

The moments I am looking for...

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The Moments I am Looking For...

Judith Stewart

Glimpses

In her 1927 diary, Virginia Woolf wrote of how travelling by car allowed her to alight 'accidentally' upon scenes that would have gone unrecorded 'save for this chance glimpse'. Her following sentence alludes to the potential power of such glimpses: "Then it seems to me I am allowed to see the heart of the world uncovered for a moment" (Woolf, 1982 p. 153). The power of such glimpses, which I regard as something different to the notion of 'seeing' or being 'seen', and the power relations associated with these, is more akin to Doreen Massey's 'throwntogetherness' (Massey, 2005 p.151). Such moments occur randomly when time, space and the gaze are brought together in an 'ever-shifting constellation of trajectories' in which chance plays a crucial role (ibid., p.151). Because Massey conceives of places as independently active, not requiring the human gaze to bring them to life, this throwntogetherness may create a specific moment in which the gaze is reflected back, not as 'an eye that I see looking at me [...] but as a gaze imagined by me' (Lacan, 1981 cited in Krips, 2010 p. 93). In such moments we catch a glimpse of what we are looking for, even if we didn't know it.

Looking

The serried ranks of books are topped by shelves containing boxes, stacked relatively neatly, of varied sizes and colours, all labelled. This apparent order continues when I open the boxes containing mini-DV tapes. Their labels: *Orford Ness, Paston, Rome, Spoleto...* trigger memories of what I expect to find inside. Some labels have a title and 'Final' or 'Rough Edit' underneath, indicating the status of the work, but others – most if I am honest – generate a sense of foreboding as I know that this seeming order is only a thin veneer that masks the chaos sitting inside the plastic casing. I am looking for a particular short clip and anticipate several frustrating hours of looking through the tapes before I find it.

I think about this chaos every time I search for a particular bit of footage, especially on those occasions when the work involves academic research processes or funding applications. These processes assume an approach to research and making art that is pre-planned, the map from idea to artefact clear and straightforward. But, for me at least, the process of making is never linear and involves detours, returning to visual material collected in some past life, abandoning

some things in favour of others, and sometimes it is all thrown back in the box and I start again. It is hard to explain this as a rational research methodology, but it is neither random nor 'intuitive' and generates its own intellectual and ethical rigour.

I know many artists are far more methodical than I am. But even though I get grouchy and swear to be more organised when surrounded by the chaos of half-labelled tapes and cameras and wires that don't match, having a slightly chaotic approach to storage has brought benefits. Many of these tapes contain footage recorded more than two decades ago, some using mismatched analogue technologies that have been digitised for ease of editing. Hence the tangle of wires. In trawling through, looking for something particular that I remember having filmed, I often stumble upon something forgotten, or discarded because it contained insufficient frames to use at the time, or was deemed too dull to work with.

October 1998 – Dublin

At the start of a month-long residency, I am standing in an empty studio on the first floor of a building overlooking the street. I haven't a clue what I am going to do or film whilst here and so I stare out of the tall window at the activity on the street below where there is a fruit stall and a man pushing a two-wheeled barrow. The barrow lurches, tips up and oranges spill out all over the road and pavement. Inevitably, my camera is in a bag and the moment lost.



Figure 1: Judith Stewart, *Dublin 1998*, 2021. Stills taken from original Hi8 footage. © Judith Stewart.

The mess of tapes, cameras and wires that cover my floor mirrors the inside of my head and I have come to think of the process of making work as being a way to sort through hoarded mental images and references collected over a lifetime. It is here that the Artist Placement Group's mantra 'The context is half the work' has significance. While they were largely referring to the location of the work or artist, I prefer to think of this temporally. Looking back through the collection of recordings, I am conscious of how some footage has acquired a meaning far from its original context.

I note the repetitions: long minutes of nothing, tracks through the grass, processions of people doing ordinary but seemingly odd things, distant landscapes where the movement generated by the extreme zoom combines with the handheld camera to create something akin to a heat haze. The sound of my breath reminds me of the ache in my arms as I try to hold them steady. At the time of filming, I did not know what I was attempting to capture but sometimes, either then or later, a connecting visual thread emerges, creating a link between then and now. What I also notice in trawling through hours of footage is the recurring cultural reference points that shape the thing we are looking for. So much for originality.

August 2001 – Sussex

I walk backwards and forwards across the Downs in the hope of finding something that lasts beyond this moment, that has the potential to resonate away from the immersive experience of the place. Coming down the chalk track, a former turnpike road, smoke drifts lazily across the path and disrupts the view. I start recording but am still uncertain about whether this is another clip that will find its way into the discarded box. The dog, who has been nothing but a nuisance to this point, appears from the hedge and shifts the dynamic.



Figure 2: Judith Stewart, *Sussex 2001*, 2021. Stills taken from original DV footage. © Judith Stewart.

I have come to enjoy these unexpected cultural connections where I notice things that echo scenes from films or paintings, and now see them as part of an overall pattern that provides another layer to the work. As my dog lopes across the path in the blurry footage, she creates a more mundane, English version of the scene in *Stalker* where the eponymous character lies in the water as the dog crosses behind him. I wonder whether Tarkovsky also had to endure his dog's intrusive behaviour before it suddenly provided him with the visuals he sought.

When I film, most of the time I do not set out with anything particular in mind. I am interested in capturing images – odd behaviours, fleeting events that, rather than signifying random

chaos, are half-remembered echoes of something once seen and brought back to consciousness. These images are, and yet are not, of the specific place and time.

Italy 1998

A man stands on a stage in Piazza San Marco and seems to re-enact Domenico's speech in Nostalgia; in Spoleto the crowd gathering around a brazier in front of the Duomo have faces recognisable from Botticelli paintings. Merged with the crowd, I start recording, uncertain of how or whether I will use this footage.



Figure 4: Judith Stewart, *Venice 1998*, 2021. Stills taken from original Hi8 footage. © Judith Stewart.



Figure 3: Judith Stewart, *Spoleto 1999*, 2021. Stills taken from original Hi8 footage. © Judith Stewart.

Seen

Looking at the footage again some 20 years later alongside other rough cuts of people filmed going about their business, I experience one of those moments of recognition; something that makes me feel rather idiotic for not having recognised it earlier. Having become aware that someone in the crowd of onlookers is filming for an unusually long time, the man raises his head. When the subject's gaze meets mine through the camera lens, I realise that it is this moment of being seen that provides the moment I was looking for.

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