

Jan Bryant



Still from *Hurt Locker* (2009), drama directed by Kathryn Bigelow, HDTV and Super 16 film, colour, 131mins. Permission to use image kindly given by Nicolas Chartier, Voltage Pictures, LLC.

It begins with a screen and a shadow in the hot, dusty confusion of a few fraught and airless moments...

You notice above all else the unfathomable distance between locals and soldiers, a breach, untranslatable and infinite, of unknowable differences, a lack of shared purpose, with men watching, staring and continuing to watch, and women in hijab watching too and then caught in the lens of the camera, in the gun sites of the soldiers, they look away to watch again furtively from balconies, from windows, away from the action, from behind washing drying in the raspy dryness of the day, cloudless and harsh, and with irredeemable remoteness, of the Iraqis, of the Americans, heat, rubble, dust, the strange nature of the event as spectacle... and the call to prayer floats so lightly above the dense confusion on the ground.

And then a sudden silence, absolute silence, bears down on the thickness of the street.

A miniature robot, first as a shadow on a screen, and then coming into view as a remote-controlled probe in the form of a little tank, suggestive of the *vardøger*, that frightening phantom double from Norse mythology that appears as voice, as smell, as form, as warning, just before the appearance of the 'real' body, and as it searches, as it struggles to uncover its target, moving insecurely over the uneven ground, dry, rocky, accompanied only by the utterances of its own internal workings, it reaches a pile of plastic-covered rubbish concealing a roadside bomb, and there are jokes between soldiers, jokes about penetration, camaraderie and the absolute concentration on task. In the eternity of suspended breath, this absorbs every other possible thing or concern or activity or thought...

To be immersed in the workings of a bomb disposal unit in Iraq as it moves about its daily tasks — tasks that are extraordinary, yet remaining daily and ordinary nonetheless, in that wonderful way of all paradox, as each moment closes

down around the very instant of each tense and dangerous act, while time is being stretched to unmeasurable limits and within each action politics disappears, unexpectedly, global politics, distilled into this spiny concentration of daily acts that at the same time throws a veil of forgetting over the failed promises of war, of bravado, of national interest launched into resource rich corners, of ideologies moulded into universal rights, of great and inevitable losses projected onto this very moment, and other moments like it, by the millions of people who protested against it in the first place, a necessary forgetting, because in the absolute present, in the daily measures taken to survive in the heat of each frightening moment, these thoughts cannot be remembered — this is an experience that can support neither contemplation nor critical reflection.

### ***"Days Left in Bravo Company's Rotation 38"***

Being immersed in the workings of a bomb disposal unit in Iraq as it moves about its daily tasks is an experience that can support neither contemplation nor critical reflection.

### ***"Days Left in Bravo Company's Rotation 37"***

According to Maurice Blanchot, "The everyday escapes. This is its definition. We cannot help but miss it if we seek it through knowledge, for it belongs to a region where there is still nothing to know, just as it is prior to all relation insofar as it has always already been said, even while remaining unformulated, that is to say, not yet information."<sup>1</sup>

The everyday contests truth and thus the world of the Law, Government, the University, the sensible and the rational, of depths and meditations, for it designates, "a region or a level of speech where the determinations true or false, like the opposition yes and no, do not apply — it being before what affirms it and yet incessantly reconstituting itself beyond all that negates it."<sup>2</sup>

The everyday takes us back to existence, to what is most important, to the spontaneity as it is lived.

The not 'knowing' beyond gender.



Still from *Red Checkers* (2009), Alex Monteith, five channel video and sound installation work. Courtesy of the artist.

Blanchot insists that in the everyday the individual is in a state of “human anonymity,” held in its movement without knowing it: “we have no name, little personal reality, scarcely a face, just as we have no social determination to sustain or enclose us.”<sup>3</sup> How does the everyday escape? “The everyday breaks down structures and undoes forms, even while ceaselessly regathering itself behind the form whose ruin it has insensibly brought about.”<sup>4</sup> “Nothing happens” in the everyday, neither rest, nor moment for reflection. Indeed, contemplation makes the everyday vanish, a characteristic observed also by Guy Debord when he announced that “disinterested observation is even less possible here than anywhere else.”<sup>5</sup>

The everyday wholly occupies and absorbs so there can be no aesthetic judgement or distance.

***Hurt Locker (2009), drama directed by Kathryn Bigelow,***  
*HDTV and Super 16 film, colour, 131mins.*

*A film about the ‘everyday’ operations of the U.S Army Explosives Ordnance Disposal Unit (EOD),*  
*Early in “Operation Iraqi Freedom.”*

*Kathryn Bigelow (1950-)*  
*American director, popular filmmaker, painter, conceptual artist,*  
*Once a member of the Art + Language Group (U.K.),*  
*Jury member for Venice, Berlin and Sundance film festivals.*

### **In the everyday there can be no aesthetic judgement.**

Still in uniform, floating near the bank of a canal, its glistening, sun-flecked surface and gentle caressing grasses embracing this body, lifeless just under the surface of the restless water, and the awful fact of a murdered man erased so comprehensively by the title of the image, by the word ‘Dachau’, Lee Miller’s prison guard, murdered during the liberation of Dachau, and our knowingness of the awfulness that is now inescapably tied to the anonymous guard, to this man whose actions we cannot know, and whose guilt is conditional upon the veracity of the photographer’s naming, *Dead SS Guard floating in canal, Dachau, 30th April 1945*, one day after liberation, the corpse, buoyed by the dense, black water and now without life in the beauty of this canal, becoming at the same time a nameless dead soldier among all nameless soldiers from all wars that have been and are yet to come, while also being complicit in the horror of Dachau, which shall itself overwhelm the world, change the world, so that this image, with its brutality located in the specificity of its title, is still above all else a beautiful image, intensified by the strange and compelling weaving of aesthetics by space and phenomena, both beautiful and horrible, so that it has the capacity to overwhelm all horror by its beauty, and now all the more horrible because of it, and then one wonders whether Lee Miller found the body in this position, in this state, or did she arrange the corpse in the canal for the sake of the image?<sup>6</sup>

***“I implore you to believe this is true.”***

*Urgent cable from Lee Miller To Audrey Withers,*  
*Editor, British Vogue, 1945.*

*Lee Miller (1907-1977)*

*Surrealist, photographer, fashion model, cook and war correspondent*  
*for Vogue. One of the first people to enter Dachau as part of the*  
*liberating American Forces.*

### **The seductive arrangement of things.**

Five large screens, wrapping around the space as the sky wraps around the world and the screen wraps around the viewer, and the image upturns land to become sky, and then from the fear of falling to infinity, dropping with the force of gravity that is also the sensation of gravity being reversed, as sky is grounded and ground becomes sky, and to advance also, as with the line of the horizon, from left to right, first land, then sky, then smoke, moving in sequence from screen to screen, across the space, and then in circles, acrobatically, so that the images are simultaneously unifying and fragmenting, and the world is fragmented by the screen, forced by the screen into an enclosed singularity, along with the singularity

that encases each pilot in the action of flying, while also revealing the inescapable compulsion for unity that brings the separateness of each screen and each pilot into collective purpose, binding the images in an order of patterning that is also the concentration of the mind on patterning, on ordering, on formation, to reach ultimately a totality of form, space and time through the assemblage of isolated parts.

And since these are fighter pilots who form part of a larger system arranged by the state for war and protection, operations abstracted to spectacle, to group formation, and then as movement against the sky, as aesthetics of flight, almost euphemistically, in each plane's beautiful tracings, the terror of war, hypothetical and speculative, is erased. As progeny of former fighters whose formation, wing-tip-to-wing-tip, was an act of survival in WW2 missions, the threat of death is faintly remembered in the terrifying movement of each acrobatic dive, for even while death is being subsumed by the present folly of the sequence, and deflected in a desire for play, it is not forgotten but folded into the possibility of failure, or collision, or mistiming, and what is perhaps more profoundly feared is another form of failure sitting menacingly at the periphery of every event, the fear of disappointing spectacles, of the unspectacular, even of boredom, a mood that also belongs to the soldier in war, to the extended passages of intense boredom that mark the life of soldiers in waiting, those moments of apprehensive aimlessness, when purpose and training promise to coalesce as action, but are yet to happen. Waiting as delayed anticipation.

Deflections.

Small and ill-equipped Air Force whose point of being must be continually interrogated, fighter jets replaced by aerial acrobatic planes, war by display, combat messy and visceral by pure vision, and the enemy by the spectator (whose thoughts have now lost their grounded wonder and no longer look up but out, along with the camera's site on the tail of the plane, machinic and isolated witness to these formations, lost even to the pilot who moves forward, while the camera looks back and now positioned in the centre of the screen, the tail directing and controlling the image).

In the sensuous inveigling of the everyday by aesthetics, we are dragged spontaneously (helplessly) from quotidian meanderings, removed from our absorption in our daily tasks, which are neither pleasurable nor arduous, to be immersed instead in the meditative seduction of form and play. In the midst of the aesthetic, time frozen and time moving, and while remembering the everyday as pure task, the power relations inscribed in gender are legible only indirectly, and only through the bringing of values extraneous to them. Perhaps it is found in the division of tasks (war, domesticity), or in the translation of form into specious qualities (hard, soft, feminine). Gender is inconceivable here — in the—purely—aesthetic and in the unthinkable—everyday, both absorbing and totalising in their differing ways.

**Alex Monteith, *Composition with Royal New Zealand Air Force Red Checkers for five channel video installation* (2009),**

*Five channel video and sound installation work,  
Commissioned by TVNZ7 New Art Lands Series.  
Alex Monteith (1977-) New Zealand artist, born in Belfast,  
the North of Ireland  
Intermedia artist, filmmaker.  
Surfer, Irish National Surfing women's champion (2001).*

**Notes**

1. Maurice Blanchot, "Everyday Speech" (1959), (trans.) Susan Hanson, (eds.) Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, *Everyday Life*, *Yale French Studies*, Number 73, USA, 1987, p.15.

2. Ibid, p.16.
3. Ibid, p.17.
4. Ibid, p.17.
5. Guy Debord, "Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life," (trans.) Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology*, The Bureau of Public Secrets, Berkeley, CA, 1981, p.70.
6. Lee Miller, *Dead SS Guard floating in canal, Dachau, 30th April 1945*, image link, [www.flickr.com/photos/hab3045/2197296661/page2/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/hab3045/2197296661/page2/)
7. Cable from Lee Miller to Audrey Withers, Editor, *British Vogue*, 1944. Quoted in Antony Penrose, *The Lives of Lee Miller*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1985, p.179.