

DOMESTICATED

We shall collaborate in building up museums of sound, smell, food, clothes, domestic objects, advertisements and newspapers.
(Mass Observation 1937: Highmore: 2002: 35)

Whatever its' other aspects, the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes.
(Blanchot: 1959:14)

In a small dark room, in an industrial building, off of a balcony walkway, where the glittering city is laid out beneath ones feet, another small dark room is evoked. A life sized video screen representation, of a couple carrying out an exercise of proof reading. This finely tuned work is executed with a professional seamless edit and technique, that blends one sequence into another, so we hear the words nuanced and feel the bodies speak and move, in tune with each other and to the exercise.

A day of continual irritation for myself, is taken from the *Day Surveys* 1937-39, a category of the Mass Observation archive. Exhibits include a projected

video of a team performance of proofreading and Risograph prints from transcribed, edited, and proofed activities. This is the second of two exhibitions, on making marks and meaning, examining a historical relationship with surveillance and self-exposure, which includes transcriptions, daily tweets and drawings. It follows on from a performance event of transcribing, copy-editing and proofreading, *General title given by myself* at Five Years Gallery in July 2013.

Mass Observation was an early 20th C British movement, aiming to create 'an anthropology of ourselves' by recording everyday life in Britain. This was conducted by multiple, self-selecting, volunteer observers, who maintained diaries or replied to open-ended questionnaires. They acted as recorders, attempting to capture the details of their own everyday lives and the lives of those around them. Subjects included:

Anthropology of football pools
Bathroom behaviour
Beards armpits eyebrows
Anti semitism
Distribution, diffusion and significance of dirty joke
Funerals and undertakers
Female taboos about eating
Private life of midwife
1937
(Highmore:2002: 84)

This is the era of Mary Douglas's seminal *Purity and Danger*, an Anthropological text of structuralism, examining the body, person and social organization as exceeding its limits to produce what is liminal. Equally examined is the work of culture as container and language as it's operative and policing mechanism. Mass

observation-ists were a type of everyday detective, employing techniques of psychoanalyst, photographer and criminologist, based on empirical methods of observation, analysis and mastery. The everyday rituals, mistakes and concerns are echoed in 21st C contemporary media: of reality TV; news; soap opera, crime and medical drama. To see is to know.

An anthropology of ourselves or a science of everyday life, is a subject much theorized, romanticized and problematized across cultural studies and contemporary art practices. Subtitles in Highmore's *Everyday Life Cultural Theory* reader (2002) list as chapter headings: *Surrealism the Marvelous in the Everyday*, *Benjamin's Trash Aesthetics*, *Henri Lefebvre's Dialectics of Everyday Life*, *Mass Observation a Science of Everyday Life*, *Michel de Certeau's Poetics of Everyday Life*. In SE Barnett's work, Contemporary Art references could be made to Structuralist film making from America in the 60s, *Wavelength* by Michael Snow (1966-7), Douglas Huebler's *Duration Piece 5* (1969), using documentary photography, maps and texts to explore social environments and the passing of time and later Chantal Akerman and also Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, and *Vital Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained* (1977). In the UK photography as the detective of the everyday has been used by Richard Billingham and Val Williams in scrutiny of the family and domestic, while recently the use of narrative stories in film, have been adopted in a close reading of everyday histories. For example Elizabeth Price *At The House of Mr X* (2008)

This exhibition of archive and filmmaking cleverly inserts history into contemporary practice, in reference to both early American Conceptual art practice and British Modernism in Mass Observation. This is an important and astute contribution, marking out SE Barnett as a serious player in contemporary practice and its' current turn to the archive, history and everyday life as subject. (For example *Art Turning Left: How Values Changed Making 1789-2013 Tate Liverpool*)

In this carefully constructed filmed performance of proofreading, a marriage of concerns of cultural life and influences to art history are laid out in this quiet but academically rigorous exhibition with a sophisticated set of components. Quaint and old fashioned, modern comes to mind watching this couple, glowing in life sized video in the half light of the gallery on an exceptionally bleak day, rendering a reading of the special documents on paper in frames, a real scrutiny that felt private and rather sacred. In SE Barnett's film, the proofreaders are based on a couple well known throughout the publishing world for their facility and formality and enacted by Mexican artist Fernando León-Guiú and writer France León. Their ease is so seductive that I recall filmic moments of tension like Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland in *Don't Look Now*. Or an elderly couple I witnessed making a breakfast in a series of finely tuned movements and idiosyncrasy, as they had done for a lifetime. In and out their words weave, rhythmic and precise and taut with the importance of their task. The everyday elevated to drama and a choreographed dance of words at work. The style here brings a gravitas and meaning that words or theory alone could not.

Within the nostalgic turn to modernist practices and empirical 20th century thinking,

is an observance, of a marriage of thinking and being, that may hold clear ideological flaws but reveals an intense effort of engagement that makes a portrait of 'the real' in its historical moment and holds us in its thrall.

Western Modernity is characterized by mystery: the unconscious, the gothic narrative or exotic cultures of other people, the poor, the native, the Freudian slips, the clue to the criminal. Anthropology renders daily practices of other cultures at once strange and mastered. Of necessity the processes of social organization will change with socio-economics and cultural specificity but the scrutiny and effort of observation, in whatever we call the discipline: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, Cultural Theory or Criminology has the power to paint a powerful picture. Theories of everyday are situated however in the context of modernity and rationalism.

Rationalism is not the antidote to myth and ritual, but the emergence of new myths and rituals under the banner of the true

Rationalism binds these two aspects together, paradoxically holding within it an irrational kernel, it seeks to disenchant the world through an unquestioned belief in its own value.

Modernity sees the emergence of new and different temporal experiences
(Highmore: 2002: 5)

Sherlock Holmes is repulsed by the everyday and can only deal with its atrophy by taking refuge in cocaine, the exception, being the everyday as the stuff of observation. Then when Holmes solves his cases' ghostly events turn out to be everyday acts of greed, spite, jealousy, and manifestations of 'human nature'.

However much he likes the strange and bizarre his entire being is dedicated to puncturing its mystery. It is rationalism that transforms the insignificant and everyday into ciphers for the bizarre. Holmes' approach generates mystery at the same time as it demystifies it.
(Highmore: 2002: 4)

It is noticeably the street rather than the home that is seen as the privileged sphere of everyday life while the everyday and accompanying boredom, is marked by difference of class, gender and sexuality.

Two widely shared, diametrically opposed, views inform what theories we have on the everyday. One we call feminine or feminist, that links the everyday with the daily rituals of private life, carried out within the domestic sphere, traditionally presided over by women.

The other the masculine sites, the everyday spaces and public spheres, dominated especially but not exclusively, in modern western bourgeois societies by men
(Schor 1992 : 188)

The attraction to Mass Observation, is an idea of the authentic and similarly with the archive, the idea of real history. The body, its limits of birth and death. The social, its limits of crime and pathology. The emotional, its' ability to touch us and connect us back to ourselves and others. It is the classification, in titles and methods, that shed light on meanings given to the everyday, coded in class and perceived difference.

What is exciting in Mass Observation is emotional depth in political life, and the new classifications upon which we enact our attention to study and master it. The languages are those of *selfi*, self surveillance and representation in social media and *Instagram*. So the mediums do indeed become the message and what is obvious is hard to see in the everyday.

In SE Barnett's work a gentle mirror is held to a mundane process to reveal an elegance of absolute existence within this task. This exacting procedure allows a grace and a scrutiny of language. The seamless video edit allows the performance of words, their structure and place.

Observation and anthropology of everyday life becomes more poignant in understanding the importance of archive and search for authentic and to perhaps re establish a connection of signifier and signified? In a perpetual new and historical and political forgetting, what if things stay the same, or the everyday is not the site of the shock of the new, but the habitual, containing within it frustration, failure and broken promises? Modernity's promise, for example, is perhaps that life can be mastered, architecture can provide solutions and factories to live in and art can transform banality.

This sophisticated exhibition and rigorous artist's practice makes a real contribution to understanding this genre. The further context of the gallery, Five Years, and of this work sited here, is that the space is collaborative and artist led, each showing or curating once a year. So, a programme of disparate exhibitions, weave together in a critical practice. In SE Barnett's work is a slow build of events and thinking to a condensed exhibition.

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