

Minding the Mundane

Harm Coordes

An Attempt of Documenting Experience through Scores

1. Find a place in the room that you feel comfortable with. Lay down.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Imagine the most beautiful sky you can remember. What was it like? What did you hear?
Remember what you could smell.
Feel the connection you had with your surrounding.
4. Take your time.
5. Get up again.
6. Thank you.

Fig. 1: Score for Imagining the Sky, 2024



Fig. 2: Interweaving with Nature, 2023

¹Mundane here is defined as ordinary and well-known events, behaviors and surroundings, as habitual practices, and their qualities.

The following text explores the challenging attempt of documenting experiences arising from the performative appropriation of the mundane¹. Rather than attempting to prove the possibility of documenting an experience, the focus is on making it re-experienceable through performative scores. It will argue that through performative scores, which are serving as instructions and encouragement for certain actions, a defamiliarization is happening that creates a heightened awareness for one's environment. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of Queer Use and the concept of Everyday Aesthetics the text delves into the research residency *Minding the Mundane* at Crystal Room, a research residency programme of Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst Bremen e.V. (GAK). Particularly, it will be zooming in on the performance *Walking as a River* that was developed as part of the research residency and which serves as an illustration of inviting an audience to re-enlive a prior performative arrangement.

“Performance can not be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so it becomes something other than performance. [...] Performance [...] becomes itself through disappearance.”²

² Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146, in Willberg, ‘If Only They Had Written a Score’, 4.

³ Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, 59 (own translation).

How to document performative research? And for me even more interesting, how the experience that comes with it, for the artist as well as the visitor? Isn't it impossible, as experience is something felt deeply subjective and intrinsic, connected not only to time and space, but also to the individual recipient's past experiences, memories, and knowledge? And isn't it impossible as everything that happens within a performance, as much as it might be scripted, is not only subject to many external and internal constraints, but also to the interconnection of time, space and contributors, which Erika Fischer-Lichte describes as an autopoietic feedback-loop in which

„whatever the actors do, it has an effect on the audience, and whatever the audience does, it has an effect on the actors and the other audience members. In this sense, it can be said that the performance is produced and controlled by a self-referential and constantly changing feedback loop. Therefore, its course cannot be completely planned and predicted.”³

⁴ see Fischer-Lichte, 61 (own translation).

The resulting, uncontrollable interaction that is happening between performers and visitors is much more than the mere exchange of information or movement or passive resonance. Engagement leads to a visual reaction, much more it creates liveness and presence. Or to put it more radical: Not the performer or facilitator is producing the performance, but the interplay which evokes a feeling of uniqueness.⁴ In order to approach these question, working with performative scores is following two main aims: (1) making the experiences re-experienceable (from the perspective of the artist as well as the participant) and (2) re-creating relationality and heightened presence in the interaction with one's human or more-than-human environment. Furthermore, in the notion of commons, it aims at making these experiences openly accessible.

Minding the Mundane

How can we value the everyday more and embrace it more mindfully? What beauty lies in it? The research residency *Minding the Mundane* was investigation everyday practices, objects and processes and searching for those that defy appreciation due to their everydayness. What is the implicit wisdom that is hidden in these practices? What are the performative or artistic potentials of the tools and equipment that contribute to the realization

of these activities? The research explored how these actions and objects could be abstracted and exhibited in interactive performative settings to create experiences of „enlivering“⁵ – combining the emotional and rational aspects of experiencing. The research was aiming at the formulation of an artistic vocabulary that collects situations and creates experiences of awareness and appreciation for the everyday. Relying on the use of performative scores (Fig. 1) the visitors were not passive recipients of the performative and spatial structure created by me and the contributing artists, but active participants in a comprehensive and conscious, albeit uncontrollable, communication and exchange. (Fig. 2)

⁵ Hohn, 'The Concept of Experience by John Dewey Revisited'.



Fig. 3-5 (left to right): Within the setting of 'Practicing Solidarity II', initial research impressions were presented in the Crystal Room in the form of a participatory installation in which a contact footswitch located in the staircase controlled the light-, sound and video layers of the crystal room. These only ran when a person was standing on this footswitch. The negotiation of participation, solidarity, care, and communication were tested. Interactive Installation, GAK, 2023



Fig. 7: “Bring a glass of water”, the invitation for Walking as a River demanded from the visitors, asking for a very mundane thing carried out in a rather unmundane way.

1. Put on the fishing pants
2. Go outside. Leave the GAK through the main entrance, turn to the right, at the corner of the building turn right again and walk down the stairs.
3. Go to the water.
4. Enter the water where the rope is. Hold on to the rope. The river might have a strong current. Be very careful, the stones might be slippery.
5. Don't fall in.
6. Go in as deep as possible without the water overflowing your pants.
7. Feel.
8. Exit the river.
9. Lay with the shore, observe the river.
10. Walk back using the staircase upstream (looking towards the „Umgedrehte Kommode“). Walk like the river, with its currents, waves, movements. (Imagine noone is watching you, just be the river)
11. Thank you.

Fig. 6: Score for Walking as a River, 2024

Using the GAK as a base for investigations, I have been either reaching out from it to other places, or investigating the place of GAK itself, through interviews, walks and other physical interactions, as well as through pictures, videos, and sound recordings. The outcome was a series of four events that took place within and around the GAK, providing performative experiences of interaction with one's environment and creating social situations. (Fig. 3-5)

Walking as a River

The artwork that I will base the following observation on is the participatory performance *Walking as a River* which I created with Swedish performance artist Stefan Andersson. It invited into an open engagement with our artistic research dialogue about the interconnectedness of all waters of the earth through different scores (e.g. Fig. 6), performative elements and through the use of props, of which for the further elaborations most important two pairs of waterproof fishing pants. It led the visitors into an expedition of observing the water they brought (Fig. 7), sharing water and stories about water, meeting and listening to each other, drinking waters (inside as well as outside of GAK, Fig. 8-9) and to perform the movement of the river themselves.

“Accessible after the end of the performance are documents that were made about it/by it, but not the specific materiality of the performance itself.”⁶

⁶ Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, 128 (own translation).

⁷ Hohr, ‘The Concept of Experience by John Dewey Revisited’, 3.

The documentation of an artwork like the performance *Walking as a River*, for example, through a photograph could become an objective representation, although the picture might have been taken subjectively, with the subjective view of the artist or the photographer. In its readability – it is documenting something in a visual language that can be read – it is working like a “signpost”⁷ that is pointing towards a meaning, providing the experience in a cognitive way. As a reader, I can assume a certain feeling, I can assume the atmosphere, I can connect the aspects and elements that make up the image. Or, I could document the performance by describing the feeling of entering the river, wearing the fishing pants, as a coolness that can be felt through the membrane of the pants, as a pressure that is brought to the body by the mass of water, as the feeling of resistance because the trousers and boots offer considerably more resistance to the flow than my bare legs would, or the feeling of excitement that a completely different perception of the water is possible by wearing the fishing pants. What I am more interested in is a mode of documentation that tries to approach that specific materiality and offers to re-enlive the past

Fig. 8: Enacting a score from *Walking as a River*, GAK, 2023





Fig. 9: Walking as a River, GAK, 2023

⁸ Schneider, 'Performance Remains', 100, in Willberg, 'If Only They Had Written a Score', 1.

⁹ see Willberg, 'If Only They Had Written a Score', 1.

¹⁰ Wilberg, 'If Only They Had Written a Score', 13.

experience—in this case to approach the space and surrounding of GAK—even without the facilitators present. Performative scores do not only provide a signpost for conceiving the past experience but could offer an engaged and playful approach through embodying mind.

In her exhibition project “If only they had written a score” (2023) artistic researcher Lissy Willberg describes the attempt to relive a past moment. The exhibition installs a “recomposition of remains”⁸. In doing so, it draws attention to the reconstruction of relationality.⁹

“I wanted to explore the place, the people, the surrounding, to set it into relation. Therefore, these works do not only want to create relations, but also relationships. Relationality is evidential because it is able to change the way “I” perceive, relate, and (inter)act (im)materially. It has the capacity to bring forth (im)material ways of relation between places, things, animals, people, and plants. Both performing and witnessing the performative can alter one’s perception, meaning can be inscribed, which, in an ephemeral way creates a lasting experience.”¹⁰

Similarly to Willberg, my research at GAK was focusing on the creation of relations and

relationships with the space and its inhabitants. I wanted to approach it, and I want you to be able to approach it similarly, and individually. To approach a space and the things it holds—especially a known one—making it strange and using it differently might help. To show how this making strange happens, I will create a distinction between unwritten and written scores.

Unwritten Scores are derived from the proper use of a thing, from ordinary, proper, learnt use, from the design or shape of an object, for example, the shape of an ordinary chair, offering a space for sitting down (seat surface) and backrest (to lean on). Unwritten scores can also come in written form, for example as manuals for household machines such as dishwashers. They allow for a “habitual mode of responding”.¹¹ According to Ahmed,

“[u]se instructions can be not only about how to use things properly, how to take care of things or yourself, but how you are directed along a path; that well-used path. An instruction can be a direction.”¹²

In the case of *Walking as a River*, the fishing pants in the beginning complied with their ordinary use. We knew how to wear them, with the purpose to keep our bodies dry. They served as a compartment for our bodies. Just the same, we know how to use a gallery

¹¹ Boeckel, *At the Heart of Art and Earth*, 380.

¹² Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 204.

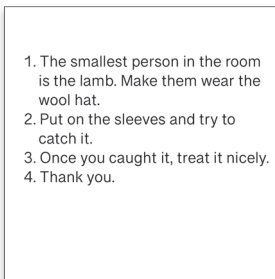


Fig. 10: Score for catching the lamb, 2024

¹³ Ramazzotto, 'Heidegger and Dewey', 2 (brackets added by the author).

¹⁴ see Ramazzotto, 2.

¹⁵ Ahmed, What's the Use?, 204.

or museum space. We know that the ordinary use is one in which the aesthetic experience is based on “the passive contemplation of a given object placed on a pedestal (and abstracted from all its historical, social and cultic components.)”¹³, a mode, which Heidegger describes as a world deprivation („Weltentzug“), stripping the artistic object of its mundane aura and influences.¹⁴ We know how to use a bridge; we know what a wall is for– but what happens when we use or approach them differently? For example, if we enact the *Score for catching a lamb* within the gallery space? (Fig. 10)

“do not use that is saying, in truth, do not be that. Those who refuse the instructions know how they work.”¹⁵

Written Scores make strange. They question *Unwritten Scores*. According to Saito (2015) and Dewey (1934/2005) aesthetic appreciation in everyday life is not only possible but can be enriched through acts of defamiliarization or through casting an aura. By consciously estranging oneself from the habitual and mundane, individuals can cultivate a heightened sensitivity to the aesthetic nuances embedded within the fabric of their everyday experiences. This process of defamiliarization involves casting the familiar in a new light, disrupting habitual modes of perception,

and uncovering hidden layers of meaning and significance that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. In parallel to Dewey's framework, Sara Ahmed's concept of "queer use" offers a complementary perspective on the transformative potential of everyday encounters. Queer use involves challenging normative understandings and engaging with objects and activities in ways that disrupt conventional hierarchies and expectations. By reappropriating and recontextualizing familiar objects and activities, individuals can reveal alternative aesthetic possibilities that challenge prevailing norms and narratives.

In the staging of an action by, for example, writing it down on a card and putting it on display or setting it ready for action within an action box like in FLUXUS (Fig. 11), a heightened awareness, a making strange and a thought provoking process is happening, that is "queering"¹⁶ the action from an everyday practice to a performative act that is playing with the juxtaposition of "ordinary/extraordinary, familiar/unfamiliar, and event-like/routine-like events"¹⁷. This making-strange resembles what artist-educator Jan van Boeckel calls "wrong-footing", offering room for participation and defamiliarization and "creating the optimum conditions for a sense of wonder to manifest itself."¹⁸ These conditions are not solely contingent upon external factors; they are also, and perhaps even more significantly, influenced

¹⁶ Ahmed, *What's the Use?*

¹⁷ Saito, 'Aesthetics of the Everyday'. 4.

¹⁸ Boeckel, *At the Heart of Art and Earth*, 379.

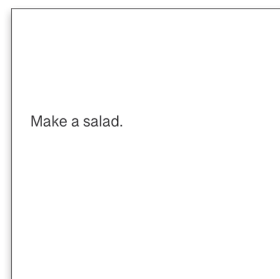


Fig. 11: Proposition #1: Make a Salad, Alison Knowles, 1962



Fig. 12: Walking as a River, GAK, 2023

¹⁹ Boeckel, *At the Heart of Art and Earth*. 379

²⁰ Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 26.

by participants' openness to actively welcome the unforeseen. Cultivating space to activate receptivity can make us feel the stone as stony again.¹⁹ Or in Ahmed's words:

“Queer uses, when things are used for purposes other than the ones for which they were intended, still reference the qualities of things; queer uses may linger on those qualities, rendering them all the more lively.”²⁰

Based on the specific materiality of the fishing pants and the space around the GAK (the riverbed) *Walking as a River* as a written score can work as a reenactment of the approach to transform the movement of the river, from an observation into a movement (Fig. 12). At the same time, an accidental element of the performance is documented in the eponymous artwork and the resulting queer use of the fishing pants: By stepping too deep into the water of the river Weser, the fishing pants were flooded, now not serving any more as a compartment to keep the performer's body dry, but one that kept the river in, making not the performer's movement an abstraction of the river, but the walking an embodiment of and with the river. One, which brought performer and river very close, and one that allows for a queer way of using within the exhibition setting, namely by exhibiting the fishing pants as

a compartment for water. The ordinary use allows for a strange use, and vice versa. *Written scores* can, however, also exist in unwritten form, for example with Tino Sehgal's immaterial instructions to perform his works that are not written, but orally transported.²¹

²¹ <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-25-summer-2012/welcome-his-situation>

“Use provides a way of philosophizing from the everyday, a way of thinking about what we are doing as we are doing it. When we say something is being shaped by use, we are also talking about who can use what, when, and where. A consideration of use allows us to show how a world can be shaped by what seems to be the smallest

Fig. 13: Walking as a River, GAK, 2023



²² Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 65.

²³ Heidegger, *Holzwege*. 26.

²⁴ Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, 315 (own translation).

²⁵ Ahmed, *What's the Use?*, 73.

thing: how worlds are shaped from the bottom up.”²²

As shown, one specific ability of *Written Scores* is to make strange. By interrogating and reimagining the familiar, individuals can uncover new avenues for aesthetic exploration and appreciation within the seemingly banal and routine aspects of process or spaces, in this case the environment of GAK—as a formal as well as ideological space. In this way, a queer use encouraged through (performative) scores is a possibility to appropriate a space or an object differently, to playfully open new possibilities and to rediscover the familiar through making-strange. Scores may help to subvert normative paradigms to explore alternative modes of interaction with objects and activities. Both defamiliarization and queer use entail a critical re-evaluation of the familiar, aiming to unearth novel interpretations and aesthetic significances embedded within the everyday milieu. Thus, “Weltentzug” (world-deprivation)²³ is met with a “re-enchantment of the world.”²⁴ In this way, a queer use can create a more mindful use, or at least a mindful approach. Things become special. Just as queer use can become ordinary use through frequent repetition, the same could apply to mindful use: “When a path is used more, it is easier to follow.”²⁵

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