

THESIS

By Keith Telfeyan

And if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you.
— Friedrich Nietzsche

I

I got high the other day and stared at a doorknob in my apartment. It looked contemplative and dignified, with a sense of justness. The door itself, ajar, revealed the daylight from the next room shining in. The whole building was quiet, shadowy and sedate. The moment felt significant. Time became abstract; memories coexisted with daydreams and I became nostalgic, breathing with awareness. Can I hold onto this moment forever? Can I objectify it and express it? Can it be put into a photograph, or is it beyond vision?

II

Limber Consciousness. Stillness; timelessness, aging, time travel, mental places. Spiritual spaces, electric with the energy of coursing blood.

A long run. Enough. Zooms and cuts and pans and tilts and touch and invisible. Nonsense and the incredible. Fly. Vivify.

Is time real? Does it pass?

Is life incremental and how long does a moment last?

Chords of wow. Temporary eternity. Capture and hold and cherish and love and be loved. Sunlight through tree leaves. Ardent sky. Why.

Cold design that warms the veins.

My eyes scream; my heart thinks.

III

Every day, in my home, I look at the way sunlight falls through a skylight onto the wall. There's a nail on this wall, on which used to hang something, but now functions only to draw my attention further to the mood of the room, as a barometer of sorts, responding to the light that shines on it, and the space that holds it. I wonder to myself, getting in my head, What am I interested in here, exactly?

I feel myself experiencing life; it feels significant. I am aware of being in time, and yet, time stops even as it passes. Everything that I associate with as a socialized person is rendered irrelevant to this moment: I am here and now. I think of phenomenology, of existentialism, of nihilism. I am in love and peace, and have no urges to obey. I am silent. I don't think, I know. If I were to speak, my words would betray me. The truth that courses through each moment is not something that can be parsed into words – I've tried! And yet, I want a souvenir of this moment. I want a trophy for having been here. I want to pay it homage, to write it a poem. Yes, I want to photograph it.

IV

I think of my home. I think of Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, which details the ways in which we experience a domicile. The shelter and peace a house provides seem that much more profound when juxtaposed to inclement weather... I'm thinking of the weather metaphorically, and the house as well. I think of the symbology of the house, as explored in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, wherein the basement, ground floor and upstairs stand in nicely for the id, ego and superego, exemplifying the fertile psychological possibilities of a residence. I think of the light that gently passes into my home through the ceiling, as if divinity were commingling with my own Freudian consciousness.

But I digress! I am interested in my house because I am interested in myself. The room is my brain. While writing this paper, I must first clean my room, organize all my physical space, so that I can think clearly: *Physical space is mental space*. It is my own self-awareness, persona, that I wish to photograph, to look at, and to feel. It is the act of looking that is the thing, not the wall of the house itself. I look at the wall, with the light and the nail, and I think: *I am that*.

Bachelard speaks of a poetic act with no history, of a poetic image with no past. What could possibly inform each moment but everything? Does not each moment justify itself? I am consumed with contradictions, that things are and they aren't. That everything is everything. The clearest way for me to express this is through picturing nothing, and speaking less.

V

Nothing and *emptiness* are dangerously vacuous words that miss the point of my ambitions. What I am keen on picturing is presence. Nowness. Much is said for clearing one's mind in order to be in the moment. Similarly, it is important to clear out a photograph as much as possible, not to suggest emptiness, but to promote attention. By reducing subject matter to that which is most poetically resonant, I aim to create things that offer moments of clarity and meditation, rather than additional clutter that demands of the viewer the mental duty of processing information.



The Ephemeral Nature of Rationality in Pertinence to Mitigated Consciousness, C-print, 30"x40"

The nail in the wall is the only literal, recognizable thing in this photograph, but the main subject of the image is the interplay of light, and the color field onto which a viewer may project various contemplations, emotional and psychological explorations. To go further, the picture's subject is purposeful ambiguity – why, after all, this nail? When hung on a wall, this borderless photograph, face-mounted on plexiglass, almost disappears into its surroundings, reflections more apparent than its own subject matter, furthering its presence by way of absence.

Susan Sontag, in an essay entitled "The Aesthetics of Silence", explains: "Perhaps the quality of the attention we bring to bear on something will be better (less contaminated, less distracted) the less we are offered. Furnished with impoverished art, purged by silence, one might then be able to begin to transcend the frustrating selectivity of attention, with its inevitable distortions of experience. Ideally, one should be able to pay attention to everything.

"The motion is toward less and less. But never has "less" so ostentatiously advanced itself as "more."

Through nothing, everything. Less is more. Sontag continues: "In the light of the current myth, in which art aims to become a "total experience," soliciting total attention, the strategies of impoverishment and reduction indicate the most exalted ambition art could adopt. Underneath what looks like a strenuous modesty, if not actual debility, one may discern an energetic secular blasphemy: the wish to attain the unfettered, unselective, total consciousness of "God."

As much as it is true, that in everything, I seek "God," it is also the case that these simple things here in front of us are *enough*. Aside from the exalted and divine, I am resolutely interested in the subtle, the simple and the ordinary. If god is anywhere, it is in chairs, streets, branches, light posts, paper. Indeed, If god is anywhere, god is everywhere. A picture of god, were one to think it and feel it, is a picture of any thing.

VI

Rilke. Keats. Magritte. Spencer Finch. David Lynch. Trisha Donnelly. Kubrick. Kant. Goddard. Luis Bunuel. James Turrell. Søren Kierkegaard. Uta Barth. Roland Barthes. Brakhage. Gehr. Snow. Van Sant. Von Trier. Vermeer. Viola. Tillmans. Mark Rothko. Luis Bunuel. Bas Jan Ader. Kaufman. Jonze. Gondry. E.E. Cummings. Maya Deren. Michael Haneke.

VII

Andrew Noren's *Charmed Particles* is a silent feature-length presentation of a filmmaker playing around with a camera. He points the camera out his window, he investigates his space, filming the contents of his home. He films a girl making breakfast. There is no narrative. One's attention is held primarily through the experimental use of a sort of constant shutter effect, as if the camera is continuously blinking. The treatment of film form lends itself nicely to an altered experience of reality – an altered consciousness. The film's title beckons us to look closer still, "charmed particles" being a physics term to describe the point at which energy becomes matter, when *nothing* becomes *something*.

Bill Morrison's *Decasia* assembles together old 35mm found footage into a symphony of sensorial wonder, achieved through the actual decay of the celluloid itself. There's lots of dancing from around the world, as if to celebrate the passing of time, entombed in this love letter to the film form. The narrative is not told in narrative form, but read between the lines: it's the story of the world turning, of life dying, and life living.

Andy Warhol's *Empire* is a static shot of an iconic skyscraper for eight hours and five minutes. What becomes most interesting, aside from the sheer audacity of it all, is the change in light over time. It was shot at 24fps for a duration of six hours and forty minutes, but becomes longer and slower when projected at 16fps. The sun sets, exterior lights flicker on, turn off during the dead of night – leaving the screen essentially black for a lengthy period – and dawn approaches. The angle, so god-like in its directedness, is achieved through the window of an adjacent building. I wonder how good the film would or would not be were it shot from the street...

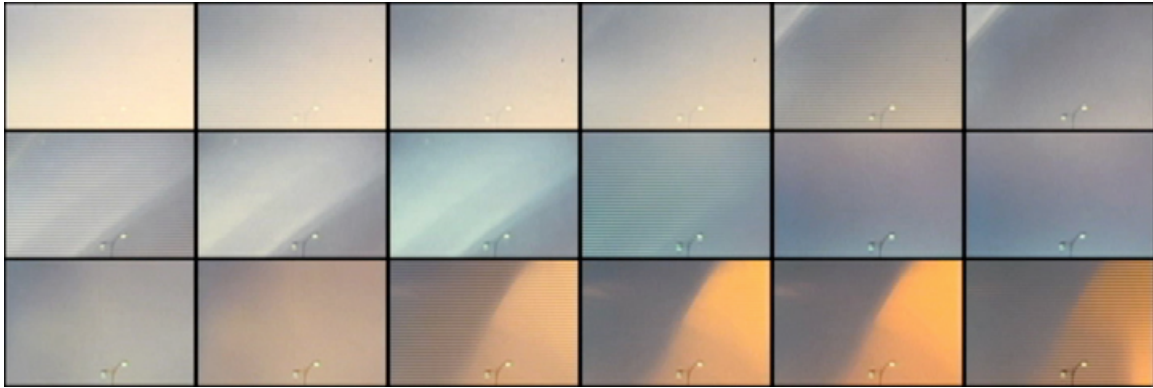
VIII

Time confounds me. I am aware of it when it is least real. I stand in front of a Gerhard Richter painting and lose myself. How much time passes? I stroll through a gallery full of Jeff Wall photographs, spending my time with each light box as I please, taking notice of details, or not. Then I go into a screening of Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream* and I know I will exit in 102 minutes. I am told exactly how long to look at each thing, and my ability to savor each image while simultaneously reading it will more or less define my enjoyment of this experience.

Movement possesses me. I could stare at the ocean forever. Watch the clouds pass. In a photograph, that movement is permanently suggested, always denied. Sometimes I think the walls breathe. It's me though, that breathes. The photograph insists that it is me, makes me aware of how resolutely still it is, that time ceases and that life is frozen. It is achingly beautiful to see something frozen in motion, because it is impossible. But it happens every day, at every moment.

Staring at an inanimate object might be something else. It stays put. Suddenly, my mind, unburdened by the lovely distraction of movement, slows, focuses, meditates a bit differently. My trance, though, is similar. That which is still and that which moves... things are always both. Thus, I am provoked to make moving pictures. It is forever a balancing act, to decide for how long things will last, for how long I will meditate on this tree branch, or this window sill. Does transcendence happen in a moment, or in succession?

IX



Still from *Lyrics to an Instrumental Song*, 8mm film transferred to video, 11:11 RT on loop

The form of film dictates so much; I feel I do very little. Super-8 rolls last three minutes, as does 100 feet of 16mm film. On a Bolex camera, the crank allows one to expose for a duration of almost 30 seconds. My gaze has essentially been confined, or defined. At the beginning and end of each roll, the film flares out as a result of unavoidable/accidental exposure. I am fascinated by the limits of things, and the explorations of these things themselves. Afterimages, the persistence of vision... But my mind wanders when studying the science of the eye...

X

I tend to take pictures while walking around, going about my life on particularly leisurely days. It is during these times that I can best escape my anxieties and focus on what is before me. I respond to my environment by attending to it, but also by visualizing it, by imagining it. The photographic process, much like the editing process of motion pictures, is predominantly a mental thing. The picture is taken before the shutter is released.

It is strange, the feeling I have now as I write, to describe process. There are steps, but everything happens at once, and is driven by two major intentions. One is to express for the sake and joy of expression, and the other is to reveal nature, to get closer to life, and to present life, as it were, before one and all.

Henri Bergson speaks of the objective of art, and the work of artists, by speaking of a veil that interposes itself between us and nature, between us and ourselves. The artist, in his or her medium, reveals to us the true nature of things by lifting that veil: "Since [the artist] perceives [color and form] for their sake and not for his own, it is the inner life of things that he sees appearing through their forms and colors... thus he realizes the loftiest form of art, which here consists in revealing to us nature."

XI

I believe in the freedom of things, and the energy that moves around and through the world like wind. I create as an act of expression, to assert my pulse, to live. The things I create enter the world as transformed energy, and exist freely. I make pictures that capture something particular that I think and feel, images that function both cathartically and aesthetically. The act of looking – our projected vision – determines so much the way something looks. How much of the qualities that we give things are in those things themselves? I like eliciting truth from banal subjects, as the constant wave of god hides within all matter. It is sensational, I think, to see it underneath the everyday. Or perhaps the everyday itself is simply worth seeing in a new way.



Still from *Lyrics to an Instrumental Song*, 8mm film transferred to video, 11:11 RT on loop

* (I am mesmerized, or rather, I mesmerize myself. I am lost in the way film is exposed to light / I am found. I see sky as a dialectic with all things. I listen to the song.)



Nothing that's said is true.

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