

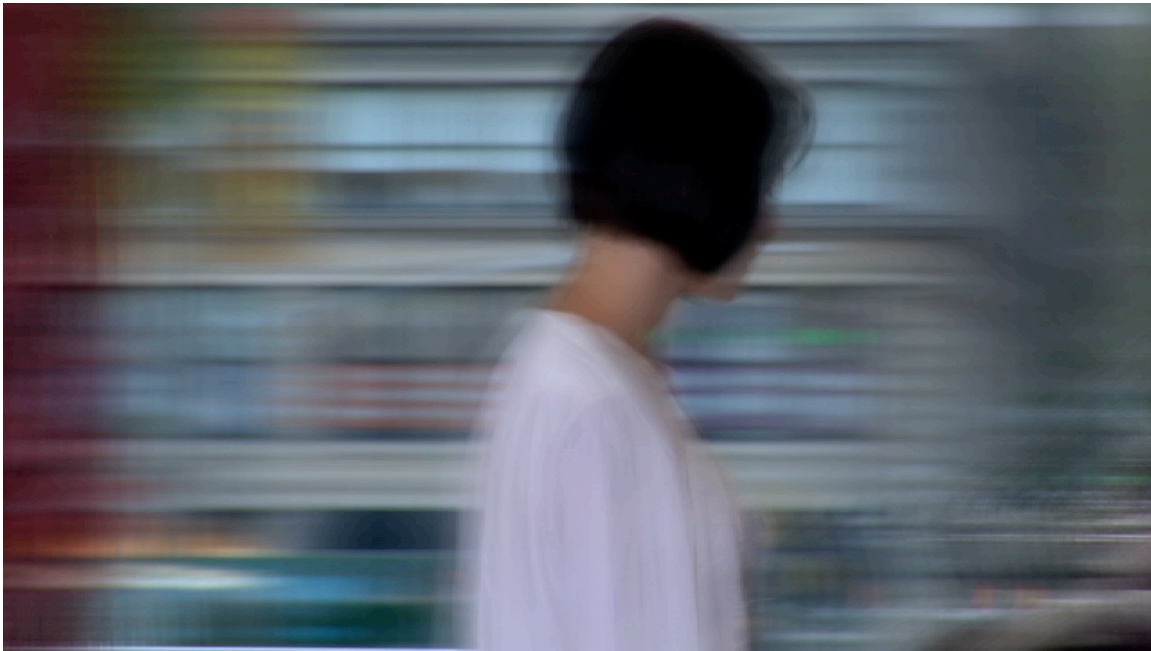
# Fashionably Late For The Relationship

Some Notes

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New York City.  
October, 1<sup>st</sup>, 2007.

## Introduction



This past summer I collaborated with my partner, Lián Amaris Sifuentes, on a major new work. The piece, *Fashionably Late For The Relationship* (hereafter ‘Fash’) was by far the most ambitious and difficult work we’d ever attempted, individually or in collaboration. And while work on the piece is still ongoing, I thought I’d commit to hard disk a few of my thoughts on the work as it was envisioned and executed, what it means to me, and how it speaks to our time. Like any true collaboration, more than one person’s voice is truly speaking in this work, so I can only address it from my perspective. Lián is writing her thoughts as well, from her viewpoint. Hopefully, between these two narratives a reader can find some insights.

*Fash* is not a single piece of art; it exists, rather, in two distinct phases, both of which are to be thought of as complementary and symbiotic. These two works are entwined at a deep conceptual level, and though they can stand alone, their counterpoint contains a meaning greater than the sum of their parts. The first part, a 72-hour outdoor performance that occurred in New York City in July of 2007, was conceived, directed, designed, and performed by Lián. Obviously, we collaborated to come up with the title, concept, and dualistic nature of the piece. But other than stumbling across the production

company and offering a few opinions, I had next to nothing to do with it. The performance was hers, and she deserves full credit as author and sole performer.

While Lián was performing I stood around, shouted at people, putzed around with some computers, slept very little, and ate a lot of hot dogs and B-grade Chinese food. Since this is pretty much what I do for a living anyway, one could argue that I was more-or-less just going through my normal routine (though, for appearances' sake, I did wear a baseball cap and forget to shave). And though I can describe the immanent structure and narrative of her work for the purpose of this essay, I will leave a discussion of the specific conceptual framework and meaning of the performance to her.

The second part of *Fash* is a video work that presents Lián's performance in its entirety. This work exists in two versions: a single-channel feature-length film, and a multi-channel generative video installation. Everything I write in this essay applies equally to both versions, except where noted. For the complete duration of the performance I directed (and occasionally misdirected) a technically complex multi-camera high-definition video shoot, capturing to the best of my ability everything Lián did during those three days.

## The Shoot

I'll briefly describe what happens during the performance as I (and everyone else who attended) saw it, starting with the scene.

Starting at midnight on July 7<sup>th</sup> (Friday over into Saturday) and continuing until midnight on July 10<sup>th</sup> (Monday into Tuesday), Lián performed on a traffic island off the southeast corner (coast?) of Union Square in New York City:



This piece of land forms a vaguely equilateral triangle, with the base of the triangle along the south edge and a tip at the northernmost point. The southern two-thirds of the triangle, which border the north side of 14<sup>th</sup> Street, contain a small park and a slightly larger quantity of amphetamines. The northern third (where the performance took place) is concrete and is primarily used by pedestrians crossing to and from Union Square. The

traffic island exists in order to split Park Avenue South (heading down from Grand Central Station twenty-eight blocks to the north) into two streets once the traffic goes below 14<sup>th</sup> Street: Broadway, with traffic continuing downtown, and Manhattan's elusive 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue, which ends at the island.

If you were to look at the 'stage' (the northern third of the island) from the edge of the park facing uptown, you would see:

- oncoming traffic on your left (splitting off onto Broadway, with the crowds of activity in Union Square just beyond).
- traffic moving away from you on your right (merging from 4<sup>th</sup> Ave. into Park Avenue South).
- pedestrian traffic crossing all around you.
- the lights of Park Avenue South leading up to Grand Central in the distance, passing through the tonier neighborhoods of Gramercy and Midtown South.

All in all, it's quite a busy place.

Over a weekend, it's even busier.

On the weekend following the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, it's packed, especially during a heat wave.

And once you've stuck a beautiful woman under a twenty-foot square canopy (complete with boudoir) on the middle of the north end of the concrete part of the island and a thirty-person film crew (complete with craft services table and a ton of expensive technology) on the south end, it gets really crazy.

Especially if everyone stays put for three whole days.

The set where Lián performed was, as I mentioned above, under a canopy tent that was picked up earlier that week by yours truly from the Sears outlet in the Pavonia/Newport Mall, one of the primary attractions of the great state of New Jersey. Underneath this tent she had a boudoir, complete with all the things that one would expect to find there:



- a dressing table, with mirror and small stool; this was fully stocked with makeup, hairbrush, face cloth, and an impressive quantity of lip gloss.
- a *chaise longue*, with a small table next to it.
- a phone and a clock.
- a screen
- a dress-rack
- a rug
- various articles of clothing, including a number of dresses that factor heavily into the narrative, and some shoes.
- a bottle of wine, a wine glass, a pitcher of water, a water glass, a fruit bowl, and a vase containing flowers.
- two lamps.
- an ashtray.

Strategically hidden within the set were a few other things:

- a microphone.
- a small portable speaker.
- a box fan.
- a portable air-conditioning unit.

We called ‘action’ (beginning the performance *and* the film simultaneously) at midnight Friday over to Saturday. At this point Lián was ‘asleep’ on her chaise, and would ‘sleep’ through the night, waking at some point around five the next morning to begin preparing for her night out, which was to occur some sixty-five hours later. Over the intervening three days, she washed her face, ate some fruit, drank a glass of wine and a few glasses of water, did her makeup, talked on the phone, tried on some dresses, talked on the phone some more, and took a number of naps and cigarette breaks. She also wrote in her dairy, which serves as an important record of her thought process during the performance.

Now here’s the catch: she did all of these things, whenever possible, very, very slowly.

When there were things Lián couldn’t accomplish slowly, she did them ritualistically, repetitively, and obsessively.

When she had to leave set (to eat a full meal, use the restroom, change clothes, etc.) she would have to walk (very slowly) behind her screen, from which she would exit the stage normally.

The slow, repetitive, ritualized and aesthetic nature of the performance is important to the performance itself, but it’s also *key* to the film, because there’s a neat trick:

We shot 72 hours of footage on three (sometimes four) cameras. I then wrote some software to *accelerate* and *blend* the footage to around sixty times its original speed. As a result, anything that took a minute in real-time on the set, lasts for one second; an hour becomes a minute. 72 hours becomes 72 minutes.

The film, therefore, is a feature-length acceleration of Lián’s performance. Sort of.

## The Film



As with most of my work, I think musically. So the basic editing premise of the film is that it functions as a concerto between Lián and the city around her. When she is on the set performing her actions, the cameras focus on her; the rest of the time, they do their best to absorb the environment flying by.

I tried to reflect this as much as possible in the music for the piece, composed by violinist Todd Reynolds and myself. The aim was to have the violin playing assert a series of moods, or gazes, upon Lián when she was on set (more on this below). The breaks in her performance serve as breaks in the different parts of the score, resulting in a programmatic work that covers a lot of different styles.

In the visual realm, I worked with a series of different time-manipulation and compositing techniques to serve these different moods. For much of the piece, the footage is accelerated and blended together, so that each frame becomes a high-quality average of sixty frames of video. In other parts, I slow the video down or manipulate it in a fluid manner, aiming to capture and respond to the nuanced actions Lián was performing at the time. Sometimes I would layer video from multiple camera views, or points from slightly different time perspectives in the piece, aiming to create a series of different understandings for how time functions from the viewer's point of view.

For the rest of this essay, I'd like to talk about the primary concept on display in the film: obsession.

## A Taxonomy of Obsession



Delaroche, *The Young Martyr* (1853)

“The essential features of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder are recurrent obsessions or compulsions that are severe enough to be time consuming or cause marked distress or significant impairment.” (DSM IV, 1994)

“The emergence of Capitalism exercises a strange effect on romance. I can only express it with an absurd fantasy: it’s as if the Beloved becomes the perfect commodity, always desired, always paid for, but never really enjoyed. The self-denial of Romance harmonizes neatly with the self-denial of Capitalism. Capital demands scarcity, both of production and of erotic pleasure, rather than limit its requirements simply to morality or chastity. Religion forbids sexuality, thus investing denial with glamour; capital withdraws sexuality, infusing it with despair. "Romance" now leads to the Wertherian suicide, Byron’s disgust, the chastity of the dandies. In this sense, romance will become the perfect two-dimensional obsession of the popular song and the advertisement, serving the utopian trace within the infinite reproduction of the commodity.” (Hakim Bey)

“There is nothing more allergic to the cinema than the work of Sade. Among the numerous reasons, this one first: the meticulousness, the ritual, the rigorous ceremonial form that all the scenes of Sade assume exclude the supplementary play of the camera. The least addition or suppression, the smallest ornament, are intolerable. No open fantasy, but a carefully programmed regulation. As soon as something is missing or superimposed, all is lost. There is no place for an image. The blanks must not be filled except by desires and bodies.” (Foucault)

“Four conditions that help identify Obsessive Love:

1. A painful and all-consuming preoccupation with a real or wished-for lover
2. An insatiable longing either to possess or be possessed by the target of their obsession
3. Rejection by or physical and/or emotional unavailability of their target, and
4. Being driven to behave in self-defeating ways by this rejection or unavailability.”

(Susan Forward and Craig Buck)

The film version of *Fashionably Late For The Relationship* explores obsession in a multiplicity of ways. When editing together the film, I worked off of an eight-part taxonomy of traits or attributes that can be ascribed to the obsessed situation:

- Heterotopia
- Panopticon
- Time-machine
- Marionette
- Guardian
- Labyrinth
- Hyperthymesia
- Possession

These traits provided impetus for how I decided to edit and sequence the film, and how I dealt with the specific issues of working with such an incredible amount of footage in such a constrained temporal framework. At every editing juncture, or when making design decisions for the digital pre-processing of the footage, I inserted by imagination into the obsessed perspective, treating the film not as a simple performance document, but as a repository for complex metaphors about how we look at those we love, how we obsess over those we can't touch, and how the intermingling of privacy and public space highlights the emotions and tensions that accompany the mania of obsession.

### **Heterotopia**



Bachelard speaks of an unspoken sacralization that occurs in the intersection between public and private space. The idea that private acts occurring in the public realm in some way serve to sanctify or ritualize the space involved, creating an interface whereby the actor can in some way *own* the space. The intersection of cinema into this process has

the potential to render the sacralization permanent and to infect other people with its intent. For example, the campus demonstrations of the 1960's (at Columbia, Kent State, etc.) have, by virtue of their recording and broadcast on the nightly news, become a permanent fixture of the sites in which those events occurred. In the fictive realm, filmmakers change our understanding of spaces through projection of imagined cinematic events into real sites in our world: think of Woody Allen's New York, or Paris as seen by Godard.

Lián's actions in Union Square are, from the viewpoint of the camera, a sacralization of her space. She possesses it by ritualizing her (private) actions in full view of camera (and audience). Through the juxtaposition of the public *site* (a traffic island) and the private *scene* (a boudoir), she creates a *heterotopia*.

Foucault's *heterotopology* assumes a six-point understanding of "other spaces," that of cultural ubiquity, diversity of function across culture, temporal discontinuity (through *heterochronia* or its inverse), a system of access, and a critical function in relation to the normative space of their environment. The boudoir in *Fashionably Late* assumes this discourse through its context, but also in its multiple function as a real boudoir, a performance stage, and a film set, all at the same time.

The ideal space of the subject of obsession, from the point of view of the obsessed viewer, is that of a heterotopia. We create timeless worlds for those we obsess over, extant from the real environments we know (or fear) our subject inhabits. We place her in a timeless zone, apart from the real passage of time, exempt from aging. Ours is an inherently *chronic* space, with time frozen and re-imagined as an idealized memory: *she is always getting ready for a date with us*.

We also (in our heterotopia of obsession) generate a system of access. As in a prison, harem, or private nightclub, we give entrance to our obsessed world only to specific people. She may be on full view for the world to see, but the world has to pay to see it.

Furthermore, this obsessive gaze serves in cultural opposition to the normal urban gaze: passive, avoiding eye contact, indifferent, momentary. *To stop and stare is to obsess*, however briefly: a strange occurrence on a traffic island.



## Panopticon



The obsessed want to see everything.

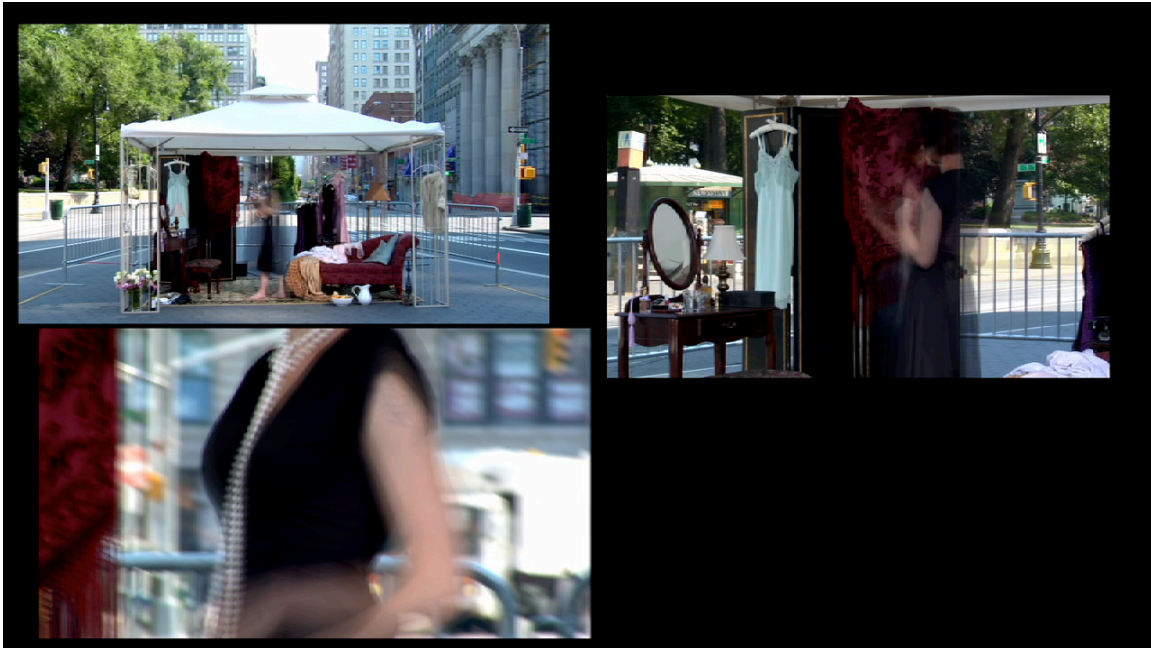
Panoptic structures (CCTV) and panoptic culture (reality television) are rapidly becoming so normal in our cultural and social discourse that we often realize their political implications only in hindsight.

Lián's performance was not only captured on high-definition video; it was captured on multiple cameras, from several angles, through a directorial situation that I created on the documentary end of the piece. The aim was to guarantee that *nothing was lost* of her performance; an obsessive endeavor which underlines the nature of gaze in obsession.

Whereas the onlookers acting as *Fashionably Late*'s audience had only a single point of view of the experience, the obsession in the film draws from a variety of shoots, selecting the best one. Cinema, as a form of photography, is subject to what Susan Sontag calls the "usually shady commerce between art and truth"; as a result, the process of film editing inserts an element of artistry into the panopticon situation, whereby not only is the one we obsess over *seen from all angles*, but the editor can selectively edit which angles best reflect the mood of the obsession.

Sontag again: "The sense of the unattainable that can be evoked by photographs feeds directly into the erotic feelings of those for whom desirability is enhanced by absence." Panoptic cinema, therefore, with its myriad micro-gazes, provides yet another tool to navigate the obsessed structure: how do we select the shots? Do we pick the images that are the "best" for the story, *or do we take all the ones where she is the most beautiful?*

## Time-machine



The act of time remapping in cinema is as old as cinema itself: the hand-cranked cameras of the silent era had the feature built-in, as it were. The digital tools available for accelerating, averaging, and compressing the temporal structure of an event serve the obsession insofar as they enable us to guarantee that *nothing is lost*. Not only is Lián's complete performance captured intact, but our time-scaling allows for us to speed up, slow down, reverse, and freeze time in a way to articulate those gestures, looks, and actions over which we obsess. Her smile while talking on the phone can linger, while the street scenes in her absence from the set can fly by in an instant.

Kristeva's writing on temporality and female subjectivity asserts that cyclical (repetitive) and eternal (monumental) time are the domain of feminine understanding, juxtaposed against linear (Nietzsche's *cursive*) time of man and (his) history. The multiplicity of expressions in the intersection between these different views of time provides a centerpiece to how *Fashionably Late* functions as a contrapuntal work; Lián's sense of time in equal parts counterbalances, resists, and defeats mine, just as my acceleration of her time provides a highlight into how linear gaze, on a macro level, feeds off of repetition and monumentality. The cinematic editorial of obsession is at play in this conversation by allowing the camera to dwell on repetitive (obsessed) acts as a mirror of the overall picture.

Temporality is a theme in much of my current work, and riffs to a certain extent off of the idea that we are running out of time. The hyper-mediated experiences of our accelerated culture have a detrimental effect on our ability to truly linger; obsession on a subject, therefore, is always at the *expense* of the un-obsessed. This plays out in the film by focusing on Lián to the exclusion of all other particulars in the scene (except for those moments when she is absent); as a result, the viewer gets a cursory understanding of the

number of people who came by the performance, and the cycle of three days pass unremarked as sunsets and sunrises serve only to mark time, not as notable events in themselves.

## Marionette



Mirror neurons are parts of your brain that fire in the same way when you take an action and *when you observe someone else doing it*. Thus a kiss viewed is, in a certain specific neurological way, a kiss performed. This conflation of observation and performance is a root source of empathy; its deficiency leads to psychosis; its hyperactivity to schizophrenia.

Watching *Fashionably Late* at a hyper-fluid, accelerated speed tests the endurance of our mirror neuropathy, as we empathize with Lián's movements, her rituals, her actions, but we also disengage with them due to the temporal elasticity of the piece: since we seldom see her perform *in real time*, we feel as if we are subconsciously forcing her to move slower or faster, as with a marionette over whom we have some subliminal control.

In many ways the time-remapping of the piece forces her aspects of her performance into the *uncanny valley*, the empathy gap normally ascribed to works of cybernetics where the simulation of a human is *nearly real*, i.e. not artificial enough to ascribe safely to a robotic charm, but not quite human either. This *almost real* quality of the accelerated performance forces not only a more active gaze (we begin to parse what speed is hers, and what speed is ours) but also allows for an obsession that asserts a fictitious sense of control.

## Guardian



Part of the delusional nature of obsession comes forth in the particular pathology whereby the obsessed thinks he is protecting the object of his obsession. We want to protect her from all harm, oblivious both to the subjectivity of that concept and to the harm we inflict ourselves. This is a paradox that plays itself out in the viewer upon seeing the obsessed viewing of a woman exposed, in full view of the public, unprotected. It has shock value both as an empathetic response to the performer as well as a thought process that evaluates the control politics of documentary cinema: *we can look, but we can't intervene*. At the same time, the perversity of cinema inserts a hyper-real quality to the issue of security and protection. Just as the romantic painters dwelled over-long on damsels-in-distress and the nearly dead, the situational ethics of *Fashionably Late's* meta-narrative (a filmmaker documenting a highly risky performance) cause an adrenaline rush in the obsessed one's concern over her safety.

## Labyrinth



By deliberately confusing the temporality of the cinematically captured subject, the obsessed can loop, rewind, re-articulate, slow down, and cinematically subvert the story unfolding before the camera, constructing an articulated *labyrinth of gaze*. This creates a classic collision of *sjuzet* (narrative) and *fabula* (story), asserting the control of the narrative (film) over the story (performance). Derrida's critique of this hierarchical system as oppressive towards story offers an insight into the editorial process of obsession; we *ignore* the inconvenient events (the ones that don't support our viewpoint) and *revisit* those that support our particular discourse.

This labyrinth exists in the cutting room, in the mind of the viewer, and in our understanding of the multiple views on time that exist in *Fashionably Late*. Lián's performance-time yields a story that is then reified into a narrative that exists on a different temporality. Just as with Nabokov and Burgess, this creates a situation of an *unreliable narrator* in the person of the film editor, obsessed with an account of events that might not really be there at all.

## Hyperthymesia



Hyperthymesians are those with incredible autobiographical memory; given a date, they can recall their exact whereabouts, actions, environment, etc. Documentary cinema creates hyperthymesiac situations for the average human caught in its net. Once recorded, the act of situational replay *forces us to remember events*, even in situations where we'd rather forget. The indelible nature of this recording feeds the obsessed, allowing us to remember not only the events unfolding before the camera, but *the memory of viewing it the first time, when it actually occurred*, however painful that may be.

## Possession



Portraiture, especially photographic portraiture, is an act of attempted *possession*, the ultimate goal of the obsessed, to feel that the subject “is more available than it really is” (Sontag again). *Fashionably Late* is, if nothing else, a technologically ambitious homage to Mona Lisa, and all of those who have found their muse through portraiture.

## Conclusion (“Speech!”)

As a conclusion, here’s a draft of what I thought I’d say at a premiere of the film.

thank you all for coming.

i’m incredibly honored to have worked on this project.

i was able to work with a production company headed by two of my favorite former graduate students.

in less than a month, they successfully assembled a brilliant team made up of colleagues of theirs, colleagues of mine, and, amazingly, my best friend.

we then did something that was more or less the most difficult, insane, and ambitious project i’ve ever conceived of: we staged a 72-hour continuous performance that doubled as a three-day-long multi-camera high definition video shoot. outdoors. in new york city. during a heat wave on the weekend following the fourth of july.

during this time i was able to collaborate with the most amazing cinematographer i’ve ever had the pleasure to work with.

in post-production i was able to draw on my friends, colleagues, and mentors for their professional input, their technical expertise, and their aesthetic advice.

and i was finally able to compose a score with the best musician i’ve ever met.

and all of this happened so i could make a work of art with, and about, and for, a woman whom i’ve admired, and respected, and loved more than i could ever say to you now.

this film is not a narrative film. what you’re about to see is a document of a performance that took place last summer. and on the performance i offered some advice, and lots of encouragement, and helped come up with the title. but other than that i had very little to do with it other than tell the performer that it was possible, that she would be able to do it, and that it would be fantastic, and it was. it really was.

the performance itself has several narratives. it has a surface narrative that unfolds over the three days it took place: that of a woman preparing for a night out; a date that presumably involves ‘the relationship’ referred to in the title.

but it also contains a multiplicity of other narratives: it contains a narrative about how we, as human beings, experience time in an accelerating world. it contains a narrative about how women view their bodies, their rituals, and their private spaces, and how they intuitively understand and empathize with those rituals as performed by other women. and it contains an implicit narrative on how men gaze upon those actions with curiosity, often with bewilderment, sometimes with envy, always with longing. by placing these private events into a public space all of those ideas are brought into sharp relief. and by presenting them in two different temporal scales, that of ‘real time’ as experienced by the audience who saw the performance over those three days, and the accelerated and re-imagined time as presented in this film, we can get an insight into how these views on what is unfolding before you might contrast.

though the film has no narrative, it has a point of view. so this work of cinema is my attempt to show you, as articulately as possible, what it feels like for me to view this woman. to see her



asleep and awake, attending to her makeup and selecting an outfit. talking on the phone and killing time, waiting until it was time to go out. all of this situated in an incredibly public, exposed performance situation that resulted in hundreds of people watching her just as i did, if even for just a few minutes.

there are a lot of filmmakers and artists in the audience, so i'll end by saying that if any of you have ever had a muse: someone who absolutely inspires you and challenges your every conception of what it means to be an artist, then you have my deepest solidarity through this work.

so that's about all i have to say. the rest of it is in the film. enjoy.