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Horizomatic Representation and Formal Materialism in Lismanis' Work

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A Remote Studio Visit with Reinis Lismanis

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Trial and Error
Reinis Lismanis



The Creative Resistance of Everyday Paulius Petraitis

everyday (adj.)

*"worn on ordinary days", as opposed to Sundays or high days,
from noun meaning "a week day" (late 14c.)*

Contemporary culture manifests a complicated relationship with everyday. The mundane is eagerly painted as something oppressive that needs to be escaped from - a shell that is pierced through for seemingly more "extraordinary", worthwhile experiences. We are continuously advised to strive for not ordinary, to search for and achieve singular experiences and to seek out epic sensations.¹ This message is strategically promoted by the commercial world and hyper-capitalism. Being expressed through the now-customary hyperbolic language of apps and product ads, it is ultimately forged in laboratories of the Stack companies and comes seasoned with Californian liberal ideals.

¹ In the context of acceleration of such claims, companies sometimes attempt to overdo previous "versions". Royal Museums of Greenwich current ad campaign "Don't be a tourist, be an explorer!" or Philips' "There's always a way to make life better" point to a sort-of logical absurdity declarations of this kind can be taken to.

This rhetoric presents everyday as something that entraps an individual - a mode that needs to be shattered and escaped. It is as if our lives somehow fall short of a seemingly "true" potential, which is achieved only by breaking free from the tasks that make up daily life in order to take up more "heroic" quests - even if they are lived strictly via a computer screen. That more often than not we are urged to purchase one accessory or the other (virtual or real) for that experience to be truly wholesome goes without saying.

In short, everyday - as it is - *sucks* and you should do something about it.

This is nothing new. French anthropologist Henri Lefebvre pioneered the term "critique of everyday" in the 1930s. He saw the attack stemming from nineteenth-century culture, especially the







literary idea of the marvellous. “Although the duality between the marvellous and the everyday is just as painful as the duality between action and dream, the real and the ideal [...] nineteenth-century man seemed to ignore this, and continued obstinately to belittle real life, the world ‘as it is’.”² For Lefebvre, twentieth-century art and philosophy seemingly turned to a closer affinity with everyday, “but only to discredit it, under the pretext of giving it a new resonance.”³

At the heart of this still ongoing fraught relationship is the potential to commercialise all spheres of life. Lefebvre saw the discrediting of the quotidian to be essentially the work of capitalist forces that turn it into an area of commercial exploit. The reading is clear: we are all losing out because of this, and the mundane, according to Lefebvre, needs to be reclaimed.

If art and literature were areas where everyday became synonymous with the merely ordinary in the nineteenth-century, it is fitting

that scenarios for rectification are waged here. On first glance a number of Reinis Lismanis’ images share the quality of appearing unremarkable. A central work in his solo exhibition “Trial and Error”⁴ was a double scroll of what one could describe as “Instagrammable images”, mounted on both sides of a green studio background. Curator and artist Kaspars Groševs in a review of the show termed them, “daily observations of an urban environment without distinction marks.”⁵ Perhaps inadvertently, Groševs touched on something essential with this very definition of everydayness: “without distinction marks” means unremarkable and routine. That it was a central piece in the space further signalled the focal role of the quotidian in the overall conceptual framing of the show.

The text originally written as the intended exhibition press release additionally put forward the importance of the day-to-day. The artist penned it in an unmistakable gesture to distance oneself from the often-unimaginative format of a carefully phrased catalogue essay - unexpectedly thrusting it into territory of casualness and the diary-type. The text starts off with a casual description of a walk around the London areas of New Cross and Surrey Quays, a sort one might expect from someone’s Facebook feed. “Man, I love those bits, they’re so strange” - the artist states. “There’s something very raw about them, especially as they are really so central in London terms. Maybe my enthusiasm for these sort of areas in London kind of goes in hand with my sympathies towards rap?”⁶ This stream-of-thought continues, exuding not only a transparent struggle to fit within the traditional convention of the catalogue essay form, but also attributing importance to everyday casualness and activities that could only be described as daily. These activities - besides walking and rap,

2 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I (London: Verso, 1991), 105.
3 *Ibid.*, 130.

4 *Trial and Error* exhibition took place at Arsenāls Exhibition Hall, Latvian National Museum of Art, Riga, 17 November 2017 - 21 January 2018.

5 Kaspars Groševs, “Nebeidzama riņķošana”, *FK Magazine*, www.fotokvartals.lv/2017/11/30/nebeidzama-rinkosana/.

6 pp 1 - 5.



ice-cream flavours, a random pub, a music performance, Instagram and a steak bought from Aldi supermarket chain are all mentioned - put in a text that conventionally is held as an important site of conceptual artistic inspiration, credits the mundane. Here, everyday acts as a catalyst and source of inspiration.

The appearance of the daily perhaps also carries a philosophical weight. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), Michel de Certeau examined the ways everyday practices offer possibilities for resisting the totalising aspects of modern society. One such practice, walking through a city, enables an individualised and subjective experience of urban spaces - pedestrians essentially weave a meaning of a city through "networks of [...] intersecting writings [that] compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator."⁷ These everyday walking rituals - which are neither predetermined nor fully programmable - are subversive because they break free from the confinements of urban planning and city vision. For Certeau, the unorganised walk, with its daily shortcuts and detours, is never fully subsumed into the strategies of organising bodies, in spite of strategic grids of urban rules. "Escaping the imaginary totalisations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness"⁸ - this strangeness stemming from its rituals eluding

the theoretical programmability of a mass behaviour.

The somewhat unexpectedly placed flâneurism of Lismanis can be linked to this subversive potential. The stroll offers a break from programmed predictability of city-living - and a break from predictability

altogether through discarding what's normally expected from exhibition essay material. That the walk is assigned central stage suggests a grasp of what Certeau saw as the creative potential of mundane activities. Walking, rap and ice-cream do not just represent the artist's eccentric gesture - a motion to put unexpected elements in the catalogue essay to confuse the reader - but should be read as part of a concentrated effort to embrace everyday with its diverse philosophical potential.

This creative subversive potential includes photography and image-making - technologies that have long become everyday in the real sense of the term. What once were conceivably extraordinary sensations, filled with the novelty of the technologically uncanny - for instance, the magic of entering one of the burgeoning photographic ateliers in the nineteenth-century to produce a "sun-drawn" likeness of oneself - are now rightly woven into the fabric of the most casual moves of living. The countless streams of networked images that now surround and are projected onto us - something Vilém Flusser foresaw⁹ - have in fact become quotidian and, even, somewhat banal. Not so long ago, the mystique of bathing a chemical photographic print in a tub waiting for the moment when the image will start forming itself - times when such scenes in films like *Elevator to the Gallows* (Louis Malle, *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, 1958) and, famously, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up* (1966) portrayed them not only as culturally plausible but also desirable - dissolved, becoming a puff of digital air. Analogue photochemical photography and its making will soon become unrecognisable as cultural gesture with its relevance remaining purely historical - relegated to the repository of the twentieth century, which seems more distant with each new break of technology.

In many ways there's nothing special about image-making today.

⁷ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 93.
⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁹ Vilém Flusser, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).





Anyone equipped with even a low-end phone camera enjoys an instantly-networkable algorithmically-enhanced and a stubbornly good-looking image. Its charm is specifically designed for screens, which are increasingly tuned to portray images in vivid and lucid colours (hence an often accompanied disappointment for those who print something that looks good online). The code of the image remains fluid, allowing devices to portray their own industry-set "version" of it. Photography-making is so overwhelmingly mundane that combining them as intersecting conceptual tools is a fitting and daring move.

Finally, a pause to look into Lismanis' images themselves. Mostly things and objects are captured with detached observation. There is certain distance and restraint in the mode of portrayal. These images, as it were, allow the captured things to merely extend their existence through photographic representation. Taken as a whole, a series, it weaves - just like pedestrians zigzagging through a city - an account of meaning for routine objects. This account avoids being strictly subsumed into what

could be seen as two major strands for images dealing with everyday - aestheticised, yet commercially (in)formed quotidian streams and their apparent opposite, a conceptual observation. These images manage to find a less travelled path; neither just likeable Instagram shots - that is aestheticised everyday - nor rarefied shots of all-important moments and conceptual perspectives, they set to embrace and embody the messiness of contemporary everyday condition. Occupying a curious place between a self-conscious object of art and an everyday object, Lismanis' works are at peace in reassessing relationships between the two in a certain casual attire. Today's capitalist condition tells us to strive for the extraordinary, yet more often than not it comes in packages that are rightly controlled (and with a high price tag) - and seek to exert control over us. To resist this capitalistic allure and to credit everyday and its routine practices - casual walks, thoughts on music and deliberation on salted caramel ice-cream - is contemporary photography's shot at playing a part in reclaiming the everyday.

