

AURÉLIEN FROMENT  
9 INTERVALS

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What does sitting involve, and does it make any demands? Does it give rise to reflection? And if not, why not? As the average lifestyle becomes more and more sedentary, sitting - and more specifically, comfort - necessarily assumes a central significance. I write this text from a moderately comfortable office chair, and yet I do not really consider the ramifications of its effect on how I position myself, or the weird shapes it might twist my spine into, over time. Rather, it is a necessary evil: I will not refuse to work because the chair is insufficient, but instead struggle on *in spite of* its structural obstinance. We appear for the most part to unthinkingly accept objects, as they are. The end swallows up the means, and so bad or counter-productive design endures.

What, then, do we sit on? Chairs, couches, benches, stools, armchairs, beanbags, walls, tables, even the ground: in short, we sit anywhere we can. Aurélien Froment's filmic work *9 Intervals* seeks to reverse this lethargic propensity, and instead affirm the space and time of sitting as one of *reflective* occupation. Continuing from a body of video work that sought to insert itself in the space before feature films, in mainstream cinemas, the work at once queries and problematises the question of comfort and discomfort, and, by extension, action and passivity<sup>1</sup>. Froment unpacks these ideas using the humblest of resources: the chair.

The chair: a structure for sitting to which my body is shaped, either momentarily or for long periods of time. The chair does not, to any large extent, reflect the shape of my body, but remains steadfast in occupation. There might be a fixture to manoeuvre its frame from low to high, and there is always the possibility of cushions, but invariably it assumes the same form. Therefore, I must adapt to the chair, or move on. The chair, then, is a kind of didactic entity, though this might be of a positive or negative didacticism. The chair is a kind of unthought yoga, which is also featured in the work: it too exists as a stricture to adapt to, or live by, at least in a bodily sense.

Thus, the language of didacticism hangs heavy in *9 Intervals*. From the seventies educational style muzak and instructional manual texts, to the test-screen slides that frame the film, this didacticism is of an inoffensive breed; it goes unnoticed, much like the chair. This is didacticism of the everyday, inherited wisdom: the kind passed down from one generation to the next, unthinking and unthought. Priorities change, and with them new structures to live by.

The concept of design, for Froment, is crucial to the work. On a basic level, this applies to the line-up of chairs that feature in the work, held up one by one as explications of design throughout history. Desirable features shift and alter with time as expectations change. The multi-part wooden chair, bent by steam, becomes outmoded over time by the one-piece post-war fibreglass wonder: light as a feather, machine-hewn and easily transportable. On a more complex level, this concept of design has a deeper significance: design as something imposed on something else, a model by which success is established by merit of proximity to said design. The chair becomes a means of comfort when, and only when, its instructions are internalised and taken on board. In such a way, comfort is externalised, becoming not something of the chair, but something existing in the relation between 'it' and 'I'. Comfort exists in neither locus, but in the application of design, or structure, between these two points. Thus, design imparts an external set of rules to a given scenario: good design is not predicated on success in the real world, but rather on fidelity to the

parameters of the design.

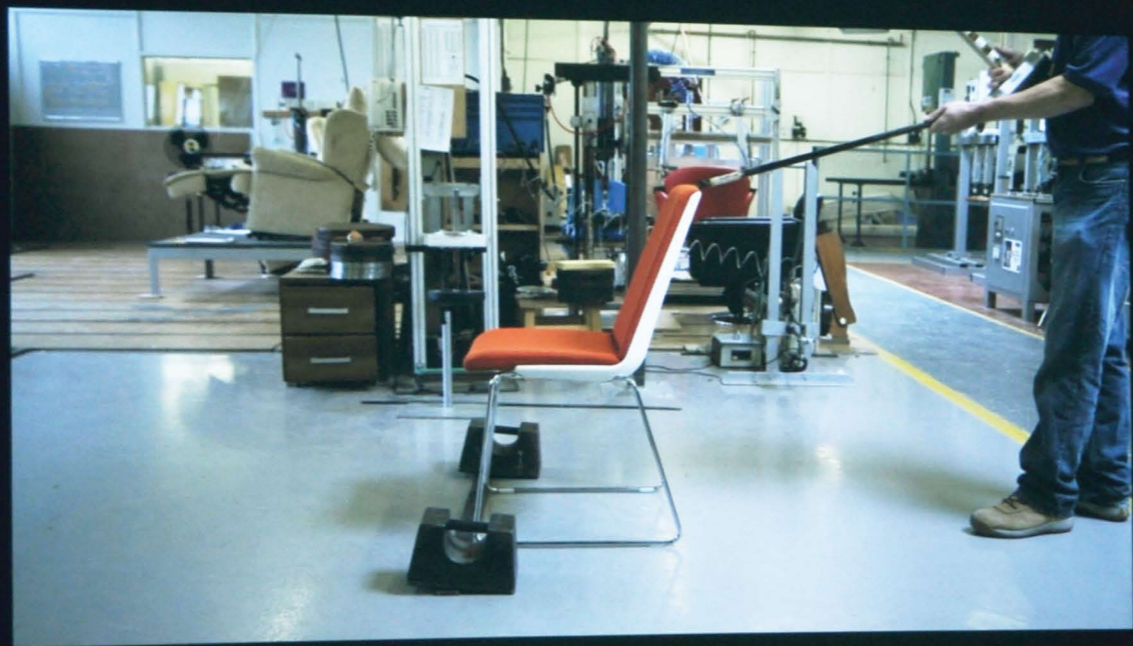
This expanded sense of design can be applied to any kind of structure that imposes a degree of artificiality on the relation between the person and the world in which they are enmeshed: acting as an impasse between true proximity, design here functions much akin to a buffer, inserting a mediating no-man's land between 'I' and 'world': thus, design is what links the chair and the practice of yoga, both featured in Froment's film. And although these mediating structures or incidences of design could be construed in either a positive or negative sense, in Froment's work they are treated without judgement as what they are: means of encountering and realigning oneself to the world. What might be negative is their acceptance in the absence of thought: through this, deleterious design-structures may come to accelerate and grow. The danger is that these - like that much-maligned-but-endured-everyday-chair - are accepted without the instrumentalisation of critical thought. Yoga, like sinking into those form-flattening cinema seats, becomes an immersive structure through which one abdicates control, and enters into a world of escapism.

Medium, too, might be construed as a breed of structure, or base-level design. In such a way, to approach the creation of the artwork *by means of* a particular medium is to enter into a pre-ordained structure over which the artist has little or no control. Designing a chair, like creating an artwork through paint, is to enter into a chain of development of that medium: it engages with its history in a very real way. To choose the medium is of course the subject's/artist's prerogative, but on making this decision a lineage is inherited - one that might be aligned towards or rebelled against - but a lineage that nonetheless factors in the decision-making process in a very tangible way. Therefore, on electing to inhabit the world of digital film, Froment inserts himself into a specific history and language, a structuring language that simultaneously curtails and permits artistic expression.

What then, might the structure of digital film impart to the artistic gesture? What presuppositions does it enact in the final product? It is clear that there is thoughtful consideration given to the medium chosen, and an awareness of the burden or expectations that that might carry. Digital video is naturally, and by its very nature, sympathetic to the surfaces of technological rendering: favouring the shiny, rigid and fabricated over the vacillating softness of human skin, for example<sup>2</sup>. Diverging from the natural tendencies of film, which appears to delight in the warmth and unpredictability of the human, digital video explicates an uncanny allegiance with its own: in it, faces are somewhat indistinct in contrast to razor-sharp representation of the artificial. Every medium, therefore, is accompanied by specific qualities that hang heavily on the final product: to resist these traits is to resist the medium itself.

Considering medium as one instance of design - more generally speaking, an externalised structure that imparts a certain enforced rigidity to a given situation - *9 Intervals* is a wholly self-reflexive affair, buckling back on itself towards some invisible remainder. What, it seems to playfully ask, would it be like to operate without some structuring entity in the frame, be that the chair, yoga or even medium itself? What would it be like to live in the absence of any external imposition, or history? Of course, this is an idealistic absurdity: life is predicated on design, and







structure: the contours of the human body, for example, which both permits life, and necessitates death. Design is not some superficial strata to be opted in or out of: it is a fact of life, right down to the metabolic level.

Towards the start of the film, the narrator reads aloud the words:

*We have all been here before. By the time we are eighteen years old, say the statisticians, we have been here five hundred times.*

*No, not in this very room, but in this generic darkness, the only place left in our culture intended entirely for concentrated exercise of one, or at most two, of our senses.*

*We are, shall we say, comfortably seated. We may remove our shoes, if that will help us to remove our bodies.*

The quote is Hollis Frampton's<sup>3</sup>, and it has a resonance that pervades the entire work. In the space before the film screen there is an abdication of control, which is enabled by the at once soothing and limiting mediumistic tendency. Though the content might vary wildly, the form will always remain the same, dictated by that 'few square yards of featureless white screen in the shape of a carefully standardized rectangle, three units high by four units wide'<sup>4</sup>. This is the dichotomy of medium, at once a positive and negative force: whether in a mainstream cinema, or indeed an art gallery, that projected plane of light allays a certain degree of discomfort with regard to *what* is going to happen. Regardless of content, it will always be bound to the formal necessity of medium: in such a way, we remain "comfortably seated".

This brings me, in a roundabout way, back to the figure of the chair. What Froment posits is that medium is at once a comforting (comfortable) and disquieting affair: through it, we accede to an external givenness. Thinking about chairs, and sitting, what are they if not vehicles for the attempt to rid oneself of the body, to be less aware of its aches and strains? So too, with yoga: in Froment's work all are aligned with the question of medium itself, a system or design for coping with the world in all its complexities. The truth is, these designs are necessary. The attempt to extricate oneself out of systems and structures over which one has no control is but a naïve illusion.

Consider language: every entry into its structures imposes an innate slippage of meaning; we never mean what we say, or say what we mean. Sign and signifier are not natural bedfellows, but arbitrarily drawn. In such a way, what we term communication is founded on an impasse, structurally inbuilt: it naturally fails. But what is the alternative to inserting oneself into its both enabling and revoking structures? Silence, you might say. We might, like Pyrrho, leave no mark that might be construed as a map, and assume a steadfast skeptical position. Feeling this unsatisfactory, the alternative to silence is, and must be, to insert oneself into language, with all the compromises that entails. As a writer, the unintelligible text cannot be perceived as a negation of language: as long as it operates by means of its structure, it must still be understood as component part. The only negation of language is bare and utter silence, leaving no trace.

To enter into any medium is just the same: to exit its parameters necessitates only silence.

Froment understands this conundrum, and accepts it in all its absurdity. The possibility of removing one's body, in the last instance, is bound by aporia: it is predicated on the dissolution of structures or designs that shape the world, and temper our apprehension of it. Medium, like the chair, is a didactic entity: it imbues sensation with a mediating externality over which we have no control. The question, then, is not how to repudiate structure or design, but to create exemplary examples of it. No one example can be perfect, every instance but a negotiation of good and bad. The challenge is to not get too comfortable: to keep testing the limits of givenness, be that of those givens dictated by medium, or even, in a very literal sense, by the chair.

<sup>1</sup> *9 Intervals* was originally commissioned by the UK arts organisation Pavilion, with each interval or segment being shown before selected feature films in a Leeds cinema over the course of three months in 2011. By deliberately inserting itself into the space of the cinema, the work in its initial manifestation diverges substantially from the vocabulary of the gallery, instead entering directly into the space of the 'comfortably seated' viewer. Notions of passivity and awareness are central here. When reassembled as an installation work in a contemporary art gallery, arguably, the vocabulary and emphasis shifts: here, the viewer does not expect to be comfortable.

<sup>2</sup> This mediumistic tendency is reminiscent of what Stanley Cavell terms 'automatism'. This he describes as the inbuilt and unchanging nature of medium, over which the author/creator has no control. (Cited in Rosalind Krauss *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (2000) London: Thames & Hudson, pg. 1)

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the performance piece 'A Lecture', presented at Hunter College, New York, in 1968 (Cited in Hollis Frampton *Circles of Confusion: Film – Photography – Video Texts 1968-1980* (1983) New York: Visual Studies Workshop Press, pg. 193)

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 194: This denotes 16:9 in the instance of contemporary digital video

