

Hamid Waheed  
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- Argument
- Recognition
- Memory

# 00:00:05

The first time I stumbled upon the term ‘queer time’ was in 2017, reading a Tumblr blog post on a page that is now sadly defunct. The person briefly explained the concept; that queer people are bound to a different set of life experiences than bodies more in line with a heteronormative life (chrononormativity)<sup>1</sup>. However, the writer devoted most of the post to a more essayistic portion about meeting ‘Y’, another person, once they’re in their mid-20s, about it being their first intimacy with another person and about sleeping, leisure-ing and pleasure-ing with them over the course of a snowed-in weekend. The last sentence of the post, explaining that this was the first moment in which they experience time at an absolute standstill, is what stuck out to me. It was a point of recognition and it extended beyond the descriptive realm of a sexual encounter; it contextualized my own practice in a way I felt excited about and crystallized many of my own memories into a set of comprehensible experiences that I’d otherwise long had difficulties formulating into language.

“This book makes the perhaps overly ambitious claim that there is such a thing as “queer time” and “queer space”. Queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement and identification. If we try to think about queerness as an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices, we detach queerness from sexual identity and come closer to understanding Foucault’s comment in “Friendship as a Way of Life” that “homosexuality threatens people as a ‘way of life’ rather than as a way of having sex”. In Foucault’s radical formulation, queer friendships, queer networks, and the existence of these relations in space and in relation to the use of time mark out the particularity and indeed the perceived menace of homosexual life.”

<sup>2</sup> Halberstam, 2005

Before reading this, I understood ‘queer time’ initially not to be within the realm of social development at all, but something simpler, or elementary, pertaining to a unique sense of temporality and space as experience. Not a timeline, but a here-and-now experience.

Duration is a key circumstance. Videos and film follow the temporal and spatial logic of whoever recorded the material, in the splicing montage of footage and in the speed manipulation of the extracted data. Whilst in performing, the observer is varyingly bound to the pace and presence of a performing body/ies. The artist subjectivity in these modes is not only a matter of expression within the form, but one enveloped and expressed in the temporal experience of the artwork.

Now, queer expressions in these techniques have been expressed in a plethora of ways, whether it be through stylization, political polemics, and in the ambiguities/subversivisms of sexuality and gender. Though these facets often appear in – and to be sure, they are significant aesthetic codifiers to the durational queerness I’m talking about - another important distinction to me is that they ultimately don’t actually constitute it.

If queer bodies are affected and can perceive the world through a queer modality this way, a different form of space and time, then they are also capable of producing it.

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In the silent short “La Chambre”<sup>3</sup>, the camera pans 360 degrees multiple times in an almost mechanical movement to expose Chantal Akerman’s New York City apartment, with herself dozing in bed and eating an apple. It’s a brief peek, finding spatial/temporal exploration in the artist’s mundane sphere - one of thought, recollection and pressing desires.

And this type of relation to mundanity and aspirations is further played with - abstracted and even “dragged up” - in her first feature “Je tu il elle”<sup>4</sup>. The beginning consists of Akerman writing pages of text with a pencil, eating from a bag of sugar, lying naked on a mattress and staring out at the snow; all inside an otherwise bare room placed in the countryside. In the middle section, she decides to venture out and hitchhikes with a truck driver, whom she shares a series of quiet moments with on the road: they eat and watch sports at a diner, she watches him shave his beard in a gas station restroom, and she sits by him whilst he drives the truck for a long time. Then finally, the narrative culminates in Akerman meeting a girlfriend: they roleplay a stereotypically hetero couple with Akerman brusquely ‘coming home’ and demanding a sandwich, eating it mannerlessly whilst the gentle and admiring girlfriend looks on, then bluntly unbuttoning her summer dress to caress one breast. They untether themselves from these roles in the last minutes of the film and have sex, a release from the preceding seventy in which solitude and longing is firmly embedded. But sexual fulfilment arrives as abruptly as it ends, with the filmmaker waking up early and unceremoniously leaving her girlfriend’s apartment. The narrative doesn’t only point to the abrupt living of queer lives, but also pushes its actual duration in each scene to illustrate the experiences on screen: On one hand, the viewer observes Akerman as a woman - a figure - over time, in fluctuation between roles. Yet Akerman the filmmaker presents this in the form of extended time with her actions, without much adornment or visual cues (stark walls are aplenty in this film). This slow pace makes me pay close attention to her actions, which has the effect of blurring her subjective viewpoint as that of both a character on screen and artist into that of mine as the viewer. This lack of scenographic elements and adornment also points to something inherent to the art experience: the mirroring of a lack - a certain poverty - in fulfilled desires of early queer memories. The bare walls of ‘Je Tu Il Elle’ are spatial negations of desire, intensifying the solitude and repressed identity of the body that we follow on screen for so long.



However, a further argument is that for this kind of queer subjectivity in time to occur, Akerman's body isn't really needed as such, nor any overtly queer signs. I think this is the case for most of her works, most interestingly posited in "Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles"<sup>5</sup>. At first glance, it seems a decidedly un-queer film: Though unconventional in its three-and-a-half-hour long exploration of a widowed housewife's daily chores, the dominant tone is didactic. There's an argumentative mode with which Akerman approaches the heteronormativity the protagonist of the work relies on, by positing it as something almost militaristic. Jeanne Dielman religiously and matter-of-factly fills her day with tasks at exact intervals: cooking for her son, reading a magazine, buying groceries and doing sex work to make ends meet. There is no pause in what needs to be done in her life, no genuine moment of ambivalence for the character until hours later in the plot, when her life unravels completely and seemingly at random. The statuesque diva appearance of Delphine Seyrig only serves to amplify these aspects of routine and can-do post-war resilience; a bodily presence radically different to Akerman's intentional, but awkward gait. Regardless, Akerman's critique of the housewife character is still imbued with queerness through the film's usage of duration. The effect I sense is that of viewing the gaze of someone observing a heteronormative lifestyle (in the director's autobiographical context, her mother and aunts) without being able to inhabit it through the camera. The content in the film isn't the artist's own embodiment of space like it had been in prior works, and there's a whole lot more attention to lighting, mise en scene and set design going on. But the temporal realm and feel of "Jeanne Dielman" is the same as that of the simpler "La Chambre" and "Je tu il elle". This feel of time in Akerman's film is a profoundly queer one to me, which is why I find it one of the most interesting aspects of "Jeanne Dielman"; an unfolding of time recognizable in the rest of her filmography, through the tracking shots of "D'est" and the meditative close-ups in "Almayer's Folly".

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The place my mind went to when reading the Tumblr post was more opaque; the endless amount of days lying in bed, looking at the curtains above undulate with the breeze coming from outside. My mind went to a knowing of times like those: a compressed, accumulated archive consisting of memories, set in time and space where I was being, yet when I didn't feel I was actually living in space and time. Hours at the computer (probably most of my teendom), bad posture from gazing downward so often in shame, walking aimlessly around town, observing the interior rhythms in my bedroom... Not to mention desire, for both affinity, love and sex, but with bodies that only existed in the abstract at that point. I tried to explain this vault of experiences to people: A closeted loneliness, an internal living waiting for exteriorization, an incapability of interacting with surroundings as an active subject and yearning for an existence that is not yet codified. In the end, I explained it as a state akin to a 'fever'. A state in which one was simultaneously incapacitated yet burning up on the inside; observations of the surrounding world was limited to what's near, mundane, boring, often domestic and in proximity to the lame body. Yet inside the body, one was in a constant flurry.

Subsequently, it matters a great deal in how I make things and what I hope is tangible in my own work. Why is this important? I think it's safe to say that though I'm insisting on speculating about something vaguely ontological and poetic when I talk about duration and queerness in this text, the desire to do so doesn't come therefrom, but is propelled by an evolving, social cartography project: contextualizing histories and legacies of queer artists and relating them to myself. This is particularly relevant to me because of the absence between generations cleaved by discriminatory laws and the AIDS crisis, (something to be both intrigued and deeply maddened by). I'm also calmed by knowing that these thoughts or endeavors I have aren't unique in the slightest in contemporary art. Rather, it's almost a symptomatic interest for a bunch of younger queer artists this generation; to look back on older, oft forgotten and mostly dead queers and make it a central interest to one's practice (Tyler Matthew Oyer, for instance, springs to mind - though I'm not big on his stuff - as well as Emily Roysdon's engagement with the work of David Wojnarowicz<sup>6</sup>). This is only a given, I guess, due to a certain privilege: the easing of necropolitics against queer communities allows for a generation intensifying its propulsion to dig into history otherwise willfully forgotten, observing time with the abundance of care and criticality that is only afforded to those with security in life. Formulated differently, one has time to think about people one can never meet when the threat of the black marker, straitjacket or noose is no longer imminent. I admit that in my case it's a recent project, and I think it crystallized fully whilst watching Luke Fowler's 16mm work "Electro-Pythagoras (a Portrait of Martin Bartlett)"<sup>7</sup>, a tribute to the pioneering Canadian composer. (An important caveat to mention is that I don't think Fowler's work dovetails into being one of the examples of queer time I'll be mentioning. Though inspirational, it operates at a level of impressionistic montage that doesn't reverberate with a recognizably queer temporality to me.)

A durational queerness in art is experiential as such – it is a feeling and state invoked within the subjective temporality of the artwork and is felt as something ‘subtly skewed’ by the observer, like being exposed to an idiosyncratic irregularity in time observation, feeling an undefined and unfulfilled bodily desire in one’s own memory. It is tapping into a very specific subjectivity in the artwork that vibrates with the observer’s own subset of queer memory. This memory relates to the ‘fever’ I mentioned; a calm remembrance of the entrapment of ekstasis (a state of enstasis). A queer duration is also introverted, it operates in tandem with the aesthetic and contextual perimeters of an art piece, but it ultimately lies on a different level, inching close to the ephemeral in how it’s primarily felt memory in the body and not on the level of something seen or heard, although these senses may trigger it. This production of a queer duration in art is a central component to many works that resonate with me and which I suggest has to do with the specific subjective memories of their authors.

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In “Trauerspiel 1”<sup>8</sup>, artist-curator Ian White combined 16mm works by filmmakers represented in the Arsenal collection with a series of actions; the latter was performed both by performers (including a naked man who sits on a chair knitting and White himself in various outfits) as well as the intrinsic machinations of the HAU1 stage in Berlin (lights, curtains). None of these components of the piece were exactly linked to one another, it was a show of oddities in its lack of relations between live dances, scenographic elements and the films shown. But the juxtaposition of these forms reverberated together, nonetheless, in representing different interests White had – both with performing in the context of the auditorium, conceptual thinking around trauerspiels via Walter Benjamin and researching the Arsenal collection.

With the show at HAU1 in mind, “Trauerspiel 1” becomes an exercise in juggling linearity and simultaneity of these different interests, in a manner I assume would be unpredictable to most audience members. White deemed the piece and its disparate elements to be “an allegory of Love and Time”<sup>9</sup> and I think there are signs carrying over in the presentation: Men knitting naked and interacting with sacks of potatoes is a banal motif in the setting of the piece, but still pointing to a relation of domesticity, repetition and ritual in other contexts (not to mention the potential for an intimate/erotic charge, though this is never tapped into during the piece). White’s dancing pose of lifting his lower body on the weight of his shoulders and balancing a slivering bouquet down one leg is also strange in its presentation as a dry gesture with the beaming stage lights exposing every facet of the pose, and nonetheless inhabiting its apparent sentimentality. I think the queerness here lies in this contradiction, working within the chronology of events, of set durations in films and the rigid movements of actions that would otherwise be considered more dynamic/organic in other settings. In the stark lights, minimal scenography and intensified atmosphere of the HAU1 (which is ‘the lack’ in this formal context, a poverty found in overexposition), the elapse of a series of works and movements become off-kilter in tandem, the duration of which opens up to an idiosyncratic, desirous charge.

Desire becomes important to what I'm on about. Just as there's no art without it, so too is there never any moment that isn't desirous. The actualization of a want is not always where we find ourselves in time and space, but the seeds of it operates in even the most fractured and miniscule ways in cosmos. What characteristics can a moment, then, inhabit as a desirous moment, and what characteristics may we call 'queer' ones? What is a queerly desirous moment? It has to do with a certain 'charge' and I think it can only come via the subject as queer themselves or being privy to the relation a queer subject has to time, space and objects. The characteristics of a queerly desirous moment and duration are hard to pin-point because they so often are interlocked to the individual queer subject. But that's not to say these characteristics are private and incapable of being understood. A moment is charged and because it has an energy that is unmistakably felt in other ways than common sensing it can be translated and deemed 'queer'. In this way, seeing time produced by someone else, by a queer subject, is always a dialectical interaction; it is recognition between observer and artist. Of course, this kind of relation isn't exclusive to queer durational art or queer artists whatsoever. But I point it out because queer art finds a wealth of potential in this relation that differs from other subjects. Queerness can present itself aesthetically, but it can also simply reverberate; sometimes this is necessary to maintain its inherent subversion once aesthetics change and become utilized for other means. In a way, I think my insistence on a queerness in art that is so ephemeral and based on sensing time and space is necessary in order to mine a theorized space that can't be appropriated or weaponized so easily. Because queerness is not just expression, it is inherently an internal part of personhood – it's present in introversion – in ways that are separate from many other identifying levels of personhood.

“Production is the matter of *our* own act of reading (which is also speaking) and an encounter with the situation we are in.”

9 White, 2012

Maybe, in this example, it becomes apparent that duration might not be enough to envelop what I'm talking about. With White, and for performance, the 'event' and how it's read is a central concern, probably what draws me the most to some of his performance works, including “Democracy” and “Hinterhof”. Similarly, this is something that also occupies the practice of his friend Jimmy Robert (who occasionally collaborated with White while he was still alive): In an interview for Flash Art magazine, he expands upon the notion of performativity in art as something laborious, not just tied to his performing body during a piece, but also to that of the spectator reading the event that is taking place. ‘Reading’ and ‘learning’ are concepts that I think are fruitful in his work, but not in the sense that one is acquiring a breadth of knowledge. I think it's more about re-learning, a re-wiring happening in the minds of artist and spectator as to what the functions of space, time and action are during the event, which I find to be a very queer kind of experience and negotiation that is constantly in flux. An example of where this solidifies would be his playful incision between gallery and club space during the piece “Old Masters”<sup>10</sup>. It's a more specific and legible juxtaposition than “Trauerspiel 1”, but the ‘randomness’ of this work presents itself differently - more circumstantially. The HAU1 performance was set to a specific performance time in the auditorium, but “Old Masters” took place in the media res of whatever else was happening in the space and crowd at the David Roberts Art Foundation that evening. It was a different kind of queer modality in time because it intervened into a chrononormative setting, carving out a duration of queer events where there were no expectations of it: People close to the excised gallery walls in the room were unaware of Robert's initial actions as being intended performance art and were initially dismissive of the actions he made as that of an intruder messing around with the installation (the fact that he's a black performing body probably factored in as well). Robert's work was more in friction and thus more extroverted than White's piece, rubbing up against the audience in interruptive defiance, but also insisting on the audience's presence as belonging to the piece - a case where time, event and the queer nature of the artist proposed radical shift.

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It was that time I was a lesbian woman living in Teheran, fifteen years ago. It was a time without intimacy, in which I really got to feel how distance could be both comfort and pain. I'd been bed-ridden at home with muscle spasms for a week and I couldn't get a hold of any doctor. But, thankfully, my condition eventually improved and I went out to get some air. I met Nadia, who was taking a walk with her kids, and we talked standing next to a playground. We talked about the situation, the weather and that time changes everything. Time kills at the end of the day, she suggested. I told her that I didn't see it that way and that I didn't understand what she meant. For the remainder of the conversation her two daughters took turns going down the slide in the playground, whilst Nadia tried to explain her point to me. But it never made any sense.



Prodger has, for the past few years, been in a seeming flow of self-referential mapping about her queer self through an expanding archive of video material. But it's one which goes beyond the perimeters of the everyday, the mundane or the strictly poetic within this realm. There is prolonged time, to be sure, but one that seeks to map out and abstract her body by using various indexes. The desire inherent that makes the duration of her works queer to me is one of structuring – of combating the normative with internal scans, processing and memory making to create the world fit for a queer navigation. The recent “SaF05”<sup>11</sup> has its point of gravitation set to a maned lioness in the Okavango Delta, but the work spans out from this to examine the numerical tools of scale, land management, video technology in relation to proximities, as well as a stream of occurrences in her own life in Scotland. “BRIDGIT”<sup>12</sup>, shot on an iPhone, continues this stream of personal recollections and recordings, but couples the mundane perspectives of staring at her own feet on the couch or tracking her cat in bed, with a part-new-materialist-part-mythologizing framework of geological time. It is fascinating for me to watch Prodger's subjective sensibilities at work, to be close to her process of connecting and networking indexes. Because it's clear that her efforts are a propulsion of memories that, at first, have been extracted from a small-scale, closeted/un-closeted history of her own, but then transformed – projected - onto macroscopic landscapes and scales via the form of digital representation.

Dani (Leventhal) Restack's works are markedly different. Though she also uses duration and assemblages of material from years of recording, her narratives are more explicitly provocative in their subversions of hierarchy: Animals are often featured in her work, both dead and alive, as well as strange rituals and occurrences in which bodily fluids, grime and nature elements create a kind of frenzy that it's hard to both discern or even look at. Though I'm not yet extensively familiar with her work, I've grown very fond of one of the collaborative works she made with her partner Sheila Restack, "Strangely Ordinary This Devotion"<sup>13</sup>: The piece offers the viewer a document of their family unit, a triangular community consisting of two women and their five year old daughter. It is one in which all the violent characteristics I've mentioned are displayed to the viewer, in sequences of socialization between the three and their environments. But the radicality of their familial lifestyle is not supposed to be provocative, it merely suggests an invigorated example of living – one reflected in the runtime of the video through the shaking camera and bodies/materials bleeding and foaming as they flash by the lens. The Restacks insist on this assemblage of memory, but it's not a sign of intended radicality. Rather, it is a kind of given normal by itself. Despite the violence and lack of overview the viewer must undergo to experience the film, there is a calmness to the duration of it; it is remarkable how the work is wildly unpredictable when I watch it and what I'm left recalling is that, on the whole, it's mundane and uneventful as hell. "Strangely Ordinary This Devotion" is a suburban work, a family work, showing a unit of strength – but it is also wonderfully oblivious to its own aggressive queerness. This is not a fault, because in this sense it reverberates exceedingly well with the introvert nature of queerness in time, by showing a number of actions 'as is' and letting their transpiration do the work on the viewer. The video works because it rarely points to its own actions through codes and aesthetics as being particularly political or subversive. For oddly enough, this enhances the potency in these exact things.

I met him forty years in the future, trying to make ends meet., underneath the docks of Philadelphia. We hugged as friends this time. We looked out onto the damp waves of the ocean and he told me to remember. That it was important to do so. After a brief pause, without looking back at him, I answered that I didn't know how – that I could never tell what memory even was, except through records in documents and hard drives. As a human being, however, I held nothing – time just passed through me like sand. But he told me it wasn't like that; that memory was a flashing pixel. It was all in the stream of things and you could spot it in a signal gone haywire. Putting a hand on my torso, he explained that despite of our senses and everything we knew – memory was in the black. And time, and time. He died five months later.

Sensing the world as it unfolds is perpetual perception, so to carry out agency and action one requires a perpetual process of their own, one of making sense. Which is not to say that rationality is required per se, but rather a set of outlines that allow friction and dynamism to be possible with one's surroundings.

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I thought sometimes that there actually was no such thing as the past, but that everything was happening right now, all at once, one big chaotic moment that no one could map out or make sense of.

An important question in talking about bodies and queerness and time: What are, ultimately, the queer bodies I'm mentioning? To whom do they belong? In a way it's obvious to me, but in another I'm at a crossroads with it. Delineating a kind of difference to what Jack Halberstam and Elizabeth Freeman detail when they speculate on 'queer temporalities' makes me resort to talk more simply of duration and event, while still insisting on the notion that queer bodies have a fundamentally different modality and that this can be seen in the production of art. So, in one way, when I say queer I do mean sexual and gender minorities. But in another way I'm speculating on a queerness that exists on a conceptual level, and these attempts at describing a duration that is so near-ephemeral opens up to a generality that might lend itself to discourses outside the realms of differing sexualities and gender subversions. I'm not sure if I mind, for who am I to judge if the texts resonate outside of my own imagined community of queer peers? The speculations I make are, after all, based on very subjective readings of my own experiences of living and seeing things. Yet I'm also adverse to being too legible, because of the violent political consequences of queerness in history and because, on the other hand, so much queerness lately (at least the visible codes) have been implemented into the fabrics of mainstream, capitalist mediation for purposes that have nothing to do with accommodating actual diverging perceptions of the world. I admit to being suspicious of this, because of appropriation and untangling of deeply meaningful contexts to certain people. The thing I want, then, is to maintain a radicality that I think has always been inherent to the queer tensions in art. Because thankfully, art operates on levels outside of merely aesthetic intentions and these are the potentials I find exciting.

Maybe that's why I'm always in fiction too. It's another word for art, another word for concept, it is the imaginary and the very real in simultaneity. And it's always being produced in this relation between the inner workings of a body and a perception of the world. Fiction, in all its speculations, occupies the same space as time does.

A pandemic was declared in that year and eventually it hit Oslo. For the subsequent month I stayed at my parent's apartment because of this. I was editing pieces I'd gathered and tried to formulate something on black, on time, and on queers that were dead for an upcoming show at the city's historical museum. I was in my childhood bedroom, now refurbished and looking much different than back then, but I still felt like a teenager again. This time around, my time was not spent staring at a wall, or the building on the other side of the street, but on labor: sifting through files, browsing, emailing about requests for certain materials, downloading and discarding a whole lot of clips and watching footage endlessly before deciding to use it. During this time of sitting by the computer, working more diligently than I'd ever done, the sun shone and spring emerged with greater heat than ever. Time was malleable in this period and I slouched onto it, a pillowcase dispersing into the ether. In that initial phase of not knowing what direction anything was about to take, time started moving, neither slowly nor fast, but in a crazed momentum.

03:22:43



## Endnotes / Bibliography

- 1 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), page 3
- 2 J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place - Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York City: New York University Press, 2005), page 1
- 3 *La Chambre*, Directed by Chantal Akerman (Eclipse from the Criterion Collection, 1972)
- 4 *Je tu il elle*, Directed by Chantal Akerman (Eclipse from the Criterion Collection, 1974)
- 5 *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*, Directed by Chantal Akerman (The Criterion Collection, 1975)
- 6 Emily Roysdon, *Untitled (David Wojnarowicz project)*, photography series, 28cm x 35,5cm photo prints, 2001-2007  
<<http://everyoceanhughes.com/work/untitled-david-wojnarowicz-project>> [accessed 25th of October 2021]
- 7 *Electro-Pythagoras (a Portrait of Martin Bartlett)*, Directed by Luke Fowler (LUX Collection, 2017)
- 8 Ian White, *Trauerspiel 1*, live performance with 16mm films, performed the 13th of March 2012 at Hebbel-am-Ufer Theatre in Berlin, Arsenal - Institute for Film and Video Art, Berlin
- 9 Ian White, "Trauerspiel 1", programme notes via PDF on webpage, Arsenal Berlin, <<https://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/living-archive/projects/living-archive-archive-work-as-a-contemporary-artistic-and-curatorial-practice/individual-projects/ian-white.html>> [accessed 25th of November]
- 10 Jimmy Robert, *Old Masters*, live performance, performed at David Roberts Art Foundation 2019, David Robert Arts Foundation and Tanya Leighton, London and Berlin
- 11 *SaF05*, Directed by Charlotte Prodger (LUX Collection, 2019)
- 12 *BRIDGIT*, Directed by Charlotte Prodger (LUX Collection, 2018)
- 13 *Strangely Ordinary This Devotion*, Directed by Dani Restack and Sheila Restack (Video Data Bank, 2017)