relationship. It is in the memories of my first lover which bookend the piece, recounting the beginning and the end of our relationship. Like the whole of my project, and in the spirit of Simmel, the microcosm suggests the macrocosm.

Everyday life theory is in search of “a form which, in an age wherein analysis does little more than reconstitute the obvious, is capable of surprising us with the flash of a profane

illumination” (Taussig 148). I hope that I have managed something of this in my performance piece. The creation of this project, for me, was an exercise in critical thinking unlike what I am used to, an exercise in making the ordinary strange and giving critical attention to what is normally overlooked. It is my personal exploration of my everyday, which seems to me the only way to really get into the substance of what the everyday is. It is personal, and it must be addressed on a personal level. It is different for each of us, and each of those perspectives is equally valid and valuable to the project of finding meaning and making sense of the everyday. This is just one slice of one person’s everyday experience, but I am only myself, and this is the only angle from which I know to approach the subject. This is my everyday, and my everyday boils down to the one thing that is most important to me: love.

Works Cited

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