The Cant of the Conni-Sewer:
Repetition and Affirmation in Nothing Happens, Twice

by Chris Fite-Wassilak

It arose first in a dream: a flat stopping-starting moaning. After a few jarring moments between states, I stumbled awake – the sound continued, coming through the floor and the window. It was just getting light outside. The sound became louder at points, like a zombie intoning a morse code message, and at times the voice split into two: a male and a female, singing together. I could make out the words ‘…the mind…’, which seemed to be the apex of the song. After a few minutes they went quiet – then they began again, evenly chanting a tune with the same rhythm, the same stops, the same apex - the same song. The dirge continued. I wrapped a pillow around my head, and eventually drifted in and out of a sleep surrounded by their plodding ritual and incessant chorus. A few hours later in the morning sun, they were still going with the one tune.

The delirium of sleeplessness turned it into a comedy, a perpetual purgatorial sitcom accompanied by a pair of tuneless troubadours. Warming in a way to the farce, I thought that this, in part, is what it must be like to be in the audience in front of a defiant performance – the actual listening bodies in those legends of insulting punk bands spitting and mocking the people in front of them, continuing despite the boos and the thrown beer bottles. I’ve always wondered, when you hear reports of ‘riots’ at plays and concerts in the early twentieth century, reactions to things like The Rite of Spring (1913)i and The Playboy of the Western World (1907) ii, what that actually means. The sleepless song cycle reminded me of the stories of one Iggy and the Stooges gig from a January in the early 1970s, playing in a small club in Michigan to an audience of mostly bikers who weren’t so keen on the stringy singer. The accounts agree that Iggy Pop asks the restless audience what they want to hear: the Kingsmen’s ‘Louie, Louie’ is the shouted consensus, and the band launches into the song. In one version, told by artist Mike Kelley, they finish the tune, then ask the crowd again what they’d like to hear. Ignoring whatever responses was given, the band launch again into ‘Louie, Louie’. Then a third time, a fourth. The other version, told by music critic Lester Bangs, has Iggy carry on a 45 minute rendition of the song, improvising lyrics to insult the biker ‘sissies’. Both tales end with Iggy launching into the crowd and getting beaten up; but what’s the difference? One is of a song repeated, the other a song being sustained. In all likelihood, they took up roughly the same amount of time, occupying around 45 minutes of someone’s life – but each carries with it
a different sense of endurance, of immersion and of consequence. The repetition is somehow more of an anxious place, a purgatory – each ending and then beginning a reinforcement of the idea that these reoccurrences will never stop, regardless of whether you cover your ears or not.

‘Everybody repeats themselves now and again,’ the speaking shoe of Sally O’Reilly’s *Harris Garulatrix* (2016) complains, ‘no one’s a bottomless font of novelty, are they? But this lot? It’s the same flannelin’ around and around their various-sized loops all day long. They’re so bound up in themselves they don’t even know I’m here.’ The works around her that she constantly berates don’t respond to her heckling. Her diatribe makes you a bit self-aware, sitting on the second floor of a museum, surrounded by videos and paintings that are open to the public seven hours a day, seven days a week, listening to a talking shoe. But she has a point: most the works in *Nothing Happens, Twice* are repeating themselves; if not documents of repeated actions, then recorded events that are played, and re-played and played again until closing time, and then wound back into life in the morning. The rest are just hanging around, stuck in torpor of lassitude, resigning themselves to the indolence of gallery days.

O’Reilly’s nattering, gossiping shoe casts the works in the show as an indifferent lot, aloof, blithely going about their self-interested way: ‘You’re all one to them, can’t tell you apart – you could be a connoisseur or a mystery shopper coming out of the rain and you’d get the same. To them, you are faceless, a notional being, a statistic.’ Of course, this opinionated piece of leather is no different than the rest of them, as a looped bit of audio recording only feigning some sort of sympathy; her strategic negativity is a way to differentiate herself from the rest of them. The shoe pronounces ‘connoisseur’ with an extra syllable and added emphasis to sound like ‘conni-sewer’; perhaps we could think of this figure of the conni-sewer as a notional entity, the body that endures these repetitions, to understand what impact they have and transformations they might provoke.

Time itself loops, spirals and bounces back in forth in the episode of Nathaniel Mellor’s *Ourhouse* series, *Ep. -1: Time* (2016). In this episode, the paterfamilias of the erratic Maddox-Wilson clan invents a time travelling toilet, only to get himself and his family caught in a widening trap where prehistory and the far future collide. And the video itself is a step out of time: a prequel, happening before and around all the other episodes of *Ourhouse* that have been made before it. The structure of his series of videos highlights the existence of what we might call episodic time – the time of sitcoms, comic books or film re-boots, where it is as if time is begun again, unchanged, each episode. In episodic time, there are no consequences. The characters in Mellor’s Episode -1 might progressively transform into Neanderthal-like creatures caused by their time-travelling – indeed, they were transformed such 816 during the 17 weeks that the exhibition was open, with the video playing on the hour every hour – but in every other episode of *Ourhouse* they will remain the same. The spiral of time in Episode -1 is the incessant swirl of
the toilet bowl, the vortex of water, and the faeces that fuels the time machine, with homo sapiens as a species literally going down the shitter.

Most the characters trapped in these loops don’t change – they can’t change. They’re stuck in a space where, ostensibly, ‘nothing happens.’ The title of the show is taken from a review of Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (1953), and a line from the play provides the title for Common Culture’s video I can’t go on, I’ll go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go (Dave) (2016). In the video, a comedian (presumably named Dave) spends 40 minutes on a small stage, facing the camera. He’s on his own in a mostly dark room, so instead of performing a stand-up set, he sets into a nervous series of anecdotes and autobiographical tales about old jobs, gender differences and animals. It’s not terribly funny, but then he doesn’t look like he’s enjoying himself, either. He constantly raises his bottle of water to his lips, as if about to drink, before stumbling into another tale; he takes only one quick swig about halfway through. He keeps saying, ‘I’ll crack on,’ his own way of expressing the existential angst of the title, that gives in to visible relief when he reaches the 40-minute mark and hastily makes his exit. Though, of course, he’ll inevitably be back a minute later, forced back onto the stage as the video starts yet again. Dave seems to think that for in order for ‘something’ to happen – in this case, comedy – it needs an audience. Does the occurrence of something, anything, rely on it being shared?

Hilde Krohn Huse seems anxious to make her experience shared. One foot tied neatly into a knot of her own making, the artist is dangling upside-down, naked from a tree. Bobbing gently on the branch, she tries to untie herself, before giving up and calling out, ‘Alex!’ Whether a partner or friend, the shouts go unheeded and fade into the surrounding forest, but she doesn’t give up. ‘Alex! A-LEX!’, varying her tone and emphasis, before just switching to, ‘Help! Help!’ In Krohn Huse’s video Hanging in the Woods (2015), the artist herself is the animal she set out to catch, and succeeded; we never see any help arrive, and the video ends with her still hanging there. Then she has to repeatedly live it out. Hardeep Pandhal’s frantic, squiggled drawings are also a self-portrait of sorts, depicting the intricate tango of self-consciousness and embarrassment in self-exposure that comes with the captured artist. In cartoonish hyperbole, Pandhal’s alter ego, a sort of scarecrow-like figure with the spout of a baby’s milk bottle as a hat, postures as a rapper and artist preparing to emerge onto the stage as a star. But instead, as in Less is Morphine (2016), the artist is surrounded by dozens of blank canvases on the wall, never painting, only reading a book titled, ‘Curating: A Pedant’s Guide to Humility’. Pandhal’s artist-rapper (‘call me 6ft. Deep’) seems to never get around to the act of making, but constantly in the frenzied, preening preparatory stages for it.

Trapped in this existential purgatory, the works here seem remarkably calm and unharried. Though perhaps it’s more airs of ‘normalcy’, people attempting to act casual in the face of an endless loop or a possibility that will never arrive. What sinks in eventually is that all the works in the show are exceptions, aberrations, refusals, loops that are repeatedly announcing what they aren’t or can’t do: like Pavel Buchler’s sculpture Once Again- (2016), a
reception bell with a bow tie wedged inside so that it can’t ring, sitting inertly inside a vitrine; the black and white photos of Mladen Stilinovic lying in bed doing what looks like nothing, ironically titled *Artist At Work* (1978 extracted from his manifesto ‘In Praise of Laziness’, commenting on the artist’s place in a communist regime); Mellor’s prequel; Krohn Huse’s outdoor performance gone wrong; or Dave, the stand-up comedian without an audience. These are constantly repeating their ‘isn’t’, a gesture that isn’t so much a disavowal as an affirmation – celebrating what they’re not, allowing a different sense of potential; ‘the possibility’, as Greil Marcus once put it, ‘that the world may be nothing, that nihilism as well as creation may occupy the suddenly cleared ground.’

Two days after the Iggy and Stooges gig at the biker bar that ended in a fight, the stories go, the band played a concert in Detroit, despite public threats from the biker gang against the singer’s life. On the live album released recording that night, Metallic KO (1976), you can hear the taunts and beer bottles thrown; the second song they play is ‘I got nothing’: the chorus being simply Iggy screaming the lines ‘I got nothing, I got nothing to say,’ over and over and over again. As in *Nothing Happens, Twice*, it is the performed, repetitive ‘nothing’ that creates a potential new moment. In Common Culture’s not-stand-up, Dave keeps saying there’s ‘nobody there’: watching the video you’re almost insulted, as of course you are there, seeing him say that. Dave might be there, doing expressly nothing – twice, or indeed 1,173 times during the exhibition – but it is the conni-sewer who changes. Those inside episodic time might regress and mutate in odd ways, as the Neanderthals and human-glass-boxes that the Maddox-Wilson family end up in Mellor’s prequel seems to suggest. But it is those outside episodic time – those who experience it fleetingly, who can witness it and step away, like those wandering around the gallery – who can pronounce a different ‘isn’t’, a potent ‘can’t’, a new song to hum repeatedly in our heads in our half-sleep.

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The Cant of the Conni-Sewer: Repetition and Affirmation in *Nothing Happens, Twice* is commissioned by Harris Museum & Art Gallery. The exhibition (Feb-Jun 2017) was curated by Clarissa Corfe and included artists Samuel Beckett, John Bock, Mel Brimfield, Broomberg & Chanarin, Pavel Buchler, Common Culture (Ian Brown, David Campbell and Mark Durden), Steph Fletcher, Pat Flynn, Willum Geerts, Hilde Krohn Huse, Nathaniel Mellors, Sally O’Reilly, Hardeep Pandhal, Pierrick Sorin, Mladen Stilinovic, Bedwyr Williams. The exhibition is part of the *Dance First, Think Later* contemporary art programme.
Legends of a vegetable-throwing audience and police intervention still circulate, though a dissertation collecting all reports on the original performance (which can be seen at http://www.worldcat.org/title/first-performance-of-igor-stravinskys-sacre-du-printemps/oclc/4598341) apparently found no evidence of a ‘riot’.

See a summary of reports of the first performance at https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/apr/16/theatre.samanthaellis