

# Closed Circadian Circuit

## *Notes on the Work of Tamara Henderson and Julia Feyrer*

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### **Overture**

It is constant twilight in the film *Considering the Belvedere* and its installation – a kind of scenography where the film is presented publicly. Light sources such as neon signs, luminous multicolored glass bottles, and flickering light bulbs become the illuminating sparks that, along with other animated objects, trigger the flow of events. The film evolves very much like the stream of consciousness refined by Virginia Woolf and her modernist author friends in the last century. In fact, Woolf, who suffered greatly from bouts of insomnia and neurasthenia, would have been the perfect nocturnal guest to this setting of interconnected spaces where the outside glides seamlessly into the inside and one room follows the other in a chain of free association. She would have felt more than welcome in this house, with the castle-like name Belvedere Court, which not only houses a typewriter and a printing press but even has an orchard. This could have been the Hogarth Press she used to run with her husband Leonard Woolf, relocated from the picturesque Bloomsbury area to a somewhat more mundane setting. Besides titles by the Bloomsbury literary group, the couple also published books on the forefront of psychoanalysis. The genre could have been a source of inspiration to Tamara Henderson and Julia Feyrer while creating their films, sculptures, installations, and performances. The two of them are almost like the kindred spirits of Freud and Jung as they, side-by-side and later on their own, explore the subconscious of mankind. Tamara Henderson and Julia Feyrer's collaborative practice has been ongoing since 2009 and includes sculpture, 16mm film, and writing.



A few minutes into *Considering the Belvedere* the coffee has just been freshly made and Woolf's seminal novel *The Waves* makes an appearance as the name of a coffeehouse chain. You could almost sense the smell of the hot brew as it slowly makes the paper mug soggy. When reading the logo on the mug spelling out *the waves* it is hard not to think of Woolf's linguistic experiment with the concept of identity, the self, and community, where six characters become one in a synchronic soliloquy. Everything is there in the film, only somewhat tucked away in cryptograms of signs, objects, words, and scenography. The protagonists are introduced along with the overarching methodology of the artists. Henderson and Feyrer seem to have developed artistic affinities with luminaries such as Aby Warburg and his *Pathosformel*, André Breton with his techniques of excavating the unconscious, and the claim of Georges Bataille stated in the first issue of *Acéphale*: "Secretly or not... it is necessary to become different or else cease to be." If there is a certain logic in the work of Henderson and Feyrer it is a headless one, both literally and metaphorically speaking, since the logic derives from a gut-feeling mode more than a rational one.

Production still from Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson, *Consider the Belvedere*, 2015, ICA Philadelphia.

### Act 1

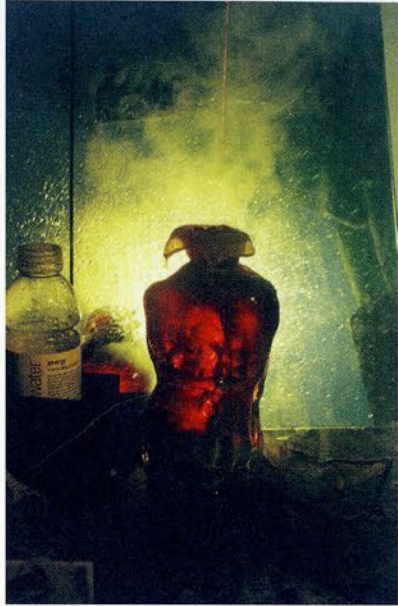
As the camera sweeps over the rooms partly covered in shadows, we meet a figure that could be the ghost of Virginia Woolf. Or is it a member of the Acéphale secret society awoken from hibernation and working closely with the Pest Detective – a character recurring in the film. She is a headless figure with only her gigantic fluffy hands visible while typing nonsense (poetry? automatic writing?) on the typewriter. She dwells in this setting, a hybrid space that is something between an office, a garden, and a print shop. A group of headless creatures – elaborately designed bottles that are given specific features by shape, color, and content – share this multifunctional space with her. These glass protagonists already featured in the previous film by Henderson and Feyrer called *Bottles under the Influence*, which came about while the artists were researching and working at the Museum of Spirits in Stockholm. In a state of being between the staged and the historical, the bottles are like strange evocations of the objects in the museum, which deals with the Swedish people's relationship to alcohol. With names like the Old Hag Bottle, the Pest Detective Bottle, the Newspaper Bottle, the Blind Bottle, and the Chance Bottle, the bottles,

which each contain their own beverage, could be read as encrypted messages from the artists giving us hints about their foremost interests.

The bottle characters inhabit the labyrinthine spaces within Belvedere Court in a highly surreal manner. The artists let us experience how sculptures resembling mass commodities and functional objects are drawn into a loose narrative built on collage techniques with strong links to the history of experimental film. We follow the camera as it moves through the office space into the garden where plants and birds of various kinds reside. The filtered light gives the impression of a DIY moonlit orchard. It's a place where the secret society could have had their nightly meetings, and where the artists grow sedative and hallucinogenic herbs such as chamomile, valerian, sage, and mugwort. To the sound of frantic giggling, the small and viscous



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branches of the plants have found their way through the pages of a herbarium into seedbeds. Some of them have become large, bushy, scarecrow-like figures moving zombie-like over the lawn. The air is filled with birdsong as if the mating season has just started.

The ecstatic life of the plants and animals reminds us of the field of research called chronobiology. It is a branch of biology with its roots in the eighteenth century that engages in the observation and documentation of the behavioral cycles of organisms within biological rhythms. Groundbreaking scientists

such as Darwin and Linnaeus worked in the field and Linnaeus created a flower clock that would tell by the hour when specific flowers were open during the day and night. In the recent history of chronobiology, scientists like Franz Halberg have explored medical issues in relation to human rhythms linked to the light-dark cycle of the day. These circadian rhythms are said to help organisms to “anticipate and prepare for precise and regular environmental changes. They thus enable organisms to best capitalize

on environmental resources such as light and food.” But what happens when light and food are accessible 24/7 and engender working and living patterns that are unhealthy for many of us?

The impact that the industrial revolution and capitalist interests have had on contemporary life and the human circadian rhythm has been scrutinized. The current state of affairs in the Global North raises ethical questions, and we can also ask how these cycles affect artistic practice. We know that many artworks have been conceived after long periods of wakefulness as well as in states of deep relaxation. The rhythms have been explored to reach beyond what is already known. Tamara Henderson has used hypnosis to design furniture and when the object later materializes it lingers in an enigmatic state between sculpture and functional object.

The circadian rhythm in *Considering the Belvedere* seems to be short-circuited and the recurring neon sign of two eyes flickering seems as if it is either run-



Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson,  
*Bottles Under the Influence*, 2012, 16mm film, color with optical  
sound, 9:42 min. Courtesy the artists; Walter Phillips Gallery, the  
Banff Centre; and Catriona Jeffries, Vancouver.

ning out of or too full of melatonin. It can't make up its mind – to sleep or to stay awake – the state of limbo is emblemized by the semidarkness of the film. Melatonin is not only used to treat chronic insomnia but also to regulate the circadian rhythm of blind people who can't adjust with the help of daylight. The blindness of the *Blind Bottle* comes to mind. It was made while the artists were blindfolded. Blindness is encrypted in symbols, objects, and sculptures reappearing throughout the film and the installation. With the help of the methodological paradigm of the *Pathosformel* developed by the German art historian Aby Warburg we can now see that visual culture throughout history has been recollected and has had its revivals. Warburg's passion was the recurrence of the Classical forms of antiquity, which he investigated with the help of his *Bilderatlas* – a collection of images that traced the migration of form across cultures in a performative fashion. Henderson and Feyrer seem to make use of his mnemonic method when bringing their forms and objects alive – while making sleep become activated and the blind seeing again.

In his *Memoirs of the Blind*<sup>1</sup> the philosopher Jacques Derrida refers to significant examples of creation myths that are associated with blindness. A tale from ancient Greece makes a particularly strong impression. It describes the origins of drawing. Pliny the Elder relates how the daughter of the potter named Butades, in a gesture of desperation, captures the memory of her loved one by tracing his shadow the night before he leaves. Even in this early historical account of drawing, blindness – in this case a turning away – and memory are present as important components. Could the community of bottles by Henderson and Feyrer be understood in this way – as traced forms (vessels) of various fluid contents that could intoxicate you, even make you blind in order to see beyond what you already know? And to pursue this thought, could we also connect the idea of memory to the way the artists dig into their own unconscious as well as the forgotten realm of history? In many works they insist on tracing forms and objects in a Warburgian sense and set them free in the manner of the Surrealists.

As a telling example of this interest in historical documents Julia Feyrer reconstructed a bar with the striking name the Poodle Dog Ornamental Bar. Based on an archival photo, she made her own version of a late nineteenth-century Vancouver bar that became a meeting place for friends and associates, performing and drinking her homemade apple wine. The interior design of the

1 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).



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*Bottles Under the Influence*, 2012, 16mm film, color with optical  
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bar traveled through time and space in an act of remembrance – a method of looking, association, mimicry, and hard manual labor. And while the space was being built it was transformed into a film set. The film revealed its own making as you could follow Feyrer while filming, reflected in the many mirrors of the bar. The camera also captured the artist's collaborators – people singing and playing music, bottles “acting” in the bar, and wine being brewed and consumed. The bar envisioned as a stage – a site for co-appearance.

### Intermission

When Tamara Henderson and Julia Feyrer exhibited their two film works *Bottles under the Influence* and *Considering the Belvedere* at the ICA Philadelphia in 2015 the films were accompanied by three theatrical sets – a press bar, a beach, and a hotel room. The rooms were filled with props from the films and the reverberation of luminous colors, patterns, and objects made the darkling ambience spread from the filmic space to the exhibition space. In line with their processual work they also transformed the exhibition into a gathering place where drinks were served, copies of their magazine *Night Time News* were distributed, and at one special occasion a mezzo-soprano visited the bar performing drinking songs with a libretto written by the artists.

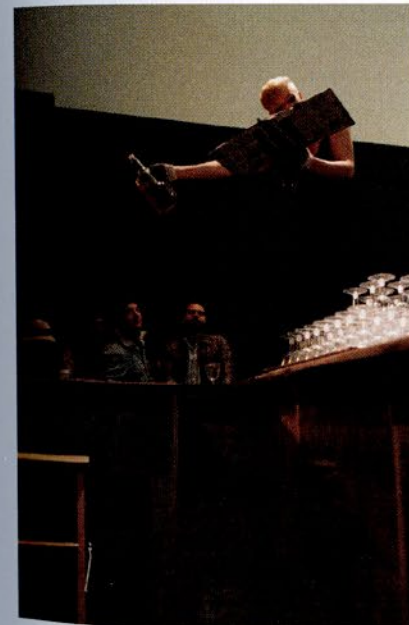
Lauren Eberwein performs "Les Bouteilles de la Table Ronde" (libretto Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson, score Tony Solitro) in Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson, *Consider the Belvedere*, 2015, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. Photo: Constance Mensh.

The singing of songs while drinking alcohol has a long tradition. In Sweden (where the protagonists of the bottle community were made) it is still a living culture and scholars have traced its origins back to over 500 years ago.<sup>[2]</sup> The tradition of singing songs and proposing toasts comes from rituals where the members of a community drank from the same vessel in order to create strong bonds between peers. The toast was a sign of one's honesty and drinking heavily was a sign for long-lasting friendship. This folk tradition was later incorporated into the Christian belief system and toasts were proposed in memory of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, as well as in remembrance of the Virgin Mary and patron saints of different guilds depending on who was proposing the toast. The practice of being together in the guilds was acted out in customs of drinking, singing, and toasting. Henderson and Feyrer's exhibition welcomed you to linger in the different settings of the bar, the beach, and the hotel room, offering the most potent drinks to drink with them and their

bottles, which moved freely between the spaces of the films and the installation.

### Act 2

How could we understand the place that is Belvedere Court? The place serves not only as the site for the creation of films, sculptures, and installations, but it is also the home of Henderson and Feyrer. The multifaceted site becomes paradigmatic for their artistic practice as such – it has not only one purpose but is constantly becoming something else that is multiple and different. The site has not only one function but reshapes and multiplies formally in line with the Bataillean urge towards transgression. The place is like a vessel (like a bigger version of the recurrent bottles) that not only holds the content of the many artworks but is the artwork itself – intoxicated and intoxicating. The artists' preference for loops and closed circuits



<sup>2</sup> Christina Mattsson, ed., *Från Helan till lilla Manasse: Den svenska snapsvisans historia (From Helan to Lilla Manasse: The History of Swedish Drinking Songs)*, (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2002).

Lauren Eberwein performs "Les Bouteilles de la Table Ronde" (libretto Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson, score Tony Solitro) in Julia Feyrer and Tamara Henderson, *Consider the Belvedere*, 2015, Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania. Photo: Constance Mensh.

reminds us of the very Nietzschean idea of the “eternal return.” Another way of reading Belvedere Court and the artistic impetus is to think about it in terms of theater and theatricality. The sites of research, the artworks, and how the works become stages for togetherness hold a strong performative quality.

The idea of the world as a stage is close at hand and has recently been addressed by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy in his seminal essay “Being Singular Plural.”<sup>3</sup> When Nancy takes up this idea that has been used and reconsidered by many thinkers, a firm ethical imperative comes with it. He uses it as a response to a certain critique of today’s capitalist society that for many has lost its meaning. In order to meet these arguments, he doesn’t ask for new forms of organization that are of a “higher order,” but he asks us to rethink the very ontology of *being*. He wants us to see that the recycling of the metaphor of the stage is to ask for a place that serves for identification, where being is *being-with* others, *being-in-common*, singular and plural at the same time. Throughout his essay he emphasizes *with* as the key to unlocking and circumventing what has become Being according to “its spectacular-market self-mockery or its communicational self-assurance.” *With* is what is left when abandoning nostalgic inauthenticity and roots, and *with* is the Latin *cum* of community and of co-appearance. He reminds us that the stage, in this sense, is a place in time and space where being as such is not expressed in terms of identity, but rather always in terms of identification. To paraphrase Jean-Luc Nancy – the stage is a site for the togetherness of Being, that is not a secondary being (where being yourself or being for yourself is anterior), but being in the sense of sharing Being.

How does this sharing take place in the thinking of Jean-Luc Nancy? We know at least how being-in-common is given form in the world of Henderson and Feyrer with bodies interconnected within the greater body of the Belvedere vessel where there is no “I” and “Other,” but dispersed objects and circulation of forms that goes into all directions. First and foremost, Jean-Luc Nancy states that he is not trying to establish an anthropocentric thinking, but he rather tries to transgress this humanity in order to affirm an “excess of the appearing that appears on the scale of the totality of being which is impossible to totalize.” He is not trying to distinguish true existence from a subexistence but instead talks about the ontology of being-with as an ontology of bodies – “of every body, whether they be inanimate, animate, sentient, speaking, thinking, having weight, and so on.” The core of this totality of vision is to stress that, above all,

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3 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).