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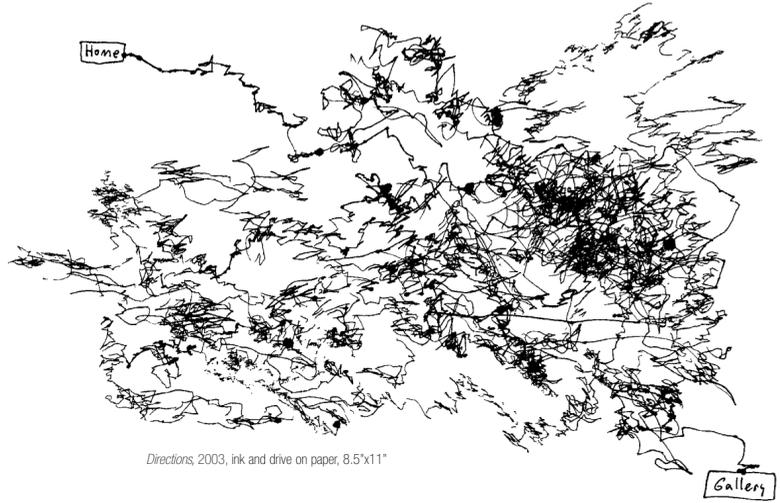
# Time and Space

Video Projections by Scott Wolniak

Thursday, Feb. 20 to Saturday, March 22, 2003



Studies for Time and Space project, 2003



Directions, 2003, ink and drive on paper, 8.5"x11"

### An Everyday Optic: Scott Wolniak's Time and Space

... How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual? To question the habitual. But that's just it, we're habituated to it. We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren't the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, it's anesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space?

How are we to speak of these 'common things', track them down rather, flush them out, wrest them from the dross in which they remain mired, how to give them a meaning, a tongue, to let them, finally, speak of what is, of what we are.

—Georges Perec *Approaches to What?*<sup>1</sup>

With a nod to Perec, it seems proper to start with some questions on the subject of "common things." Or, to be more precise, a particular common thing, weeds. What, after all, is more common than weeds? Gardeners inevitably notice them, but who else notices weeds? One answer is whoever chooses to question the habitual. Philosophers do; Voltaire's *Candide* famously concludes that we must "cultivate our gardens," prompting Professor Pargloss to respond that "man" was put in the Garden of Eden to "dress it and to keep it" that is, to work." (In other words, to pull weeds!)

And, artists notice weeds too. For some time Scott Wolniak has tended a small patch of earth between the

sidewalk and curb in front of his house, keeping it clear of weeds and garbage as an act of civic responsibility. It's a potentially endless task, since the humble site continues to sprout weeds and trap trash. Wolniak collects both the weeds and the trash, and transforms the latter into an image of the former.

In *Weeds*, a series of sculptures Wolniak has made that exemplifies his aesthetic practice, he adheres the trash to a backing, using templates drawn from the weeds to then cut out leaf shapes, turning the discarded fragments and wind-blown scraps of consumer culture into the substance of art. He works quickly and randomly at this stage, avoiding composition. In some instances, the trash remains whole: a manipulated cigarette butt blooms into a dandelion. In this deft transfiguration resides an entire aesthetic attitude, one that views the everyday as containing the potential for utopian transformation. The familiar is made strange in such a way that the debased and discarded reveal the presence of something marvelous, the unattended comes to our attention, the abject flips over into the elevated.

Wolniak's practice calls to mind Walter Benjamin's description of his approach to the Arcades project, his famous unfinished "industrial archaeology" of 19th century Paris:

"Method of this project: literary montage. I need say nothing. Only exhibit (zeigen). I won't filch anything of value or appropriate any ingenious turns of phrase. Only the trivia, the trash — which I don't want to inventory, but simply allow it to come into its own in the only way possible: by putting it to use."<sup>2</sup>

To allow things to come into their own, Wolniak tries "to find systems that will determine most of the aesthetic issues,"<sup>3</sup> setting up a process that involves a combination of planning, chance and editing; in other words finding a way to say nothing, and only exhibit. Wolniak seeks to create works of art that obviate aesthetic decision, making the art make itself as much as possible. *Weeds* suspends questions of composition — the trash is randomly ordered when it is applied to its backing support. Aesthetic elements result from a sequence of decisions that then determine the specificity of the piece. It's not just a question of "the idea becomes a machine that makes the art." *Automatic Turbulence Studies* is the title of a series of drawings Wolniak has done that were made in a way that will seem familiar to most everyone. While traveling via various different modes of transportation, Wolniak keeps pencil in contact with paper, registering the movement of a line in response to the bumps and shocks of the route. Here, method is meaning; Wolniak's way of working holds the most interest and the individual drawings are incidental. In the video "11/02/00," Wolniak rides precariously in the back of a pick-up truck where a small easel and prepared canvas are set up and, as the truck rumbles around the

corners of a neighborhood, he paints. He may or may not be trying to render the sights rushing by. It's a valiant, comical performance, touching in its futility. It's also loaded with commentary on art making, as painting goes on a desultory road trip with video; each medium vies for our attention. In the end, the murky, thickly-painted canvas tumbles out of the truck during a bumpy moment of acceleration. Though he hops out to retrieve the canvas, there's no mistaking the indifference to results in this gesture.

What does it mean now to allow "the trivia, the trash" to come into its own? What does it mean to let the canvases tumble out of the truck? What is it that Wolniak is allowing to come into its own? It's not weeds or trash, which are not on display in his show at the Gahlberg Gallery. It's everyday life, which, like weeds and trash, goes unnoticed. In *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, a critical and historical overview of theories of everyday life, Ben Highmore outlines the role of aesthetic practices in the process of awakening us from "the dreamless sleep" in which the habitual goes unquestioned.

"If everyday life, for the most part, goes by unnoticed ... then the first task for attending to it will be to make it noticeable. The artistic avant-garde's strategy of 'making strange,' of rendering what is most familiar unfamiliar, can provide an essential ingredient for fashioning a sociological aesthetic. Aesthetic techniques, such as the surprising juxtaposition supplied by Surrealism, provide a productive resource for rescuing the everyday from conventional habits of mind. Similarly, if the everyday is conventionally perceived as homogeneous, forms of artistic montage work to disturb such 'smooth surfaces.' This sociological aesthetic isn't simply designed to 'shock' us out of our established forms of attention; its ambition is to attempt to register the everyday in 'all' its complexities and contradictions."<sup>4</sup>

Wolniak belongs among the group of artists who find subject matter and substance for their art in everyday life. The artist of everyday life, giving voice to 'common things,' might be considered the contemporary equivalent of Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life." Since everyday life occurs in multiple, mutable ways that require particular and varied aesthetic methods to approach, there can't possibly be a singular example and the term should be plural — *The Artists of Everyday Life*. They differ from Baudelaire's artist, whom he idealized as "... the painter of the fleeting moment and of all that it suggests of the eternal."<sup>5</sup> The aim of these artists is not "... to distill the eternal from the transitory."<sup>6</sup>

We can characterize the project of these artists in broad terms: they are involved in the fabrication of "an alternative aesthetic for attending to the experience of modern everyday life;" an aesthetic that is perforce contrary to "high culture's propensity toward expressive subjectivism in relation to the everyday." They find ways

to work on our perception and attention to make things noticeable, employing an "aesthetic of experimentation that recognizes what actuality always outstrips the procedures for rendering it."<sup>7</sup> They resemble Baudelaire's painter insofar as they confront a challenge similar to one Baudelaire described, "... there is in the trivial things of life, in the daily changing of the external things, a speed of movement that imposes upon the artist an equal speed of execution."<sup>8</sup> If we understand "speed of execution" with reference to actuality outstripping the procedures employed in its rendering.

So then what does all this have to do with bananas? Despite its fame as star of countless comedies, the "funny guy of the fruit family," Wolniak says, is so familiar that it is almost invisible. "We don't question it, it doesn't question us, it doesn't seem to pose a problem ..." (Perec). Wolniak's banana brings with it many associations, from pop art album cover icon to the colonialist exploits of Capital. But this banana establishes its own identity as a measuring device. In *Homespace*, Wolniak disturbs the smooth surface of the everyday banana, estranging its temporality by using digital video technology to compress duration. Presenting the banana this way brings it to our attention in an unfamiliar way. Wolniak turns the banana into an hourglass. Our time spent watching the life cycle of the banana, lit and framed as video subject, makes us the banana's double; time passes for us too while we gaze at the black spots winking into view on the yellow skin. *In video vanitas*: we can take the banana as an image of ourselves — mortal, transient, decomposing daily. And in the snips and blurbs of sound synchronized with this process, we experience the "background noise" to which Georges Perec refers the everyday. This is not just noise; this is our life, our body, our space.

Without the banana in the picture, slowly rotting, everyday life wouldn't become noticeable in the background. Paul Virilio reminds us "there is no apparent speed without a horizon, a terminus."<sup>9</sup> Hollywood is thankful for this fact: a spaceship can majestically glide across a screen against a field of distant stars even though, in fact, an interstellar ship could only be traveling at astronomical speed beyond depiction. Without a stable element, something fixed, static, there's no way to register a dynamic phenomenon. A banana, the artist on an escalator, office partitions; these provide the horizon against which Wolniak makes things appear: warm, intimate domestic sounds; the flickering reconfiguration of people in public space; the lazy, lame choreography of the workplace.

In *Time and Space*, Wolniak reverses the angle of Hollywood's special effect, using the fixed "foreground" element to emphasize movement in the "background." The terms foreground/background don't refer to a literal placement of elements in pictorial composition. Virilio brings to our attention the millennial appearance of a "final" perspective, the product of our technoculture, "in which the depth of real time wins out over depth

of real space." When "the optical thickness of our planet" has been reduced to "nothing" by real-time telecommunications, foreground and background can only refer to "the relationship between phenomena," that is, their apparent relative speed.<sup>10</sup>

Wolniak's temporal and sequential modifications of patterns of routine, by changing the relative speed of phenomena, produce an effect of "optical magnification of the appearance of the human environment," highlighting aspects that are either 'hyperactive, mechanical and structural' (Wolniak) as in *Transpace* or *Workspace*, or cozy, domestic and personal as in *Homespace*. Wolniak's facility with time compression differs from the spectacular examples of pop media, where time-lapse cinematography makes clouds scud across the sky or commuters morph into blurring lines of color. He uses the technique to bring us into contact with the "speed of movement" of "daily changing ... external things" (Baudelaire), exhibiting (only exhibit!) that our movements and environments are a single event, ceaselessly becoming.

At times, Wolniak casts himself as the fixed element in the works. He traces human activity by revealing its relation to the fixed position, the horizon or terminus, not only of objects but also of his self. His presence in his work is not self-portraiture, or, rather, it is non-psychological self-portraiture, a depiction of the subject as a spatio-temporal phenomenon. Here Wolniak becomes like the banana, a recording instrument. At other times, Wolniak becomes the object in motion.

In his video *Multitask* (2002), Wolniak enters a static, fixed frame and sits in a chair in his studio. Then, against this stable background, he gets busy, real busy. Single-frame slices of various activities — reading, drinking coffee, stretching, using a cellular phone, and so forth — are progressively interlaced, transforming him into the artist as studio Shiva, a many-limbed deity of mundane movements. This eye-arresting representation of

"multitasking" is a case in which the artist's speed of execution appears to equal, if not expressively to surpass, the speed of movement of things.

In this work and the works on display at the Gahlberg Gallery, Wolniak demonstrates what technology does to our attention and our bodies, cranking us up to a high-rev flutter, like info-age hummingbirds. As the object very much in motion, Wolniak clearly belongs to "the professional browsers of the transportation and transmission revolution — physical transport and optical transport — specialists in time differences, revolutionary jetsetters amidst a general roaming in which the dislocation of the real world derives spontaneously from the delocalization and accelerated displacement of bodies (dislocate is from the Latin, dislocare: to move about, displace)."<sup>11</sup>

As an optical transport specialist in time differences, Wolniak is akin to Italian photographer and pioneer filmmaker, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, who was briefly associated with Italian Futurism. In his 1911 manifesto *Futurist Photodynamism*, Bragaglia looks askance at the "reconstruction of movement" — the province of chronophotography — in favor of the production of sensation — the province of his practice of Futurist Photodynamism. In his photographs, Bragaglia renders multiple aspects of movement, by means of technical manipulations (long exposures and a moving subject producing complex images, superimposing blur and still.) However one judges Bragaglia's achievement in his photographic experiments, his desire "to obtain a vision that is proportionate, in terms of the strength of the images, to the very tempo of their existence, and to the speed with which they have lived in a space and in us,"<sup>12</sup> parallels Wolniak's artistic endeavor. The project to obtain a vision proportionate to the tempo of existence recalls Perec's call to let common things "speak of what is, of what we are," as a way to take account of, describe, and question what happens every day.

Questions at the beginning, questions at the end. ... The artists of everyday life leave us with the ongoing task of questioning.

As Perec writes, "To question what seems so much a matter of course that we've forgotten its origins ...

*What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us. We live, true, we breathe, true; we walk, we open doors, revolutionary jetsetters amidst a general roaming in which the dislocation of the real world derives spontaneously from the delocalization and accelerated displacement of bodies (dislocate is from the Latin, dislocare: to move about, displace)."*<sup>11</sup>

Wolniak's *Time and Space* takes up this vital line of questioning.

— Jonathan Miller

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1 Perec, G. *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* London 1999, p. 210  
2 Benjamin, quoted in Highmore, B. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* London 2002, p. 60  
3 Wolniak, in conversation, Dec. 2002  
4 Highmore, B. *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction* London 2002, p. 23  
5 Baudelaire, C. "The Painter of Modern Life" in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* London 1972, p. 394  
6 Baudelaire, p. 402  
7 Highmore, p. 23  
8 Baudelaire, pp. 393-394  
9 Virilio, P. "Light Time" in *A Landscape of Events* Cambridge 2000, p. 47  
10 Ibid. pp. 44-48  
11 Virilio, P. "The Big Night" in *A Landscape of Events* Cambridge 2000, p. 6  
12 Bragaglia, A.G. "Futurist Photodynamism" in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. U. Appolonio New York 1970, p. 40  
13 Perec, p. 210

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