A. WESTERLIN HATT, GREEN HAIR, DENTAL GOLD, PINK PANTHER, 2025
NINA KÖNNEMANN, WHAT'S NEW, 2015
RACHEL ASHTON, CROSSING THE BAR, 2024
STEVE BISHOP, STANDARD BALLAD, 2015

(4)

BETWEEN BEATEN PATHS AND DESIRE LINES

BY JOHANNA THORELL

What is a ceremony, stripped to the core of its function and form? Whether religious or secular, a ceremony typically consists of a set of formal acts performed in public to celebrate, commemorate, or otherwise mark a significant event. Often held on special occasions or during life transitions, ceremonies encompass everything from baptisms, weddings and funerals to grand inaugurations of sporting events and papal coronations. Rooted in ritual—repeated, stylized sequences of actions performed with intent—ceremonies are, at first glance, set apart from the daily routine. The four moving image works gathered in the film program *(C)eremony*, however, expand this definition by reflecting on the presence of the ceremonial and ritual in the everyday. What we encounter in these videos are, for the most part, not ceremonies in the traditional sense, but moments where ritual seeps into the mundane, where the ceremonial threads itself through the fabric of the quotidian.

Steve Bishop's *Standard Ballad* (2015) examines the production of emotion in a singular moment from the closing ceremony of the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow. The video revisits archival footage of the grand finale, in which a monumental inflatable version of Misha, the teddy bear-like Olympic mascot, enters the stadium carried by a dozen giant helium balloons. In contrast to the nationalistic spectacle and awe-inspiring displays of power that characterize more recent Olympic Games, this final scene is steeped in sentimentality, and the mascot appears oddly kitschy. A soft diplomatic gesture at the height of the Cold War. The spectacle's original soundtrack has been supplanted by a slowed-down rendition of a 2000s hit by American singer-songwriter Norah Jones. This acoustic manipulation gives the footage a strangely familiar, comforting, and almost generic quality of the emotional cues at play. Bishop juxtaposes close-ups of tear-streaked faces with sweeping shots of the stadium. A choreographed formation of hundreds of performers hold colored placards to form a giant image of Misha shedding a tear. These human pixels form a living ornament, wherein individual identities dissolve into a monumental collective gesture. The inflatable mascot bids farewell and drifts off into the night sky in what resembles a secular sacrifice. *Standard Ballad* posits the ceremony as a score for emotional reactions, blurring the line between authentic sentiment and manufactured affect.

In contrast, Nina Könnemann's *What's New* (2015) appears deliberately anti-ceremonial. The short video piece centers on an advertisement billboard in the streets of Berlin, an architectural feature of the urban landscape that grants visibility to its content while itself remaining so ubiquitous that it often passes unnoticed. Könnemann stages a double reflection of what happens behind the image and outside the frame. In the montage of brief, fragmented shots of a street-level billboard across different seasons and times of day, a curious motif emerges. Men of varying subcultural styles and social backgrounds appear in succession, slipping behind the billboards, caressing its orange frame, or suddenly reemerging onto the street. It resembles a kind of pilgrimage to a space just out of sight—though, more likely, they are seeking a place to urinate. At what point do these individual patterns of mundane necessity, through collective repetition, become ritual? The video attests to how people forge unofficial routes in public space, what urban planners call desire lines: paths that deviate from the prescribed ways of moving through the city. Könneman also attends to the relation between advertisement and its referent. The film footage covers the "real" spaces, commodities, and events that are on view on the billboard—a Caravaggio painting, the Museumsinsel in Berlin, a concert venue, an outdoor grill, a gas station, a supermarket reopening—as if to break the spell of the image. If *What's New* strikes as anti-ceremonial, it still implicates advertisement as a ritual form of capitalist society. These billboards generate not only new pedestrian rituals, but also scripted emotional responses, positioning consumption of goods as pathways to belonging.

A. Westerlin Hatt's *Green Hair, Dental Gold, Pink Panther* (2025) looks at another kind of social choreography, one rooted in codified behaviors and scripts around luxury and value production. The short video piece unfolds across three subsequent scenes: a sales training, a pawnbroker's office, and a robbery. In the first, a young man instructs the staff in a jewelry store on how to sell. "Think of it as sports," he says. Through the gamification of sales and the careful construction of the shopper's experience, the act of selling becomes a form of ritual labor that is rehearsed and governed by a script. The luxury lies not just in the product itself but is produced through this performance. The second part shifts to the quieter, more studious setting of the pawnbroker's office. A crescendo of strangely ceremonial music builds tension as the camera creeps in from behind, watching over the pawnbroker's shoulder as he carefully dismantles a set of gold teeth. Here, value is judged, disassembled, weighed. In the final scene, the musical score remains the same, but the visual grammar abruptly shifts. Surveillance footage monitors two cars sliding into a mall. Masked figures leap out and rush into a store with smooth, mechanical precision. They have played this game before. The robbery becomes its own ceremony of social transgression: masked actors, a strict sequence of movements, a premeditated logic. The ritual at play is less about reverence than about timing, precision, and repetition. Each scene—selling, appraising, stealing—follows a distinct script, unfolding through formalized gestures. They are not public ceremonies in the traditional

sense, but tightly choreographed acts that assign and redistribute value, rituals that maintain and disrupt the social order.

In Rachel Ashton's *Crossing the Bar* (2024), the observation of daily routine blends with scripted scenes. Set in the jazz bar Bassgeige, a longstanding institution in Braunschweig, the video captures the daily undertakings of the barkeeper and the regulars who arrive, drink, and converse in familiar cycles. Not unlike the objects that fill the bar's saturated interior, a myriad of small, habitual gestures accumulate into a shared ritual. The bar also serves as the stage for a "memory play"—a series of fictional dialogues between neurotic family members, in which Ashton herself stars as both narrator and character. Moving between the genres of documentary and fiction, the video interweaves two distinct modes of repetition: the playful reenactment of ingrained family dynamics and the near-scripted behaviors of the bar's regulars. Parallels emerge between the shaping of an institution through the ritualized habits of those who inhabit it, and the theatrical working-through of dysfunctional patterns—both gesturing toward moments in which the rituals we live by must not only be rehearsed, but can also be rewritten. *Crossing the Bar* hovers between pre-written acts and the writing of new ones, suggesting that even the most ingrained rituals can be performed differently. In doing so, it imagines social choreographies not as fixed, but as open to reinvention; not as spectacle, but as a form of transformative social drama.

(Fig.01) **A. Westerlin Hatt, *Green Hair, Dental Gold, Pink Panther,* 2025** 05:43 min

(Fig.02) **Nina Könnemann, *What's New,* 2015** color, silent, single channel, HD (1:1,46), 3:40 min

(Fig.03) **Rachel Ashton, *Crossing the Bar*, 2024** Digital 4K, HD, 20:00 min

(Fig.04) **Steve Bishop, Standard Ballad, 2015** Single channel video with sound, 5:10 min

TRAPPING RULES
BY LUCIE PIA

A party is always "staged" – and yet it can only really work if that very fact is ignored.

There was a time in my life when I couldn't go to a party anymore without feeling completely ridiculous – I felt caught in a ritual, a kind of game, one whose rules I knew, especially the rule of "letting go." But that's precisely what felt so forced and artificial to me. All these formalized rules and codes which deliberately ensure that the party – like a ceremony – takes place separate from everyday life, felt like a kind of self-deception. Not wanting to give in to this stifling feeling, I went out even more often and stayed out even longer, hoping that somehow, it might return – that state of self-forgetfulness, the "authentic" experience of letting go. I was driven by the idea that I could only overcome this fear by exposing myself to the situation again and again until eventually the moment of release would arrive. Of course, that didn't happen.

Later I read Lacan's sardine can story and his seminar on *The Split between the Eye and Gaze*, and the theory of the scopic drive that follows from it – and finally, I felt I had found a description for this feeling of being caught under an external (almost divine) bodiless gaze, which would literally paralyze me in these party situations. (Even if that still wasn't an answer to the question of the cause for me.)

Around the same time, I saw Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* at the Filmmuseum in Vienna, and I believed I was seeing aspects of that same experience / effect being reflected through cinematographic means. The 1995 sci-fi movie is set in the future, around the turn of the millennium – the final scenes take place on New Year's Eve 1999. One of the main characters, Lenny, becomes addicted – like many others – to SQUIDs, which are traded illegally like drugs. SQUIDs are short immersive video recordings of intimate scenes (often sexual or violent), shown from a point-of-view perspective (POV), and experienced via a head-mounted device that connects directly to the viewer's brain – enabling them to feel exactly what the original subject felt during the recording. From today's perspective, these SQUIDs could be seen as a kind of premonition of virtual reality (or, in a sense, as reminiscent of the addictive consumption of social media on smartphones/tablets, often done in the most private spaces, like the bed). But the crucial difference is that SQUIDs are not "virtual" – they provide direct and "real" access to a person's past experience. This experience is transferred to the cinema audience as well – once a SQUID sequence is shown, you fall under the spell of the scopic drive. Prior to the SQUID activation, identification with the character on screen is already in place through mirroring (*suture*) and shot/reverse-shot techniques but this identification is only intensified during the SQUID scenes to the point that you even adopt their scopic drive. The POV perspective transfers the gaze of another person onto your own, you lose control (of your own seeing), identifying completely with this external corporeal perception. The immersion is abruptly interrupted when the perspective changes and the protagonist using the SQUID appears on the screen from a regular perspective. This sudden cut back to the character now fully absorbed in their immersion creates such a rupture that you feel caught in the act yourself – under the gaze. You become a witness to their voyeurism – and therefore to your own.

In Nina Könnemann's *What's New?* (2015), private rituals unfold in public space without ever being directly shown – yet even in this less immersive format, the viewer is drawn into a silent, voyeuristic scenario through subtle identification with the camera's gaze. The video work has no sound and plays with the viewer's desire to peek behind a billboard – a spot where passersby ritualistically vanish from our view. This spot is shown in various frames, shot during different seasons. The camera's gaze from different frontal perspectives onto the billboard never fulfills this desire but instead maintains the viewer's anticipation. The camera remains more or less in the same place in each frame yet shifts slightly – like a silent observer keeping a safe distance from the object of interest. This observer – and thus we – are exposed the moment a passerby approaches and interacts with the camera. The observing gaze is also repeatedly interrupted by short sequences showing the actual products, events, or locations advertised on the billboard. In contrast to their elevated symbolic depiction in the advertisements, these products and places appear sobering in "reality," stripped of symbolism, while the hidden ritual behind the billboard becomes again and again the true object of desire, rendering the advertisement's visible surface secondary.

In A. Westerlin Hatt's three-part video work *Green Hair, Dental Gold, Pink Panther* (2025), the product – in this case a luxury item – also becomes secondary. Instead, various ceremonies surrounding this good come to the fore. The first part features footage from an instructional training video that teaches aspiring salespeople the ceremonial rituals of selling ("the sales game"), using customer greeting routines as an example. The second part, shot from a POV perspective, symbolizes the extraction of gold from gold teeth – here, the obsessive gaze of a goldsmith merges with the camera's view, creating a dizzying, embodied closeness to the golden object. This is intensified by an increasingly dramatic soundtrack that glitches slightly, transitioning into the third part which culminates in a pixelated video of a spectacular robbery shown rhythmically from fragmented surveillance camera perspectives. These real recordings

show a perfectly successful robbery according to all cinematic and ceremonial rules.

"In memory everything seems to happen to music," says Tom, the protagonist of the play *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams portrayed by an actress in Rachel Ashton's film *Crossing the Bar* (2024), set in the *Bassgeige* bar. While the camera remains distant, always generating an overview of the spatial setting, Ashton constructs a complex narrative through the overlaying of sound (background music and soundtrack) and the dual casting of characters who appear both as amateur actors in the staged play and as regulars in the bar. Ritual routines of the bar, along with its sediment-like layered interior, are documented by the camera, while simultaneously a play is rehearsed in the same space. The play deals with the sentimentality and subjective nature of memory – and the notion that memory can only ever be hazy and detached from reality, while Ashton's scenic shots of the *Bassgeige* evoke exactly these kinds of place-bound recollections. *Crossing* the bar leads me back to the ceremonies of nightlife – I remember while at parties I've often asked myself: *How can they all follow the rules while acting as if there were none?*

A similar question arose while I was watching Steve Bishop's *Standard Ballad* (2015): *How is it that such a staged mass spectacle can move so many people? (And why do I have to listen to a slowed-down version of Norah Jones singing "Ooooh ooooh oooh" while watching it?)* By combining a selection of historical footage of the1980 Moscow Summer Olympics closing ceremony with a contemporary standard ballad of Norah Jones, Bishop enhanced the cinematic elevation which seems to match the reality of this historic moment – according to reports, many viewers at the closing ceremony were truly moved to tears when the official Olympic mascot Misha floated away, carried by balloons. The footage edited by Bishop documents how a moment of harmony was ceremonially staged – despite the global political climate being anything but harmonious at the time.

This makes me think about the present moment and the rules of distraction at play – like the continuity of the Olympics or Eurovision Song Contest and other mass events supposedly generating harmony, at a time when a genocide and multiple wars are being live-streamed through our phones. Like in shooter games images of war are mostly conveyed from a POV perspective. Through identifying with the camera eye, we become direct witnesses to the horrors of the victims or atrocities committed by the attackers. These images not only lead to protest but are also misused as trophies. In language of warfare the term theater or theatre is used to describe an area in which important military events occur or are in process. In language of warfare the term theater or theatre is used to describe an area in which important military events occur or are in process. This metaphorical use of the term goes back to the early modern times and a regulated concept of combat. The term theater itself goes back to the Ancient Greek θέατρον *(théatron)*, "a place for viewing", which stems from θεάομαι *(theáomai)*, "to see", "to watch", "to observe".

LIST OF FIGURES

IMPRINT

FIRST PUBLISHED IN 2025
by Twentysix

EDITED BY
Twentysix (Robert Bergmann & Julian Ernst)

DESIGN BY
Max Schropp

PRINTED AND BOUND BY
REPLIKAT press

Many thanks to
Sofus Keiding-Agger, Emilie Forey, Robert Hodge, Michael Part, Nadim Vardag and to the participating artists and authors.