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Anonymity and Invisibility in 1960s Performance Documentation

Performance artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s used documentation to question what could count as an event, subtly changing the practice of witnessing a performance in the process. In Alison Knowles's *The Identical Lunch* (1967-73) and Adrian Piper's *Concrete Infinity Documentation Piece* (1970) we encounter an approach to spectatorship where the artist is both performer and spectator. How does this dual role of performer-spectator change the event and its capacity for developing community? I propose that the performance focuses on the relation to an object that eludes clear visibility, gathering around it those participants who are in search of it. Further, the study of the self as spectator-performer in the early 1970s sustains a tension between the anonymity of the subject of the everyday and the specific body of the performer; such a tension ultimately opens to a performer's politics. In my talk, I want to distinguish between spectator and audience, where the former is a live witness and the latter observes the performance by whatever means at whatever time. In the cases discussed here, spectatorship is distinguishable from the more general audience.

Beginning with the problem of invisibility, Alison Knowles's performance *The Identical Lunch* provides an interesting object of analysis. The event consisted of the ritual performance of the following score: "a tunafish sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo and a large glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup was and is eaten many days of each week at the same place and at about the same time" (*Journal of the Identical Lunch* 1). Knowles's live performance was seen only by fellow participant performers, so the audience of her various documents effectively looks at the artist's regard of herself. Likewise, the sandwich is displaced from the focus of the performance, acting as a medium for thinking about current events, the social situation of New York in the late 1960s, the economics of the lunch, and specific

conversations Alison Knowles had with her lunching companions – many of them writers publishing projects with her partner Dick Higgins at the Something Else Press. Playing with invisibility in the performance work situates the event at an oblique vantage, ultimately displacing the private act to highlight the circumstances of a social situation.

Alison Knowles's lunch in many ways locates a particular set of historical, economic, and social circumstances. The economics of the tuna fish sandwich was surely a factor in choosing it for the performance; "it's the best cheap lunch you can get!" says Alison (Knowles, Personal interview). The act of consumption is a financial transaction seen through the relations it establishes with various diner workers who prepare, serve, and must be paid for the meal. On April 20, 1968, she writes: "**M** says, 'Same? ... no buttermilk today, coffee?' 'No, tea with milk,' says **N. M**, whose job it is, **N** discovered, to order buttermilk, has forgotten to do so.—.60+tip" ("The Identical Lunch" 182). Employing a third-person voice, the artist gives us the sense that she is studying her performance with a scientific objectivity. Knowles frames the historical setting of the performance by interrupting her narrative with newspaper headlines. On May 22, 1968, she writes: "**N** sits, opens the daily **POST**, reads **2nd Battle of Columbia** headlines" ("The Identical Lunch" 183). Sitting at the politicized space of a 1960s lunch counter, the artist is very aware that the things of everyday life, like her sandwich and soup, are framed by other relations that situate the time and space of her gestures – like a student-police clash related to opposition of the Vietnam War and the corporatization of Columbia University. By recording these social conditions, the lunch turns out not to be about food at all – instead Alison Knowles articulates the margins of her experience in an effort to picture the realism of the lunch.

The absence of the actual lunch is apparent in the series of photographs taken during the group performance 'The John Giorno lunch.' The first of these shows a group of friends walking down the sidewalk into Riss Restaurant. The figures at the center of the photograph are out of

focus as our eye is directed to the signage of the locale. Riss is 'AIR CONDITIONED' and sells Coca-Cola. Whether part of the group or not, people seem to be approaching the restaurant door from several directions, a gathering place of New York lunch on that block. In the foreground, a man and woman are engrossed in conversation – and this becomes the theme. The second photograph is a medium shot at the lunch counter where two conversations are happening simultaneously, with the camera focusing on one of these. In the blurry foreground, there are sandwiches and cups of soup. The sandwich and the act of eating it are scarcely visible. Marked as absent from the performance, eating the sandwich remains outside the frame, desired but not given by the images presented. In my interview with Alison Knowles, she remarked that the act of eating was a central component of *The Identical Lunch*, but she did so by noting the curious way that eating escapes the gaze: “I realized that when you’re eating, actually, it’s not a fixed gaze at the other person. And what you’re doing otherwise is sort of pleasant and off-the-cuff and not planned... [you’re] looking down” (Knowles, Personal interview). This lack of direct gaze is crucial to the performance. The sandwich itself disappears as focus shifts to everything around the sandwich.

The Identical Lunch sets up a shift of attention, oriented around materiality. More specifically, her performance makes its object (the lunch) *a thing*. Things fundamentally present an encounter with the real, and so impede our grasping of them as such. This approach to the performance as gathered around a thing becomes apparent through the relation of act and document that forms the event. In the relation of performance and document, we understand the eating of the tuna sandwich as marking a place where an audience comes into being. Philip Corner, a participant in the lunch, refers to it as “the thing which is the thing sustaining the life, the eating of it” (26-27). That is, the object at stake is scarcely present through the experience of

the body that eats (the act), but in the network of relations and collection of narrations that we tell about eating (the documentation).

Looking at the performers' observations of their own performances, we see the material qualities of the sandwich easily overshadowed by the social situation of consuming it. Act and document come together in *The Identical Lunch* in a way that alters the visibility of what matters – substituting sociality for materiality in the document – and locates an audience by making visible these unseen relations in the diner. The book makes these dialogues all the more visible, reframing the performance again through the conversational exchange between various participants' documentary submissions arranged alongside one another in the book. Here, Alison Knowles has created a generic condition against which variations of style and action appear as particularities that challenge the original 'identical' lunch and draw attention to chance occurrences. Lynn Lonidier, another participant, contributes this text to the *Journal*:

“While loose tweeter pops accompany tin-can music-to-eat-by we watch ourselves eat in the mirror behind the counter

Wiping ourselves sucking tuna loose from teeth we decide since we didn't have paper to record the heightened details of the experience we should at least have proof we ate an Alison Knowles' lunch

The waitress wants to know why we ask her to write up the check a second time”
(*Journal of the Identical Lunch 2*).

The lunch is repeated within this account – both in the mirror of Lynn and her friend eating and in the twice-written check that confirms the experience. The mirror in Lonidier's account where the performer watches herself performing is mirrored again by the writing of the lunch, drawing attention to the way the documentation repeats and restates the event. Literary critic Maurice Blanchot describes the everyday is what we see again, that which escapes us as we initially

experience it, that which is ‘unperceived’ (14). By seeing again in Knowles’s documentation, we see the everyday indirectly and so know the event as continuous with the everyday.

Turning to the question of anonymity, Adrian Piper’s project *Concrete Infinity Documentation Piece* aims to locate the performing body as object through documenting everyday gestures, attempting to render the artist with an anonymous subjectivity. In this manner of focusing on the self, Piper encounters the limit of anonymity, finding an origin for political engagement at the point of the artist-subject’s self-recognition. In the 57-page diary chronicling Piper’s actions over five weeks, the artist creates an archival work that chronicles the details of her daily life. Originally given the tentative title “Object Maintenance”, Piper’s goal in the *Concrete Infinity* project was to explore her condition as a physical object, eliminating traces of her subjectivity. She attempts to describe her daily actions with meticulous detail, but also with a limited, non-subjective perspective eliminating, for example, personal pronouns from each sentence:

“No subject.

One verb/sentence.

No incoming information, environmental

conditions, sensory input (saw, heard, smelled,

touched, tasted) |

ate : o.k.

read:

o.k.”

This constraint aims to make the diary less personal and more anonymous: *any* body would follow the same course of daily experiences – waking up, consuming food, eliminating waste, leaving the house, returning, going to bed. Not surprisingly, the project fails to conceal her subjectivity. Instead, the artist plays with the visibility of everyday actions by providing diary

entries that fall somewhere between anonymous snapshots and personal narratives. Her work sustains a productive tension between personal life (bodily actions, domestic spaces) and the social space of the everyday, where repetitions show off Piper's failed performative of urban anonymity and open a productive space of feminist identity. Maurice Blanchot proposes that the everyday is without subject. If this is so, perhaps it is because, as Michael Sheringham suggests, "our anonymity in the everyday does not turn us into ciphers or statistics. The experience of the everyday cannot be reduced to its content; it eludes objectification because it consists in perpetual becoming" (16).

Despite her attempts to study the body as object and remain anonymous, these aims are complicated by the mirrored presence of her body in the accompanying photograph snapshots, interrupting the simple disappearing act of a performance of everyday life. Let's consider these snapshot photographs for a moment. In these images, a recurring glare indicates the mirror in front of which the snapshots are taken; and the presence of a camera held in Piper's hands confirms this. In some of these photos, the artist's eyes are cut off. When that happens, the camera stands in for the eyes as the mechanism of sight. Usually held in Piper's left hand, the camera is the center and focus of each snapshot. These are not simply snapshots of the artist's body; they are snapshots of an artist taking snapshots of herself, putting the artist in the positions of both performer and spectator at the same time. With these hand-cut, black and white photographic self-portraits of the artist that accompany each page of the handwritten diary, one sees the anonymous language of modern bureaucracy merge with an intimate performance aesthetic that is less measured.

The anonymity of her pronoun-less written narrative is further compromised by a focus on bodily details that cannot help but give physicality to an individual body. Piper records: when food is consumed, how her limbs move in regular yoga exercises, and each time her system

eliminates waste. The entry for Tuesday, June 2, 1970 begins: “Woke up at 5:45 AM. Peed and shat. Weighed 99 lbs. Made bed. Put on tea. Ate three teaspoons of soya lecithin.” Here the body is a laboratory for catalyzing physical reactions to the most basic stimuli. By using personal and intimate details of her bodily actions, Piper opens performance to otherwise unnoticed gestures: “Brushed hair. Washed glass. Wrote in diary. Turned off radio. Went downstairs.” These gestures remain invisible to outside viewers, but by recounting them, the performer creates a space *for herself*, orienting her to a heightened mode of attention. She witnesses her own being and locates a basis for political subjectivity in the process.

In her essay “Doing-Cooking,” Luce Giard names and characterizes the kind of ‘women’s practices’ that have resisted visibility, despite their ready cultural translation from generation to generation (155-56). She analyzes Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) as a case where everyday gestures are brought to visibility. In this film Akerman explores the daily life of a single mother, honing in on her household routines through several long scenes with no speech where the camera closely follows the protagonist through laundry and food preparation. In both Akerman’s film and Piper’s diary, the materiality of everyday life comes to the foreground, helping define the emergent subject.

Scholars of everyday life have frequently examined everyday subjectivity as expressed by a list of material things. Maurice Blanchot understands this effect as the result of the impossibility of having a subject of the everyday:

“To live it [the everyday] as what might be lived through a series of separate acts (represented by the vacuum cleaner, the washing machine, the refrigerator, the radio, the car), is to substitute a number of compartmentalized actions for this indefinite presence, this connected movement (which is however not a whole) by which we are continually though in the mode of discontinuity, in relation with the indeterminate totality of human

possibilities. Of course the everyday, since it cannot be assumed by a true subject (even putting in question the notion of subject), tends unendingly to weigh down into things.” (18-19).

Blanchot’s argument that we only encounter the everyday through things finds resonance in a performance that recounts daily life through relations with materiality. Providing little structure to everyday gestures in her narration in *Concrete Infinity*, one notices rather a listing or display of things in use:

“Made Eyebright-Te Kuanyin tea. Swallowed one tablespoon cod liver oil, one teaspoon wheatgerm oil. Drank orange juice, pulp, egg, rue polish, yeast, bone meal powder mixture. Body temperature 96.5°F. Washed glasses, Osterizer assembly. Swallowed one multiple, one B-complex and C vitamin, eight glutamin acid pills. Drank Eyebright-Te Kuanyin tea. Rinsed sprouts. Ground soybeans into vegetable drink, strained out celery seeds. Refrigerated mixture. Made licorice root tea, herb stock. Ate soybeans. Refrigerated sprouts. Peed.” (7/1/70)

Adrian Piper keeps her language simple as she describes the domestic gestures performed: rinsed, ground, strained out. The repeated effort to locate the body as object – through language that recounts the material things around the body – repeatedly fails to locate the subject’s identity. Circumscribing the body by describing things and their uses, she puts personal characteristics in tension with gestures that evoke something common. Any expression of anonymity that succeeds in *Concrete Infinity* does so to political effect. By making events from non-events, she questions the non-event of the everyday, giving domestic gestures social and political efficacy. The role of documenting these events is to locate a hidden present within the everyday, to make visible these unseen actions.

It is at precisely this point in her career that Piper shifts the focus of her performance works to consider her impact on the people she encounters. During the spring of 1970, she describes “the invasion by the ‘outside world’ of my aesthetic isolation. ...I have become self-conscious” (Piper 31-32). Beginning during *Concrete Infinity*, Piper moves the site of her performances to the street. Then, in *Catalysis* (1970-72) and later in *Mythic Being* (1973-75), Piper turns away from documentation to performance work that “induce[s] a reaction or change in the viewer” (32). By experimenting with subjectivity that negotiates the real identity formation of a young woman and the presumed anonymity of everyday life, Piper discovers the need to make an art of interaction. From her concern with the patterns of private life arises a concern with how that life is connected to others. By bringing performance act and document together, and failing to remain anonymous in the process, Piper gives greater visibility and significance to private acts and subjective responses.

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière describes how the aesthetic revolution “shifts the focus from great names and events to the life of the anonymous; it finds symptoms of an epoch, a society, or a civilization in the minute details of ordinary life” (33). What results is a new mode of understanding truth, not as something pictured or narrated, but available through various signifiers:

“What is cast aside – which is reappropriated by film and photography – was the logic revealed by the tradition of the novel (from Balzac to Proust and Surrealism) and the reflection of the true that Marx, Freud, Benjamin, and the tradition of ‘critical thought’ inherited: the ordinary becomes beautiful as a trace of the true. And the ordinary becomes a trace of the true if it is torn from its obviousness in order to become a hieroglyph, a mythological or phantasmagoric figure.” (34)

Rancière's analyzes the truth of the everyday through the mythologizing (or perhaps, 'thinging') of the details of ordinary life. He proposes that the politics or community of aesthetics arises through individual encounters with and interpretation of these details.

Documenting everyday actions brought to light what could not otherwise be seen and gave importance to these invisible gestures. These artists explicitly or implicitly counter the imperative that a politically effective performance must be theatrical, employing subtler means to reveal the way that material concerns – the consumption of food, et cetera – are ultimately experienced as social encounters or with social awareness. Documenting private performances interrogates the limits of invisibility and anonymity, and locates in the process potential for social interaction and political awareness. Watching themselves watching, performance artists see an art of engagement; if not explicitly feminist – Knowles's work is not, she insists – it is at least political. From performances that center on invisible 'things' of attention, these artists stage repetitions that are productive, in large part due to what they leave hidden. They encounter the everyday indirectly in the documentation of their performances, and in doing so make those performances more clearly part of everyday life.

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