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Teal Gardner

The Camera's Eye and Mine: An Experience of Creating Video

I have been carrying around a new eye. It is more than an eye. It fits in my pocket. Would you like to try it? Come here and let me hand it to you. Turn it on. The little button in the right corner of the top face. Look through the viewfinder, what do you see? I have seen you closely with it. I hope that you aren't embarrassed, but I have watched you today.

Do not be angry. I remember you and my camera remembers you, though I will forget; I have already lost so much detail. My camera will forget if I tell it to delete, but until I make that choice, your image will stay locked up tight in digital form. It knows differently from me what it saw, it knows nothing of what you are or why you move the way you do, or why I have told it to take a picture of you and knit that picture together with other pictures of you so that it looks as if you are moving within the box where an image of you will exist now and until our eyes are turned away. I know how you look sitting in your car, with your face made abstract by the focused strength of the setting sun coming in a slanted beam, right at your head. Did you know that you looked beautiful with your eyes obscured in shadow, one hand on the steering wheel, waiting for the light to turn green? I had been standing there with camera resting on hip, worshiping you from the corner of 10th and O, regarding you as if I were a spy; through the corner of my eye. There had been hundreds of you that day, slouched or erect in their cars, with their arms and hands sometimes visible, sometimes not. Some of them smoking, some of them talking on the phone. Some of them saw me there. Some of them understood that I was making a recording, and that they didn't have a choice. It was a little like leaving my body. Were you afraid when my eye obscured the keyhole, were you afraid when you knew that I was watching? Was it worse once you realized that I'd be taking something away with me, something hidden inside of my digital camera, a relic that you'd never seen, belonging to both of us equally?

Do you want it back?

I don't think that I can give it back to you, now that it has been

done. I have taken the seconds recorded, and fed them into a technology, and now I can see your image again and again. It is the same with an image of a tree, something else that I have seen, and caught and taken away. I'll put you near the tree, in this weaving that I am making. The tree is moving in a way that reminds me of laughter. Maybe you'll understand it once it is complete.

Before I stood at the corner and caught your image, I had spent a week looking out of the window of my room, thinking of what to do with this new "sense of an eye." What sights would I accumulate? Where does one begin to document the world "as seen" when we already do so much of our knowing through sight? (How I would love to have existed outside of myself during that frustrating tangle of days, a week of witnessing but not taking any video. A week of sights that are now as good as dust.) I hesitated to record, was crippled by the wide ambiguity of what to see and keep. Hours slipped off as the light changed again and again from early to late, when the backyard filled with motes and I was too busy thinking, "Do I have the right to catch this sight?" "Can I take responsibility over these moments in time, am I human enough to be trusted with these things?" Perhaps I was not, and those days went along observed, but undocumented, and the backyard twisted with the wind and became slick from the rain.

Early on it was decided that the subject of the video would exist with or without me. I did not have any desire to film artificially created scenes. I would, instead, exercise choice over my environment, using the video camera as a net. I catch the scene in the net, and then I process it within the parameters of a video timeline. I would stitch together the world that I've captured, creating an organization that would reflect the idiosyncratic tension between aesthetic choices and raw moments.

How many times have I stood rapt in attention at the sight of Blackbirds twisting and careening through the sky, en masse, and wondered how anything so spectacularly beautiful could exist? Wonderfulness fell out of a Blackbird's wing and landed in my eye. I would wish for some way to catch the untouchable position of the birds, that moment in the sky, never having a camera at ready to secure it. The living world is striking in every way, though we often move through it with such a velocity that much is lost. How much is seen that is never really examined? It just happens that there usu-

ally isn't time to form a meaning from the minutia of the banal. To become involved requires the development of a different set of objectives; time must be dedicated to the observation of phenomena. The act of creating a video document of the world about us is tedious and results in a different sense of intimacy with the subject. I see an angle between shadow and stone on the side of a building that looks foreboding to me. I have imposed my human understanding of "foreboding" upon the sight, which means that I have imposed myself. Here is the moment in which I must approach it with the camera, point the lens at the spot and record. In the process of understanding what it is to create a pure document, I have come to regard myself as an aggressor. There is no possibility of being a passive observer when one is armed with a tool as powerful as a video camera.

From Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil*:

My personal problem is more specific: how to film the ladies of Bissau? Apparently, the magical function of the eye was working against me there. It was in the marketplaces of Bissau and Cape Verde that I could stare at them again with equality: I see her, she saw me, she knows that I see her, she drops me her glance, but just at an angle where it is still possible to act as though it was not addressed to me, and at the end the real glance, straightforward, that lasted a twenty-fourth of a second, the length of a film frame.

It is my intention to be as unobtrusive as possible when doing the work of creating this video document. Mine should be as slight an influence upon the observed as possible; for, under the scrutiny of my camera, the subject will be immediately affected and altered. There is, of course, a certain value to that aspect of the film medium itself; that the documenter is still present, even if their face is never shown through the lens of the camera. It is the unintended (and inescapable) result of presence.

An afternoon arrival at home. I'd ridden at top speed, 11th Street catapulting itself behind me, leaves above shuddering under a high atmosphere of flat grey. I rode the sidewalk up onto the grass, the windows to the front rooms were open, and a cacophony of piano

chords and notes descended from an open window. This is something I am used to. Nicholas has been practicing for his senior recital since the summer, when we were home all day making our rooms, before the piano was perfectly tuned. He's chosen a highly dramatic piece by Rachmaninoff, which suits his personality absolutely. Nicholas is of a slight but strong build, kind and intelligent with a double penchant for dry humor and physical jokes. It is at the piano where I see him when I close my eyes to recall, with his fingers stretched apart and face in profile, focused on the keys. Dark eyebrows knit in concentration, back straight, black hair. He is beginning to master this piece of music. It has taken on the quality of deep expression and tone that was intended by Rachmaninoff, who wrote of his struggle as a traditional Romantic composer during the birth of Modernism in Russia;

"The new kind of music seems to create not from the heart but from the head. Its composers think rather than feel. They have not the capacity to make their works exalt—they meditate, protest, analyze, reason, calculate and brood, but they do not exalt."

As I listen at the door of his room, I realize the moment, and run for the camera. The piano has been laid bare, its hammers and strings are exposed... he has taken the front cover off of the upright piano; the intensity of the piece is even more dramatic when experienced at close range, at such a volume, Nico's hands flashing impossibly in a complicated frenzy. It takes a few seconds to put the camera to the right setting. Transformed from sight into pixels on the digital screen, the image Nicholas playing the piano was remote and fascinating. I stood over his shoulder and moved my gaze back and forth between the screen and the live scene, his movements slightly out of sync when interpreted through the camera, slowed down by processing, half a second behind. I watched Nico. I watched the screen. I pressed "record" and stood as still as possible. Then began to follow his hand, making a sweeping motion with the camera itself, it becoming an agile eye-extension with the ability to play back a capture. This was the right moment to film him; my presence did not create a distraction that he wasn't used to, and (as far as I could tell) he exhibited no discernible "camera shy" reaction. In the final edits of my video, I spliced the images of Nico playing the piano with quick gestures made by camera lens moving over asphalt and an overgrown and ivy hung hedge. The camera I held was not passive- rather; it became a tool which assisted me in

chronicling my experience of Nico's piano practice.

Look up the sides of buildings, up at the ceiling; you may be looking into a camera lens. They are all around, watching us with the precision of a mathematical equation. I am captured as I am capturing. My pixelated self is stored in a technology. Maybe it is viewed that day, maybe never. And with what kind of a glance are the images caught on surveillance apprehended? Is judgment passed on the surveyed by the person who sits in a small office, packed with screens? Here the images are grainy and rough, and time of the essence; what time did you enter the store, at what precise moment did your hand reach out to the bins of plastic knickknacks? How many seconds later did you shiftily look around, checking if you'd been seen, and at what moment did you excitedly step back outside, coat pocket burning with stolen ephemera? If you had seen the cameras in the ceiling, would you have stopped your hand? When one knows one is being watched, does one not act differently? I have seen it in my experiments with the camera, the results are uniform (if the one being filmed is aware of it, they will invariably react somehow). If I am aware of being watched by the tiny camera in the upper right of the lecture hall, will I pay better attention to the professor? Probably not. That isn't the intention of the camera, or is it?

In Chris Marker's statement about the ladies of Bissau, he evoked their aversion to the lens, his words were coupled with images of women quickly turning their faces from the camera pointed at them, using their hands as shields, active in the evasion of capture. Their proclivity to avoid the capture was no protection from Marker's aggressive intent, rather it created a scene that reaches beyond the moment when she realized that she was being filmed- (as she was unable to prevent the camera from gathering her reaction to its gaze, in fact she put on a sort of reflexive show) -divulging the secret of her reflex for self preservation onto the film, solidly placing her humanity in the center of a captured instant. Now the creation of a dual existence: one where she is a living, breathing human being; the other, the record of her reaction to the camera as it snatched up her lived moment, elevating that moment by transforming the medium by which it can be experienced. I like these moments where a reaction is itself the moment, a circular sense of interaction, which is provoked and then cut off. It is what Dziga Vertov called "life caught unawares", something he described as being what one sees through the lens of a camera when life is pro-

voked or surprised into action by the presence of a camera alone.

I must think of what I have done with the images that I stole of people who were sitting in their cars, in coffee shops, to people through rear windows of cars that I traveled in, in airports, in the library. I took part of their unconscious, and willfully restructured it into my own design, assuming the role of a lever which produced a new reality. We broke through the veil of separation, and together became part of the spectacle. Guy Debord calls this connection between people and images The Society of the Spectacle, “a society mediated by images” through which each of us moves. Of the Spectacle, Debord says “It is at once the result and the project”. We trade places with each other, once as the hunter-aggressor, armed with camera, and once as the hunted-for, the unassuming subject. With this in mind, I will film through your kitchen window while you run hot water into the sink, and when you post a letter to someone we won't discuss. I will come after old lovers and film their every nuance, wondering if they think of me yet, even after all of this time. I film you when you sleep, for that is the sweetest time. And I do it all out of an urge to be able to take a bit of it away with me, to better understand myself. As if my fibers would be somehow reinforced by the addition of your moments to mine, creating a final weaving, a vital pattern of a life that will be a testament not only to mine, or my craft, but to the constant collaborative reality surrounding us, by the people and things that make up the world around me, a testament and epitaph to the fleeting moment that is now here, then gone, never to exist again as it was, except for reconfigured as a flicker from the past within the confines of a screen.

Afterword

A letter to the Bell sisters, whose images I spectacularized in 2008

Dear Cassidy and Delaney Bell:

Hello. I am writing to tell you about a document that I have for you. I made it when you were not yet four years old in September of 2008, when I was your occasional babysitter. It is a video. It is a delicate object, something that is preserved only in digital form, inscribed as a file on

my computer hard drive. For the past twenty years I have kept it, so that I could give it back to you now that you are of the age I was when I took it. I can show you how I saw you at age four, with your clicking plastic heels on the sidewalk running with strollers and baby dolls strapped into them, Cassidy stopping to arrange the doll again so it would sit upright in the stroller. Delaney is running down to the end of the neighbor's driveway and back, almost edging me into the grass.

I hope this letter finds you well, and that the video I have included serves as a document of your childhoods, of a day in the distant past that may have been completely forgotten.

If you have the time, I would ask you to write and tell me how it feels to see these images of your childhoods now.

Fondly, Teal Gardner