

Enduring Elsewhere #1

Shaping, keeping, transmitting, entrusting

A life, an object, a work of art: what allows them to endure when the place that once held them recedes, when the voice falls silent, when the keeper of their secret is gone? Enduring Elsewhere brings together four essays by Rita Selvaggio, each centred on a gesture: shaping, keeping, transmitting, entrusting. The diary gives shape to the days through words, images and sounds; the house museum preserves the fabric of a life in its objects; radio carries the work across distance to whoever is listening; instructions entrust its return to others. Each gesture calls for a different kind of fidelity: to lived experience, to the eloquence of things, to a disembodied voice, to a form waiting to be completed anew. Art's time is thus revealed in the care that makes it possible, in the materials that sustain it, in the presences that receive it.

To endure is also to part from one's origin: to find a dwelling in another act of listening, in a gesture, in the care of whoever receives what time has handed over.



Da sinistra a destra. Chantal Akerman, *News from Home*, 1977. Collections CINEMATEK © Chantal Akerman Foundation

The Shape of Days

The Diary Beyond Genre

Rita Selvaggio

I. A Threshold, Not a Document

The wind at Dungeness never stops blowing. It lifts the shingle, bends the stalks, carries with it the salt of the sea and the silhouette of the nuclear power station that dominates the horizon. It is a landscape that would seem to rule out any possibility of a garden. And yet it is here, from the late 1980s onward, that Derek Jarman plants poppies, cotton lavender, sea kale, sea fennel, irises. Every stone is moved by hand. Every plant is an experiment in resistance.

The pages of *Modern Nature*¹ follow the same rhythm as the garden. They do not narrate what has happened: they happen together with the days they record. The seasons, the tides, the light, visits from friends, the advance of illness, the growth of the plants follow one another without hierarchy, as if every entry belonged to the same breath as the landscape. One day Jarman describes a poppy coming into flower; the next he notes a session at the hospital, the memory of a lover, a reading of John Donne, the passing of a flock of birds over the Kent coast. Nothing is presented as an exceptional event. Nothing is set apart from the flow of daily life.

It is precisely this apparent absence of hierarchy that makes *Modern Nature* difficult to place. It is not an autobiography, although it tells a life. It is not a book of memoirs, although it holds memories. Nor is it a working notebook meant to prepare other works. Its pages point nowhere beyond themselves. They constitute, in themselves, a space of aesthetic elaboration.

Criticism has often regarded the diary as a minor genre: a private repository from which to draw biographical information, verify authorial intentions, or reconstruct the genesis of a work. Seen this way, the diary remains inevitably subordinate to something else — the novel, the film, the photograph, the painting. It is a document, never a work; a threshold, never a destination.

And yet, faced with texts like *Modern Nature*, this distinction begins to crack.

What happens if the diary is no longer taken as the background to the work, but as one of its forms? If daily writing does not prepare the artistic labour but coincides with it? If to note the changing of the light, the growth of a plant, or the slow transformation of one's own body is not to record an experience already completed, but to construct a particular way of inhabiting it?

This is where one must begin. Or, perhaps, return — for the diary, before it was ever a form, was a gesture: the gesture of someone turning toward themselves without yet knowing what they will find. Its history is long. It runs through European modernity, changes shape, takes on new guises, and each time seems to ask of writing something writing is never quite sure it can give.

Montaigne², in the *Essays*, does not properly keep a diary. And yet he performs the gesture without which the diary might never have been born: he makes himself the matter of his own book. He does not set out a thought already concluded; he follows it as it takes shape, hesitates, swerves, contradicts itself — as though thought were not something one possesses but something that happens. It is this compositional principle — attention to movement rather than to outcome — that the diary will inherit, and carry to its furthest consequences.

In the nineteenth century this principle grows more defined, closing in, almost, around a self. Henri-Frédéric Amiel³ entrusts to a seventeen-thousand-page diary, written with no intention of publication, an untiring exploration of his own interiority. It is a dialogue of the self with itself, sustained across a lifetime, as though daily writing might finally reach the point where a consciousness coincides with what it knows of itself. But seventeen thousand pages do not conclude a self. If anything, they reveal its inexhaustibility. Only after Amiel's death would criticism come to read those pages as one of the most exhaustive documents of modern introspection. Here the diary remains private by definition: the less it expects ever to be read by another eye, the more authentic it is taken to be.

With Kafka⁴ this privacy moves into the very workshop of writing. His notebooks mix daily entries with narrative fragments, dreams, doubts about his own vocation. It is no longer only life that is put to the test on the page: it is writing itself. The diary becomes the place where literary work prepares itself, attempts to begin, questions itself, often disowns itself. Each sentence seems to ask the next for permission to exist. And yet the diary remains subordinate to a work standing beside it, which, at least in principle, should one day absorb it.

Virginia Woolf⁵ brings this subordination to a new degree of self-awareness. In her diary she notes the progress of her novels, the crises of writing, the sudden perceptions she will call *moments of being*. She knows that there are instants no form can anticipate, and she takes them in before they vanish. But here too the diary remains a workshop, a training ground for a work that continues to locate itself elsewhere. It is the space in which time arrives before form, while the definitive form still belongs to the novel.

It is with Anaïs Nin⁶ that this hierarchy begins to waver. Nin writes and rewrites her own diary for decades, edits it, publishes it in her lifetime, makes it her principal work. The diary no longer accompanies the work: it demands to be the work. It becomes the place where Nin constructs and stages an image of herself, as before a mirror that does not merely give back a face but slowly invents one.

For the first time with this clarity, the diary attains the full status of a work. But it remains a work built around a character. The page does not relinquish the coherence of a self that narrates itself, mythologises itself, organises its own life into a recognisable form. The subject does not merely appear: it composes itself. It becomes the central figure of a narrative that, even as it proceeds day by day, continues to want a face.

This very construction begins to waver in the work of authors and artists such as Jarman, Guibert, Akerman, Giorno, Mekas and Wojnarowicz — who do not exhaust the field here, but render its transformation with particular clarity.

They do not inherit from Nin only the ambition of making the diary a work. They inherit, and radicalise, the idea that the diary can be a work — but without preserving the constructed self, the coherent character, the authorial mythology. At a certain point, the image of the self is no longer enough. The page need not reassemble whoever is writing it. It can accompany their presence without turning it into a character.

The break, then, concerns not only the status of the diary, its passage from document to form. It concerns also the fate of the subject who writes it: no longer a character to be composed, but a presence that merely passes through the page. A self that does not claim to coincide with its own image, that does not ask writing to make it whole.

Between the second half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, a

constellation of artists and writers thus emerges who take the diary out of the autobiographical tradition and transform it into an autonomous aesthetic practice. Daily writing no longer serves to tell a life. It serves to give shape to a way of perceiving time, the body, memory, friendship, and loss.

The diary does not record an existence. It continually puts it to work.

To speak of the diary, in these cases, is to speak of a different idea of the work: one that renounces completeness, that is not organised around a beginning and an end but takes on the discontinuous rhythm of experience. An open, processual form, able to move through literature, film, photography, performance and the visual arts without belonging definitively to any one of these languages.

This is why the diary can be thought of as a critical device. It does not merely comment on the world: it alters the conditions through which the world becomes perceptible. Its matter is attention, not confession. It exercises the present rather than reconstructing the past. It is the slow, daily labour through which a life takes shape, not the account of a life already completed.



Da sinistra a destra. Chantal Akerman, News from Home, 1977. Collections CINEMATEK © Chantal Akerman Foundation

II. Beyond Autobiography

This hypothesis now calls for a more explicit theoretical grounding. For the marginality that criticism has long attributed to the diary was not simply the result of a widespread prejudice. It was also, paradoxically, theorised.

When Philippe Lejeune⁷ attempted to include the diary within his own work on autobiography, he had to acknowledge that the genre resisted the very definition he had elaborated for the narrative of the self. The autobiographical pact presupposes a retrospective voice, capable of reassembling an existence into a coherent, finished form. Whoever narrates already knows, at least in part, the meaning of the story being told.

The diary, by contrast, is written in the present. It does not yet know how the story it records will end. It does not know its last page, and precisely for that reason it cannot order the preceding ones with a conclusion in mind. It escapes the autobiographical pact structurally, because it lacks the distance from which an existence can be reassembled.

Tellingly, Lejeune himself described the diary as a form of writing without a stable theoretical home: tolerated more than studied, relegated to the margins of a discipline built on the model of the completed narrative — as though its not knowing where it is going constituted, for theory, a flaw rather than its most proper condition.

In the same years Béatrice Didier⁸ showed that this formal marginality conceals a precise function. For Didier, the diary does not merely record an already-given subject. It is the space in which the subject watches itself form — a refuge in which the self discovers, and in a sense invents, itself through the daily labour of writing.

The self, then, does not necessarily precede the page. It can appear within it. It can recognise itself only after having written itself. This is a function literary criticism has often overlooked, preferring to treat the diary as a mere repository of biographical material rather than a device capable of producing subjectivity.

If one shifts the gaze from literary theory to theories of narrative identity, the distinction between the diary and self-narration becomes even clearer. Paul John Eakin⁹ argued that personal identity does not pre-exist narration but is constituted through it. To narrate oneself is to fabricate oneself, not simply to report an existence already complete.

It is a powerful thesis, for it strips identity of the illusion of a fixed substance. And yet it still presupposes a narrative arc, however provisional: a form capable of gathering experience and rendering it, at least temporarily, legible as a story.

The diary of Jarman, and likewise those of Guibert, Akerman, Giorno, Mekas and Wojnarowicz, calls even this premise into question. It refuses not only the retrospection of the completed narrative. It refuses the very idea that writing must consolidate itself into a story.

If for Eakin one makes oneself by narrating oneself, for these authors one makes oneself by remaining within the present of writing — without abandoning it, without letting it settle definitively into narrative, as though the subject could exist precisely in the suspension that precedes the telling of what has been.

This resistance to form becomes still more legible in light of Leigh Gilmore's¹⁰ work on the limits of autobiography. Gilmore observed that when self-representation collides with an experience that exceeds the categories available to it — illness, violence, trauma — writing tends to swerve away from the formal constraints of autobiography, hybridising with other languages and other disciplines.

This is exactly what happens in the diaries examined here. Faced with illness, loss, institutional violence, these authors do not seek a genre better suited to contain them. They do not try to bring what exceeds experience back within some more capacious form. They inhabit it within a form that refuses to stabilise.

One that cannot stabilise.

And it is precisely in this instability that it finds its own necessity.

One further step, finally, remains to be taken. It is indicated by the work of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who have extended the field of self-narration well beyond the written text, to encompass the body, space, image and voice. This expanded perspective bears closely on these pages too, for it forces the question of where the diary truly ends. Or whether it ends at all.

It is here that the term “diary” calls for a clarification. It no longer designates only a defined literary genre — private, dated pages entrusted to a notebook — but something broader, which might be called the diaristic form¹¹.

A diaristic form is a compositional principle grounded in temporal rhythm, in discontinuous accumulation, and in the renunciation of retrospective synthesis. It can move through writing, film, photography, performance and sound recording, without identifying definitively with any one of these languages.

What links Jarman's *Modern Nature*, Guibert's photographic notebooks, the filmed diaries of Akerman and Mekas, Giorno's tapes and performances, and Wojnarowicz's writings and collages is thus not membership in a single medium. It is a shared logic: to note without concluding, to accumulate without narrating, to remain faithful to the rhythm of the days even as the medium changes.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson¹² offer, in this sense, a decisive tool. The two scholars have shown how, over the course of the twentieth century, self-narration progressively broke free of the written page to inhabit the body, space, image and voice: from the graphic memoir to performance, from the autobiographical film to more recent practices.

The self no longer speaks only through a sentence. It can appear in a gesture, in a sequence of images, in a recorded voice, in a body occupying space. The diary, in this light, is no longer a genre but a cross-media device: a compositional logic that can take shape as readily in a notebook as on film.

Adopting this broadened category does not mean diluting the specificity of the diary. It means recognising its full historical scope. The notebook, the working journal, the voice recording, the daily photographic sequence, the film shot day after day: all these practices share the same constitutive principle that animates *Modern Nature*.

For this reason they can be read within a single critical constellation, without having to force the notion of the diary beyond its own bounds, and without sacrificing, out of philological caution, their deepest common ground.

III. Derek Jarman — The Garden as Compositional Principle

In *Modern Nature*, this transformation concerns time above all.

In the traditional diary, time is often the principle that organises the narrative. The succession of days guarantees a narrative continuity: each entry adds a piece to the story of an existence. In *Modern Nature*, by contrast, chronology progressively loses this function. The days follow one another, but they do not build a plot. They build a sensibility.

What recurs is not events but certain elemental gestures: observing, planting, walking, reading, waiting. The writing moves by recurrence, not by development. The seasons alter the garden,

illness alters the body, light alters the landscape, but none of these transformations is read as a stage toward a conclusion. Everything remains exposed to a present that never stops redefining itself.

This is why the garden at Prospect Cottage is not merely one of the book's themes. It constitutes its compositional principle. A garden is never concluded. It demands continuous care, accepts loss, absorbs failure, begins again each season without erasing the traces of those before it. The diary too proceeds by this logic. Every page is autonomous, but none is self-sufficient. Meaning emerges from accumulation, from repetition, from the almost imperceptible variations that time deposits on the writing.

In this sense *Modern Nature* is not simply the account of a garden. It is a garden constructed through writing. The entries do not describe an already-given landscape: they bring it into existence as an aesthetic form. To read the diary is to walk through that space, to pause where it pauses, to recognise that the rhythm of the pages coincides with the rhythm of cultivation. Writing and cultivating thus become two inseparable gestures, grounded in the same practice of attention.

It is no accident that, in Jarman's pages, the word "care" takes on a meaning that exceeds the body. To tend a plant, to tend a place, to tend a sentence belong to the same daily exercise. None of these gestures promises salvation. All of them, instead, produce a form of resistance — not against death, but against the idea that life could be reduced to its exceptional events.

Michel Foucault¹³ would have recognised in this gesture an ancient form. In his final courses at the Collège de France, Foucault returns to the hypomnemata: the notebooks in which the ancients gathered readings, thoughts, maxims once heard — not to confess themselves but to constitute themselves. To write, in this tradition, is not to expose an interiority already given, but to practise becoming what one writes: an activity of formation rather than of revelation. To tend a garden, to tend a sentence, belong to the same governance of the self that Foucault calls the care of the self — a daily practice, never concluded, indifferent to the distinction between life and work.

At this point, the diary ceases once and for all to be a document: it does not record reality; it gives it form; it does not preserve time, it makes it habitable. This is its deepest critical function — not to explain the work but to show how a work can coincide with a daily practice of attention, without ever separating itself from the flow of life that generates it.

Even the writing, in *Modern Nature*, seems to obey this law.

The pages do not accumulate certainties. They simply remain with things long enough for them slowly to reveal their own presence. A stone picked up on the beach, a poppy that has survived the wind, the sudden flight of a gull, a sentence read before falling asleep, an unexpected visit, the silence that follows a diagnosis. Nothing is turned into a symbol. Nothing claims to represent anything beyond itself. The writing remains stubbornly faithful to the surface of the world, as though it were precisely there, in the fragile evidence of things, that a form of truth were kept.

It is perhaps this fidelity to the present that makes it impossible to distinguish the diary from the work.

Each entry is born to answer an immediate necessity: to hold a light before it changes, to fix the name of a plant, to record a conversation, to remember a dream destined to dissolve a few hours later. But precisely because they do not seek to build a completed narrative, these pages end up composing something more lasting than a story. They build a way of inhabiting time.

Time, in Jarman, does not flow. It breathes.

It contracts around the sudden flowering of an iris, dilates through a sleepless night, slows as a plant sets root in the shingle, quickens as illness becomes unmistakable. Each day possesses a different rhythm, and the diary gives up trying to make them uniform. It takes them in as they come, with their interruptions, their suspensions, their unexpected returns.

Like the gardener, whoever keeps a diary works without knowing what image their labour will finally take on in time: they sow, wait, weed out, begin again. Every page, like every plant, remains exposed to the elements, and none can call itself final. It is from this fragility, far from any monumentality, that every diary is born: an infinitely simple gesture, that of stopping — not to interrupt time but to grant it a different density. To write every day is to withdraw a fragment of living from the unbroken consumption of the hours, not to turn it into memory but to allow it to go on existing in another form. It is an act of attention before it is ever an act of writing.

In *Modern Nature* this attention takes the form of listening.

Jarman seems to watch the landscape as though continually on the verge of speaking to it. The plants are not objects to be described but presences to enter into relation with. The light does not simply illuminate things: it alters their character. Even the wind, which runs through every page

without ever being obsessively named, becomes a force that organises the rhythm of the garden and that of the writing. Everything moves. Nothing remains identical to itself.

This fidelity to the everyday does not amount, however, to a cult of intimacy. It would be a mistake to read these texts as the simple account of a private life. More than the seat of interiority, the diary is the point at which the world enters continually into contact with a consciousness that moves through it. Subjectivity does not precede the writing. It changes along with it. Each page registers less an identity than a relation — with a landscape, a body, a voice, a loss, an unexpected presence.

Jarman understands this with an almost disarming naturalness. His garden is not a refuge from history. It is a way of moving through it without giving up the possibility of care. Even as illness makes the future ever more uncertain, each new plant continues to be entrusted to the earth as though time might still open up. There is no naivety in this gesture. There is the awareness that every form of creation is born of the decision to go on, even when nothing guarantees that what is sown today will truly come to flower.

Many years after *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes¹⁴ devotes his teaching at the Collège de France to a kindred question: how can a life find a form without reducing itself to a story? At the centre of *La préparation du roman* is not the novel in the traditional sense, but the daily note, the fragment, the observation jotted down almost distractedly — writing born not of narrative construction but of a stubborn fidelity to what each day offers to the eye. That reflection remains deliberately unfinished. Barthes will never write the imagined novel, and remains on the threshold, in that intermediate space between the note and the work.

It is in this interval, more than in the single pages, that the diary finds its own language: not in the continuity of a plot but in the rhythm of returns, suspensions and resumptions that separates one day from the next. The fragment thus ceases to be an incomplete form and becomes a sufficient unit, open to the next page just as every day remains open to the one that will follow: there is no final chapter able to organise, once and for all, the meaning of a life.

The diary, for this reason, belongs not only to literature. It belongs to all those artistic practices that have given up the idea of a closed work in order to take on the form of a duration. Film, photography, performance, poetry, the garden: different languages that share the same trust in process, in repetition, in the slow transformation of things.



Da sinistra a destra. Chantal Akerman, *News from Home*, 1977. Collections CINEMATEK © Chantal Akerman Foundation

IV. Hervé Guibert — The Gaze That Exposes

When Hervé Guibert begins to write, the landscape changes radically. Dungeness's open horizon is gone. Space contracts. The page draws closer to the body. But the question remains the same: how can one give experience a form without immediately turning it into a story?

If in Jarman writing is born of an encounter with a landscape, in Hervé Guibert it is born of the urgency to look.

To look is not simply to see. It is to expose oneself — to accept that every image gives back something that escapes the observer's control. This is why, in his pages, photography and writing very soon stop belonging to two distinct languages. Both try to hold on to what, in the very moment it appears, is already disappearing.

Guibert writes like a photographer.

Each sentence seems to interrogate, more than describe, the distance separating the body from its own appearing. A face observed in the mirror, skin that changes, a shadow on a wall, the gesture of a hand, a room suddenly empty. Nothing is turned into allegory. Every detail keeps its own opacity, as though the writing deliberately gave up explaining what it can only go on looking at.

The body too, in his pages, refuses any fixity.

Time works on it as light works on film: illness leaves a stain there, desire an overexposure, fear a

shadow that will no longer erase itself — the body is this before it is ever the stable seat of an identity. Guibert does not tell the story of the body. He watches it as it changes. Each entry coincides with a new distance from the self, with a new image that the writing tries to draw near without ever fully possessing it.

In his work, for this reason, the diary loses every last trace of introspection.

Interiority holds little interest for him. What matters is the point at which the world leaves a trace on the body, and the body, in turn, alters the way the world is perceived. The page becomes the site of this reciprocal crossing. It does not gather confessions. It registers transformations.

Even illness, which so much criticism has taken as the exclusive key to his work, never occupies an absolute position. It alters the gaze, certainly, but does not exhaust it. It continues to coexist with an open window, an afternoon of light, a rediscovered photograph, a friend's face, the memory of a journey. No experience claims the privilege of explaining all the others.

There is, in this way of treating illness, something that anticipates a distinction elaborated years later by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick¹⁵. Sedgwick sets a paranoid reading — one that unmasks, diagnoses, traces every image back to its symptom — against a reparative reading, able to take in a text without claiming to resolve it into a final explanation. Guibert writes his own illness with this same caution: he does not unmask it, does not elevate it into a sole interpretive key. He lets it coexist, as we have seen, with an open window, a friend, a rediscovered photograph.

Perhaps it is here that Jarman and Guibert, for all their differences, finally meet.

One moves through landscape to understand time; the other moves through the body to understand the gaze. But both refuse to turn the diary into a narrative of their own lives. They prefer to make it the place where life continues to expose itself, without ever closing into the reassuring shape of a finished narrative.

For this reason too, Guibert distrusts transparency.

His photographs do not explain his pages. His pages do not illustrate the photographs. Between the two there always remains a gap, a remainder, something that resists every attempt at coincidence. It is precisely in that distance that the writing goes on working.

The diary then takes on an unexpected function. It does not preserve images. It prolongs their instability.

Each entry sets back in motion what had seemed by then fixed: a portrait, a memory, an encounter. Nothing remains definitively settled. Even memory changes texture every time it returns to the page. The writing does not recover the past. It exposes it once more to the uncertainty of the present.

It is a subtle but decisive difference. Memory, in Guibert, does not resemble an archive. It resembles, rather, a darkroom. Images emerge in it slowly, gain intensity, then begin again to fade. None offers itself as definitive proof. Each keeps the fragility of its own appearing.

This is why his writing seems continually to oscillate between closeness and distance. It draws near to bodies until it all but touches them, yet in that same instant recognises the impossibility of ever truly possessing them. It is a writing that renounces mastery. It prefers to inhabit the interval separating experience from its representation.

Friendship, tellingly, occupies a place in his pages as important as love. Friends are not secondary characters. They are those through whom the gaze continually learns to decentre itself. Every face forces the writing out of itself, to measure itself against an otherness that can be neither absorbed nor explained.

The diary thus stops being the privileged seat of the self. It becomes a space crossed by others.

Voices enter, leave, return. Bodies leave traces. Photographs interrupt the course of memories. Every presence alters the balance of the page. The writing does not gather these apparitions in order to order them. It accepts being continually transformed by them.

From this willingness to let itself be changed is born one of the rarest qualities of Guibert's work: the ability to make visible not what we are, but what we become in our encounters with others.

V. Chantal Akerman — The Spaces of Absence

With Chantal Akerman the diary changes nature once again.

It is no longer landscape that organises the writing, nor the body that measures its transformations. It is distance.

A room, a corridor, a window, a kitchen table, the sound of a lift, a street walked every morning. Apparently anonymous places that, in her work, take on an unexpected density — not because they conceal some hidden meaning, but because they hold the time of whoever passes through them.

Every space keeps a memory.

Not a monumental memory, made of exceptional events, but the almost imperceptible memory of repeated gestures. A chair moved every day to the same spot. A cup left in the sink. The movement of curtains when a window is left open. The light that crosses the same wall every time, yet is never quite the same as the day before.

Akerman watches these minimal shifts with a persistence that belongs as much to film as to writing. In her diaries, as in her films, almost nothing happens. Or perhaps what happens is what traditional narrative has always considered irrelevant: the time it takes a body to cross a room, the wait for a phone call, the silence that follows a conversation, the trace someone leaves in a place after everyone else has gone.

It is in this suspension that the page finds its own breath.

The writing does not accompany movements. It measures them. Every sentence seems to ask how much space exists between a body and the world around it — how much time it takes for a house to become a place, how much silence is needed for an absence to acquire substance.

Absence, in Akerman, never coincides with emptiness. It is a presence that has changed shape.

It goes on inhabiting the rooms, altering the rhythm of the days, redrawing the most habitual routes. This is why her interiors never appear merely domestic. They are places crossed by what can no longer be seen but continues to exert a force on the things left behind.

No work states this principle more explicitly than *News from Home*¹⁶, shot in 1976 out of the letters her mother had sent her in New York some years before.

The images show only the city: streets, subway cars, the windows of empty diners, long fixed shots in which almost nothing happens. On the soundtrack, Akerman's voice reads her mother's letters, often drowned out by the noise of traffic or the clatter of the trains below, as though the city itself were struggling to silence that voice from elsewhere. Akerman is never seen writing a reply, nor reading those letters in the privacy of a room: she is seen only, by way of the camera standing in for her, inhabiting the spaces those letters cannot reach.

The film stages, with an almost didactic literalness, the very structure of a double diary: a mother's written diary in Brussels, and the filmed one of a daughter in New York, which never meet except in the friction between an image and a voice foreign to it. The mother's absence is not filled by the reading of her words. It materialises, if anything, in the distance between what is seen and what is heard, between the present of the city and the past of a correspondence that keeps arriving late.

It is a logic that Avery Gordon¹⁷ has theorised with precision in speaking of haunting: the ghost is not what is missing but a real presence that claims attention, that makes itself felt precisely because it can no longer be seen. To know an absence, for Gordon, requires less a gaze than a listening — an attentiveness to murmurs, to traces, to what continues to lay claim to its share of reality. The voice of Akerman's mother, drowned out by traffic but never erased, is exactly this: a ghost claiming its right to be heard.

It is no surprise that, in those same New York years, Akerman had struck up a friendship with Jonas Mekas. The same trust in the fixed shot as an instrument for listening to time, the same idea that the duration of a take can bring out relations that traditional narrative would leave invisible, unites the two beyond their differences of medium.

The writing behaves this way too.

It does not try to fill what is missing. It leaves it room.

Every page renounces the temptation to explain. It prefers to stay beside what resists words, as though the diary's task were not to make the world more transparent but to preserve its opacity.

Akerman introduces, at this point, a further possibility.

The diary is not only the place where lived experience takes shape. It becomes the place where even what has withdrawn from that experience continues, stubbornly, to exert its own presence. The writing does not give back what is lost. It builds the space in which that loss can still be inhabited.

Reading Akerman, one often has the impression that every page resembles a room left open. It does not invite the reader in to find an answer. It asks only that they stay long enough for the silence slowly to begin speaking.

VI. John Giorno — The Voice That Circulates

The page, with John Giorno, seems almost to lose its weight.

The words no longer seek to build a surface to be read slowly. They ask to be spoken, breathed, carried on the breath. The writing still keeps its own form, but already lives in the possibility of a voice. It waits for someone to make it resound.

It is a subtle transformation.

For centuries the diary belonged to the domain of silence. It was the place of the closed page, the private note, the sentence entrusted to paper so that no one else would hear it. Giorno overturns this legacy. The daily word is not kept safe. It circulates. It exposes itself. It passes from one body to another without losing its intensity.

Even when he writes about himself, what emerges is not an individual story.

Every experience is immediately handed back to a collective dimension, as though language possessed a natural capacity to exceed whoever speaks it. The page does not hold the voice. It sends it travelling.

This is probably one of the least acknowledged legacies of the performance poetry of the later twentieth century.

The work no longer coincides with the printed text but with a continual migration across different media: the page, the tape recorder, the telephone, the stage, the record, the listener's memory. Each passage slightly alters the words, without ever breaking their continuity. The writing accepts existing in many forms at once.

*Dial-A-Poem*¹⁸ was born of a precise episode, which Giorno himself recounted many times: a boring phone call, an ordinary conversation over which, out of tiredness or impatience, a question suddenly rose up — why can't this be a poem? From there came the idea of connecting a series of telephone lines to reel-to-reel tape recorders, so that anyone dialling a number could listen, free of charge, to a poem chosen at random among the hundreds recorded. The system, running steadily from January 1969 with ten machines installed at the offices of the Architectural League in New York, allowed neither the choice of a text nor control over its length: every call exposed the listener to a different poem, left entirely to chance.

The archive that accumulated over time gives a good sense of the breadth of this idea of poetry. Alongside the texts of poets in the conventional sense there was room for Buddhist mantras, political statements by Black Panther militants, even a recording of John Cage's four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence. When, in 1970, the project became part of the *Information* show at MoMA, its popularity had already outstripped every expectation: in its first months of operation the calls had reached a million, to the point that a New York Times article caused the lines to collapse temporarily under the overload.

As the years passed, the *Dial-A-Poem* archive turned into something closer to a collective diary than a simple anthology. Among the voices gathered there, one of the later recordings preserves Joe Brainard reading a fragment of his own *I Remember*¹⁹: a text that Brainard, who would later die of AIDS-related pneumonia, had built by piling up minimal memories one after another, according to a compositional principle not so far from that of the diaries examined here. To listen to his voice today through Giorno's telephone archive is to come upon a double diary: that of Brainard's memory, and that of the sonic memory Giorno built around it, poem after poem, call after call.

It is this intertwining, more than a simple thematic affinity, that makes *Dial-A-Poem* an exemplary case: not a work that speaks about time but a device that exists only in the time of its reception, always different, never entirely possessed by whoever listens to it.

In this archive one recognises a form of what José Esteban Muñoz²⁰ termed queer evidence. For Muñoz, the ephemeral — a gesture, a recorded voice, a performance leaving no trace but its own happening — often constitutes the only evidence available of lives the official archives have ignored or erased: fragile evidence, hard to hold onto, but for that very reason more faithful to what it seeks to document. *Dial-A-Poem*, with its voice heard only for the duration of a call before withdrawing, belongs to this lineage: it does not preserve, it testifies through its own disappearance.

It is no longer only what gets written down. It is what continues to circulate. A phrase remembered during a conversation, a line repeated silently while walking, a fragment resurfacing months later in another city. The page no longer represents writing's point of arrival. It becomes one of its many stopping places.

In this continual passage from one medium to another, time takes on an unexpected quality.

It proceeds according to the return of words, not according to a succession of days. Some phrases reappear after years, spoken by a different voice, heard in a new context, suddenly charged with a meaning that had earlier seemed absent. The writing does not preserve time. It reactivates it.

This, more than anything else, is what sets Giorno apart from the authors who came before him.

Jarman entrusts his thought to landscape. Guibert measures it through the vulnerability of the gaze. Akerman listens for its resonance in the spaces of absence. Giorno, instead, hands it over to

the circulation of the voice. The word seeks no final dwelling place. It exists only for as long as it goes on being spoken.

In this light the diary definitively stops belonging to the book.

It becomes a gesture that crosses different media, changing each time without losing its own identity. Its form no longer coincides with an object but with a practice that keeps renewing itself every time someone reads, listens to, remembers or repeats a phrase.

It is this openness to transformation that allows the diary to move beyond the borders of literature — not because it abandons writing, but because it recognises writing as a mobile matter, able to inhabit the page, the voice and memory all at once.



Da sinistra a destra. Chantal Akerman, *News from Home*, 1977. Collections CINEMATEK © Chantal Akerman Foundation

VII. Jonas Mekas — Editing Time

When Jonas Mekas picks up his camera, he is not looking for an event.

He is looking for a rhythm.

The images arrive before their meaning. A face laughing for a few seconds. Sunlight crossing the branches of a tree. A table laid after a dinner. A child running. The reflection of snow on glass. Very brief fragments, often unstable, seemingly unable to bear the weight of a story. And yet, watching them again, one notices that nothing is accidental. Every image is waiting for the others.

That rhythm has a precise origin. Mekas arrives in New York at the end of 1949, a Lithuanian refugee who has passed through a forced-labour camp in Germany and years in displaced-persons camps: he settles in Williamsburg, and two weeks after arriving, with a borrowed sum, buys his first Bolex camera. He begins filming not to document his exile but to inhabit it: to fix fragments of a life that exile had suddenly stripped of continuity. From this first gesture on, filming becomes a way of staying afloat in the present rather than a way of preserving it.

It is editing that turns contingency into form.

Rather than organising a narrative, it lets the images go on resonating with one another long after they were recorded. Two shots separated by years can suddenly recognise each other. A gesture returns. A light reappears. A face believed lost resurfaces beside another face that did not yet exist when the first was filmed.

This capacity of editing to make images distant in time recognise one another finds its most moving proof in *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania*, the film Mekas builds in 1972 around his own return to his native village of Semeniškiai, twenty-seven years after his flight. The footage of the journey interweaves with material shot in Williamsburg in the early years of exile, decades before: two times that had never met now meet on the editing table, and exile ceases for a moment to be a wound without answer, becoming instead a form, however provisional, of reconciliation.

The film diary is born precisely in this interval.

Not in the moment of shooting but in the long time of reassembly. To film is to entrust the present to the possibility of a future edit. Every image remains incomplete until it meets another image capable of altering its meaning.

Small wonder, then, that Mekas's film diaries seem to oscillate continually between immediacy and distance.

They are built from material gathered in the urgency of the instant, yet acquire their form only through an almost archaeological patience. The editing does not reconstruct a biography. It brings out invisible relations, affinities no memory could have foreseen.

In this light even chance takes on an unexpected value.

What had seemed accidental slowly reveals a necessity of its own — not a narrative necessity but a rhythmic one. The images learn to breathe together. They seek each other out. They answer one another. They produce a continuity that belongs neither to chronology nor to narrative, but to the persistence of certain intensities.

It is perhaps here that the diary meets one of cinema's deepest intuitions.

Memory is not an ordered sequence of facts. It is an incessant editing. Every memory changes position each time another image draws near it. No fragment keeps the same meaning forever. Everything remains open to new connections.

Mekas seems to have understood that living means this too: letting time go on silently re-editing our experience. The diary, then, does not merely follow the course of the days. It continually reassembles their constellation. Every return alters the whole. Every new image forces all those before it to redefine their place.

It is this openness to re-editing that keeps the diary from becoming an archive. The archive preserves. The diary, instead, keeps shifting its own images, accepting that none of them occupies a final position. Its form coincides with this ceaseless movement, in which the past never stops reorganising itself in the light of what continues to happen.

In 2000 Mekas carries this principle to its furthest consequences with *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty*, nearly five hours built from thirty years of film assembled with no concern for chronology. Mekas himself, in voice-over, refuses the title of director: he says he merely films, that he is possessed by the need to do so, that he moves through life with his Bolex to fix what happens in the moment it happens. This is not modesty. It is the most precise possible statement of a logic belonging, at its core, to the diaristic form: not a craft exercised upon given material, but a way of inhabiting time that merges with time itself.

In this, Mekas's work gives concrete form to what, in the earlier theoretical section, was left to the image offered by Tim Ingold: a life that proceeds like a path generated by walking, not as a sequence of already fixed destinations. Few diaries, among those examined here, show so clearly what it means, in practice, to proceed without a destination: to film every day for thirty years, without knowing what form all that material would finally take.

VIII. David Wojnarowicz — The Body Traversed

David Wojnarowicz brings the diary up against another threshold.

What remains of a diary when it stops protecting whoever writes it?

It is no longer the place where an experience seeks a form. It becomes the point at which different, often incompatible experiences violently collide. Personal memory coexists with reportage, desire with rage, tenderness with outrage, childhood with destruction. No single element manages to hold the centre of the page for long. Everything remains exposed to the pressure exerted by the others.

It is a writing crossed by centrifugal forces.

Every sentence seems to widen beyond its own origin, as though individual experience were incapable of existing without being continually struck by history. The diary does not protect intimacy. It shows its vulnerability.

This is why Wojnarowicz refuses every reassuring distinction between what belongs to the private sphere and what concerns public space.

The body carries the imprinted traces of the institutions that govern it. The cities that cross through it. The images — advertisements, films, anatomy manuals — that have taught it to look at itself in a certain way. And then the acts of violence that repeatedly force one to redefine where in the world one can still stand. To write is to make this stratification perceptible. Not to simplify it.

This stratification corresponds to a condition Judith Butler²¹ has called precarity. For Butler, every life is constitutively exposed, dependent on others, never able to protect itself alone; but this shared precarity is distributed unevenly, and certain lives, certain bodies, are rendered less visible, less grievable, barely counted as lives at all. Wojnarowicz's body, crossed by the institutions and the politics of silence that in the 1980s let a generation die, is precisely one of these bodies: his writing does not ask for protection, it demands visibility.

The urban landscape too changes texture.

The streets of New York are not a backdrop to events. They absorb desires, fears, encounters, exclusions. The walls, the bridges, the subways, the abandoned piers hold the lives that have passed through them. Every place appears as a surface of sedimentation, where individual stories go on settling without ever fully coinciding with the city's official memory.

The writing then moves like an incision.

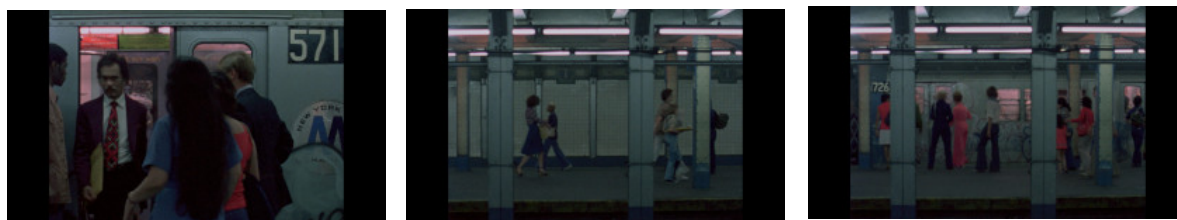
It does not add meanings. It uncovers them beneath those already there, bringing back to light connections that dominant discourse continually tends to erase. Every page works against forgetting — but not in the monumental sense of commemoration. It works so that what has been excluded can still exert a force on the present.

This is the most surprising quality of his work.

The diary does not hold only a voice. It holds a conflict. It remains the place where different languages, incompatible images, heterogeneous times continue to collide without being brought back under any higher order. The writing does not seek a synthesis. It accepts friction as its own condition of existence.

Leo Bersani²² would say that this refusal of synthesis is not a limitation but a radical choice. Writing at the height of the AIDS epidemic, Bersani had argued that the urgency to redeem sexuality, to bring it back within a reassuring story of identity and belonging, betrays precisely what is most disruptive within it: the possibility of a subject willing to be shaken, undone, without claiming to put itself back together. Wojnarowicz's page, which gives up every higher order, belongs to this same genealogy of refusal: it offers no consolation, only the honest record of what refuses to heal.

To read Wojnarowicz, in the end, is to experience a page that asks not for agreement but for willingness — willingness to remain within disquiet, to recognise that some fractures cannot be mended, and that it is precisely from that impossibility that a different form of truth is born.



Da sinistra a destra. Chantal Akerman, *News from Home*, 1977. Collections CINEMATEK © Chantal Akerman Foundation

IX. The Work That Continues

At this point, the diary appears very far from the definition traditionally associated with it. It is not the secluded seat of interiority, nor the simple repository of lived daily experience. It is a space in which times, bodies, images, places and languages continually enter into relation, transforming one another. Its matter is not identity. It is movement.

Perhaps the question from which we set out was imprecisely put.

It was not, in the end, a matter of understanding what a diary is.

It was a matter of understanding what a work can become when it gives up separating itself from the experience that generates it.

What does it mean, then, for a work never to separate itself from its own making? The aesthetic tradition has thought of the work as an *ergon*: a finished product, separable from the process that produced it. The diaries examined here bring it closer, instead, to an activity that exists only for as long as it is exercised — not a residue of the making but the making itself: which is why *Modern Nature* has, strictly speaking, no completion, only an interruption, one that coincided with Jarman's death. The question changes accordingly: no longer what a diary represents, but how it exists.

That foundation can be sought in at least five directions, each of which illuminates a different aspect of the same shift.

Maurice Blanchot²³ devoted decisive pages to the idea that the writer never properly knows whether a work is complete: what he calls *désœuvrement* — the work's unworking, its coming undone in the very moment it is made — is not an accident threatening writing from outside but its own law. The work, for Blanchot, never possesses the stability attributed to it: it continually withdraws from the book meant to contain it. The diaries examined here render this unworking visible with an almost disarming candour that theoretical literature does not allow itself: they do not try to hide the absence of completion, they expose incompleteness itself as a compositional principle.

Jean-Luc Nancy²⁴ helps clarify what happens, in this exposure, to the body and to the subject who writes. For Nancy the body is never an interior to be represented, but a surface always written from an outside: to exist means to be exposed, to touch, to enter into relation with other bodies, other voices, other writings, in an existence that is singular only because it is already plural. It is a description that fits precisely the Guibert who watches his own body change without ever possessing it, and the Wojnarowicz who refuses every boundary between the private sphere and public space: in both cases the page holds not an interiority but records an exposure.

Michel de Certeau²⁵ restores theoretical dignity to precisely those minimal gestures this essay has

repeatedly called elemental: observing, walking, waiting. In his analysis of everyday practices, de Certeau shows how the ordinary person, seemingly passive, in fact exercises a silent creativity made up of tactics that elude the imposed order: to walk through a city is already to rewrite it, to wrest it from the map that would have it legible from a single vantage point. It is a model that clarifies why the diaries of Jarman and Akerman, so focused on repeated gestures and rooms passed through, are in no way less significant than more overtly ambitious forms of writing: their ambition resides precisely in the details of everyday life.

Giorgio Agamben²⁶, with his notion of the gesture, adds one last clarification, useful for not mistaking this attention to the everyday for a mere inventory of actions. For Agamben the gesture is neither an action performed to reach an end nor an event to be communicated: it is pure mediality, a means that does not exhaust itself in the purpose it pursues. Planting a flower, crossing a room, filming a table laid for dinner: none of these gestures asks to be justified by some further end; each is worth only its own pure enactment.

Tim Ingold²⁷, finally, offers the image best suited to holding these different threads together. Distinguishing *wayfaring* — proceeding along a line generated by walking — from *transport* — movement between two already-given points — Ingold describes life itself as a line of growth, not a sequence of destinations. It is the image that best captures the compositional principle of these diaries: not a journey toward a destination, but a proceeding that generates its own form step by step, page by page, frame by frame.

Five different perspectives, then, but convergent ones: all of them shift attention from outcome to process, from representation to exposure, from completed action to suspended gesture. It is in this theoretical space that the hypothesis proposed here takes shape.

A stone moved by hand, at Dungeness. A strip of film slowly veiled by light. A voice New York traffic almost erases. A number that can be dialled only once. A camera bought two weeks after exile. A body bearing the marks of those who have crossed it. Six images. A single question, asked six times: what remains of a day, if no one tells it?

For a long time modernity thought of the work as an object capable of standing outside time. Even when it told of the present, it aspired to a stable, recognisable form, meant to last beyond the circumstances of its own birth. The diary seemed to belong to the opposite extreme: provisional, incomplete, exposed to the contingencies of daily living.

This very opposition is what the artists discussed in these pages progressively render unusable.

Their works do not try to defeat time. They take on its rhythm. They accept that every form remains open to the transformations that made it possible. Duration no longer represents a limit to be overcome but the very matter of creation.

In this light, the meaning of incompleteness changes too.

What appeared to tradition as a flaw — the fragment, the note, the jotting, the recording, the obsessive return of an image, the persistence of a gesture — becomes the place where the work shows its readiness to continue. There is no conclusion able to arrest its movement for good. Every form remains permeable to the time still to come.

Seen this way, the diary is no exception: it makes visible a process running through many of the most radical artistic practices of recent decades — not the abolition of the work, as has often been claimed, but its gradual transformation from a bounded object into a practice able to extend its effects beyond the limits within which it has provisionally made itself visible. It is not born at the end of the labour but accompanies it as it happens; thought does not step in after experience but grows within it; creation does not interrupt living in order to turn it into representation, but continues to inhabit its own movement.

This is perhaps why the diary continues to exert a force as discreet as it is persistent.

It promises no revelations.

It does not claim to deliver a final truth.

It reminds us, rather, that some works do not ask to be concluded. They ask to be moved through — as one moves through a garden, a city, a voice, an image, or any given day — knowing that every passage will alter them once again, and that it is precisely in this possibility of continuous transformation that their deepest form resides.

By editorial choice, the text is illustrated exclusively with images from Chantal Akerman's *News from Home* (1977).

Notes

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- 6) Anaïs Nin, *The Diary of Anaïs Nin*, 7 vols., New York, Harcourt Brace, 1966–1980.
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- 10) Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1994.
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- 12) Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
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- 19) Joe Brainard, *I Remember*, New York, Angel Hair Books, 1970.
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