



Elise Schierbeek

## ***Doldrums: On the Uncanny Domestic***



*The Hunch that Caused the Winning Streak and Fought the Doldrums Mightily*, Stephanie Barber, 2010

Taking a cue from the evocative title of Stephanie Barber's *The Hunch that Caused the Winning Streak and Fought the Doldrums Mightily*, this program drifts through six works that rest on dread within the home and suburban domesticity. Through varying modes, each work deals with rupture of "the doldrums." Often, this takes the form of revealed contradictions—a haunting within the comfortable, an instability within the ordered.

"The doldrums" have a number of meanings and associations. Doldrums can mean: "a spell of listlessness or despondency" (think winter depression); or, originally in sailing and oceanography, "a part of the ocean near the equator abounding in calms, squalls, and light shifting winds" (think of a stuck ship); or, "a state or period of inactivity,

stagnation, or slump" (think of an economic downturn).<sup>1</sup> The doldrums are often associated with the boredom of the American suburbs, becoming the "suburban doldrums," which seems to cling to concepts like summer malaise and teenage boredom, often appearing in descriptions of alternative rock and music genres. With suburban doldrums, we can think about identical houses and yards, shopping malls, white conservative enclaves, and the ennui, isolation, and repetition that permeates them.

Dread in this program stems from a sense of the uncanny. The "uncanny" is notoriously difficult to casually define. It has become a frustrated signifier for the eerie, off-kilter, or spooky in likeness. Despite its peak in fashionability

in cultural theory of the 1990s, the word prevails to this day in art discourse, surely due to its open-ended metaphors.<sup>2</sup> The word was born out of psychiatry and psychology, and most firmly defined by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny." Etymologically, the word stems from the German "unheimlich," meaning unhomely or un-home-like.<sup>3</sup> The familiar, domestic, secure, or comfortable becomes frightening when it is simultaneously close to home and somewhere far from it. In psychoanalysis, this concept is useful for staging stories about things once repressed now surfacing. In this program, the uncanny presents itself over and over, triggering revelations at home and in suburbia.

<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary.

<sup>2</sup> Masschelein, 54.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



*The Hunch that Caused the Winning Streak and Fought the Doldrums Mightily*, Stephanie Barber, 2010

## Others' Homes

*"Woah, look at that." ... "Don't!"*

Stephanie Barber's *The Hunch that Caused the Winning Streak and Fought the Doldrums Mightily* (2010) is a quick, perplexing rove through a fabricated home. As expressed in the work's description, "the interior was delusional like any visual psyche."<sup>4</sup> Photos of Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian homes are recorded to appear as one interior while two narrators hesitantly investigate the space. They turn on television sets to watch a British marching band, inching across the space as Ethiopian music swells. Finally, they arrive at a Japanese musician seated on a sofa. The majority of the scene is composed of cut-and-pasted paper images sourced from books. This meshing of cultural signifiers into an eerie unity

<sup>4</sup> Description taken from Video Data Bank website.

brings the perspective of the American explorers into sharper relief. The viewer can think of received and mediated understandings of disparate global realities, hints of colonialism, and the clash of civil wars turned metaphorical as collage.

The video is undeniably spooky, largely due to the dominant sound of a percussive film projector and the tension of the narration as the explorers breach the (mostly) empty home. The narrators seem to exist as close friends, though at the start they resemble analyst and analysand, musing absurdly on an influential experience with orange juice. The two enter the home as if drifting into a shared psyche, apprehensive yet eager; "Should we go in?" "Should we turn the other television on, also?" *"Woah, look at that." ... "Don't!"* Nervous excitement compounds in the act of watching televised events and in the title of the work presented at the start of the video. The title

suggests a fiction in which luck strikes and changes everything, precipitating a "winning streak."

When asked about dread in the video, Barber writes, "I agree, there is so much dread. I think there is dread in collapsing places and times ...dread and revelry. (Or the potential for revelry?) We are no longer horrified by collage and its multiverse implications."<sup>5</sup> While we may now sit comfortably with such an aesthetic paradigm, here its approximations of a domestic reality remain uncanny in their not-quite-rightness. Explored by those who do not belong but enter effortlessly, the home conjures ghostly impressions of otherness.

## Exterior Interiorities

*"What do you want me to do? What should I be doing?"*

Cam Archer's 2011 work *Their Houses* is both a poetic examination of the artist's suburban California neighborhood and a meditation on his stagnant creative life. Venturing around the home he has lived in for a decade, Archer forms observations, in equal measures profound and matter-of-fact, that deal with image capture, light and shadow, nature and existence, and the production of imagined narratives. He trains his Hi8 camera on street lights, animals, houses, and discarded objects. The public spaces of the neighborhood appear to be populated primarily by autonomous teenage boys, whose lives and attitudes bring the filmmaker rich lines

<sup>5</sup> Email exchange between Elise Schierbeek and Stephanie Barber, 2023.

of questioning and a sense of wonder in existence.

Archer's voiceover is a driving constant, yet an unstable thing. His written narration is voiced by actress Jena Malone, imbuing the video with a ghostly feminine affect and adding a layer of distance between Archer and his listeners. The narrator is familiar with and fond of all his surroundings at the same time that he is timidly curious. Stories unfold that might usually sound embellished, but vulnerable self-reflexive commentary fosters a bizarre trust as the voiceover weaves a subtle humor and addresses the viewer directly, intimately.

The doldrums show up in this work as collective and personal alienation—a listlessness. Imagining conversations with neighbors, the filmmaker posits, "the park is the center of our neighborhood. They would go on to tell me 'it's *our* destination, it gives us purpose, a well-rounded day.' I watch and I wait for these well-rounded days. Anything to keep me. Anything to keep myself from everything else." The filmmaker is preoccupied with moments in which the possessive singular becomes plural and emphasizes these shifts, noticing when knowledge and spaces become shared, even the shared light cast over two parked jet skis at dusk—"their sunset." Our destination. Our secret. Their raft. Their houses.

A layered portrait of disaffected boyhood quickly emerges: drum practice, a bike jump, drugs in a parked car, pushup counts, a piñata kicked around in the street. Boredom rests in a refrain echoed by numerous



*Their Houses*, Cam Archer, 2011

boys arrested by the camera's gaze: "What do you want me to do? What should I be doing?" Existential offerings come from one boy in particular, the smoking and brooding too-cool 'Pretender' as the filmmaker names him. "Don't you just hate being disappointed?," "I don't know how to have a good time," "Did you know that we all have the same story?" Disappointment grows in the filmmaker's attempts to tacitly know the other, be it a fascinating vacant house down the street or the secrecies of brotherhoods.

The diaristic derive and its edit continually embody and fixate on the uncanny. Interspersed split-second shots crop up like repressed things: a boy's hand on a bus stanchion, a home movie frame of a boy poised to speak, a figure in costume accessories performing an anguished gesture. Using the format of home video, Archer reveals a deep alienation in all that is home to him. Slow

motion, voyeurism, and degraded footage turn the video haunted. What begins as a soft pondering of suburban life crescendos into a treatise on interconnectivity, shared experience, and the narratives of image capture.

### Un-homes

In *Trim Subdivisions* (1981), Bob Snyder engages with suburban uniformity through its architectural facades, situated strictly on the outside of Archer's interior-exterior divide. Snyder departs from his early work to take a nearly structuralist approach to footage of Indiana tract houses. Snyder uses Quantel digital editing and effects, cutting edge for their time. Uniquely omitting any soundtrack, Snyder provides the viewer with a dull camera hum and slow wipes from still image to still image of exterior suburban homes. The transitions are broken up by cascading punches in, warped and dizzying

combinations of shifting windows, siding, bricks and shutters.

Where the industrial regimentation of tract houses is rhythmic and discreetly zoned, so too are the artist's editing decisions within the technology that he works. From the work's description, "cubist re-constructions of the monotonous facades fracture spatial planes . . . Based upon the confining regularity of the architecture, the repetitive box-form serves as a metaphor for the regimentation of life in industrial societies, while the silence suggests tension and aridity rather than serenity. The rhythm of the wipes that unfurl from the borders is emphasized by the eerie stillness."<sup>6</sup> The silent tension turns the houses unsettling, homes un-homely. Despite its obvious metaphor, the video remains unironic, hypnotizing us into a reimagined zone.

<sup>6</sup> Description taken from Video Data Bank website.



*Trim Subdivisions*, Bob Snyder, 1981

### Stillness

*"Why would we move?"*

In contrast to Snyder's cold examination of the suburbs, Frédéric Moffet's *Adresse Permanente* (2014) is an intimate meditation on the filmmaker's childhood home in suburban Montréal. Through presented ephemera, private domestic

shots, and discreetly captured slices of life, a son's comment on normalcy builds.

Despite an undeniable tenderness in perspective, a critical dread finds its way into the film. Not unlike the hum of Snyder's *Trim Subdivisions*, we are first carried along by the buzz of a lawnmower that unsettles idyllic birds and bees. The viewer



*Adresse Permanente*, Frédéric Moffet, 2014

is thrust into a POV, grass-level shot of the mower's methodical path of destruction. From there, we experience intimate domestic objects: a clothes line of identical white underwear, black and white family wedding photos, a tissue box on the toilet ledge, the bustle of chores and the trill of a landline.

Moffet lingers on these objects without giving us access to his parents directly. The anonymity adds to a sense of the home's interchangeable, bourgeois, and heteronormative position. It also produces a ghostliness. While this work is not as straightforwardly uncanny as the rest in this program (perhaps the least eerie), it does bring a gap into relief, that between the occupants' sense of peaceful home and their son's relative unease with a familiar space that once ostensibly brought him comfort as his childhood residence.

The filmmaker politely pokes around, but never quite prods, until a final question to his mother and a zoom out to a Google Earth snapshot of his parents' repeating subdivisions. Imbued with the filmmaker's subjectivity, the film stages a possible reckoning: "You never thought of moving?" Here, Moffet attempts to momentarily push new wind against the doldrums of "a stable life lived according to the rules of society."<sup>7</sup> On Street View, the couple is serendipitously captured, frozen in a relaxed afternoon porch conversation. Like the Google Earth images and expressed voiceover of *Their Houses*, "everything old, everything

important; it stays right here, ever so, still."

### Uncanny Domestic

*"This was how my life was always going to be."*

If this program deals with any explicit return of the repressed, it is within Cecilia Condit's 1992 *Suburbs of Eden*. Compared to the rest of Condit's oeuvre, this video is one of her more serious and at times difficult works. Yet the video still engages Condit's signature absurdism and mysticism. *Suburbs of Eden* is the story of a repressed housewife, mother, and career-woman developing her practice as a therapist while facing an endless, agitated guilt trip from her husband at home. All is told through interspersed Biblical signifiers—Eve's original sin and fall from grace in paradise.

Beneath its feminist text and plain allegory, Condit stages a dark confrontation. In the video's opening lines, the protagonist Ann comes to terms with something akin to what the affect theorist Lauren Berlant called a "relation of cruel optimism"—when something one desires is actually an obstacle to their flourishing.<sup>8</sup> Through sardonic sing-song and sorrowful voiceover, Ann grapples with the conflicts between her needs and those of others, as well as with contradictions within her own wants and needs. She faces the dread of suburban doldrums.

By puppeting a nuclear family through absurd gestures, Condit remarkably paints a domestic scene as familiar as it is alien, as real as it is ridiculous. Like coping mechanisms, brief moments of charm and levity sooth the viewer only to turn sinister in the next instant. A sexual embrace

<sup>8</sup> Berlant, 1.



*Suburbs of Eden*, Cecilia Condit, 1992

<sup>7</sup> Description taken from Video Data Bank website.

between loving husband and wife is narrated by a patient's description of a panic attack. Children's play with sandbox toys gets intercut with footage of dumpster trucks depositing heaps of trash. A father's laugh morphs into a cackle. Lipstick gets drawn out of the lines.

Haunting interactions make suburbia un-home-like; children fall into hysteria, domestic items tumble and break, husband and wife growl rabidly into each other's mouths. Condit presents the domestic as uncanny in order to force a second look at something we have been shown many times, the overfamiliar gut punch of banal sexism, to offer some catharsis and to feel again the things women grow so tired of feeling.



*Carol Anne is Dead*, Michael Robinson, 2008

## Performing Ghosts

"Can we go to Pizza Hut?"

Michael Robinson's *Carol Anne is Dead* (2008) is a 90s home movie reenactment of the family horror film *Poltergeist*. Including footage of the filmmaker at age ten, the video plays out as recalled lines in fits and starts, its family actors breaking character and erupting into punctuating giggles. Rawly shot and dimly lit, the video has the hallmark delight of a home movie and the startling improvisation of any good childhood performance act.

Family charades, play-acting, and home video are performative rituals that break up the monotony of domestic life, that fight the doldrums mightily. In *Carol Anne is Dead*, the family attempts to reproduce the eerie, switching back and

forth between their familial vernacular and the script of cultural iconography. In a weird layering, *Poltergeist* and *Carol Anne is Dead* each deal with the manifestation of strangeness in the home. Culture possesses the domestic space like a ghost from the TV set.

We are used to thinking of home movies as keepsakes or records of organically unfolding life, often in the context of a family history. Of course, these preserved memories are peppered with spontaneity and performances for the camera, but *Carol Anne is Dead* stands out in its rich scenario—the reenactment of a family movie and a horror film. Looking at an existential phenomenology of the uncanny in home movies, Vivian Sobchak identifies the uncanny first in the encroachment of the image-self into the self-image, causing alienation. This occurs when, for

example, a close family member creates a representation of another family member to be watched back later, as opposed to the (possibly less uncanny) production of a selfie or live video encounter with oneself.<sup>9</sup> An interesting layer of self-estrangement is introduced to this concept when the encountered self is engaged in the motions of a performed other (perhaps this is why some actors never watch their own films).

Robinson's family teeters in what Sobchak names the "ontologically uncanny" wherein characters break, soothing themselves with laughter to reconnect with their understood selves, their normal selves.<sup>10</sup> *Carol Anne is Dead* allows us to experience its suggested

<sup>9</sup> Sobchak, 207.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 214.



*Their Houses*, Cam Archer, 2011

relationality as a double uncanny—performed selves and performed others in front of the video camera. Robinson's family is at once approximating itself and a cultural mimesis of the white middle class family. Sobchak writes, "Certainly any film (or video)—by virtue of its function as medium—offers us an experience of precisely this unstable reversibility and oscillation of presence and absence, concealment and unconcealment, hiddenness and appearance. However, the home movie makes this instability not only its form but also its content. It thus progressively provokes . . . the uncanny fundament not only of home movies, but also of human being."<sup>11</sup> In a feedback loop, *Poltergeist* haunts the family, the family haunts the film, and through the mode of home moviemaking the family haunts itself.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

## Conclusion

Video's uncanniness maps itself easily onto the American suburbs for cinematic-cultural and historical-material reasons. Analog video, as a middle class consumer format, was mass-marketed in the mid 80s, all on the heels of the suburbs' material boom.<sup>12</sup> Around the same time, the suburban horror film (building off the suburban gothic film subgenre) began to gain popularity, orbiting themes of a sinister underbelly and violent rupture made all the more unnerving in spaces of comfort.<sup>13</sup> This program enters this conversation in order to offer a more subtle and critical consideration of the uncanny domestic than is manifested in horror films about suburbia.

<sup>12</sup> Moran, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Murphy, 136.

The proliferation of video at home is itself uncanny as home videos, as explored by Archer and Robinson. The ability to record hours and hours of footage shifted a paradigm, bringing home moviemakers closer to approximating real-time, and therefore life itself. This close linkage between life and recording, paired with particularly ghostly qualities of the analog video image, allows for the tension of the uncanny to further surface in moving image at the level of medium. The real is one step removed, familiar made unfamiliar. From a contemporary perspective, the image quality of analog video in particular may fail to approximate life, as realism has become dependent on higher native resolutions. Analog video and its playback mechanisms carry with them imperfect edges, saturated colors, and image artifacts that aesthetically remind viewers of a gap between recording and reality. In this ambiguity, perceptual anxiety can flourish. Much like memory, video is an aberrational capture, and it degrades with each revisitation. On its path to becoming unrecognizable, we encounter the recognizable, which persists in it uncannily along the way.

In his recent writing on Artificial Intelligence, Franco "Bifo" Berardi invokes the uncanny, pointing out its earliest origins in psychology as outlined in the introduction to this essay. Informing Freud's uncanny, Ernst Jentsch first wrote about the *unheimlich* in terms of a perceptual anxiety in attempting to distinguish between a human and an automaton.<sup>14</sup> Approximation,

<sup>14</sup> Berardi, para. 6.

imitation, and automatisms tend to disturb. In this program, the works act out this same anxious ambiguity in likenesses, as well as unconsciously reproduced patterns. Barber's "delusional interior" unsettles us with its Frankenstein-ed continuity, offering up a counterfeit impression of foreign domesticities. Snyder's exteriors reveal themselves to be less home and more house, replicating on and on. Moffet's parents go through the motions of suburbia, while Archer's neighborhood boys wonder what motions they *should* be going through. Meanwhile, Condit's unhappy family short circuits its own robotics, and Robinson's family strangely simulates their on-screen horror analogs. In the gaps that open up between home and un-home, we encounter exit routes to sail beyond the doldrums and into a place that both unsettles and illuminates.



*Trim Subdivisions*, Bob Snyder, 1981

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