

Monica McTighe

## *A Work Aesthetic: The Films of Kevin Jerome Everson*

**Source:** Video Data Bank's *Broad Daylight and Other Times: Selected Works of Kevin Jerome Everson*, 2011

Unscrewing the cap of a plastic soda bottle, a young Black cab driver takes a swig and listens to the dispatcher recite numbers and street names. Behind a glass window, a bureaucrat stamps forms and hands them back to waiting clients. In another sequence that is repeated again and again, a young mother grasps and kisses her baby girl when an older man places the child in her lap. These scenes depict routine activities in the lives of everyday working people—nothing to look at really. Why film them? In the context of the films of Kevin Jerome Everson, these quotidian activities reverberate across history, and across social and cultural boundaries. The films highlight these unremarkable activities so that they are seen against the background of the social, economic, and even weather systems that shape contemporary lives. Despite their simple and straightforward subject matter, these films always allude to the complex networks woven from histories, objects, and material, social, and economic relationships.

Born and raised in the working class and largely Black community of Mansfield, Ohio, Everson uses the circumstances and relationships in his life as the material for his films. These include not only the people and locations of Mansfield, but also his training and travels as an artist. Everson's respect for his subject matter is matched by the extraordinary formal qualities of his photographs and films. The photographs reveal his keen eye for poignant moments,

learned from street photographers such as Garry Winogrand. In his films these qualities have come to include not only beautifully composed images in simple black and white and rich colors but also complex filmic structures based on the repetition of the sounds and movements, the periods of tedious waiting and frantic activity that characterize a work day.

The films in this collection represent Everson's production during the last decade, which focuses on the routines, rituals, and games by which people cope with the circumstances of everyday life. In turn, the films demonstrate how racial, sexual, and economic relationships have real effects on the fortunes of individuals. The work puts on display Everson's range as a filmmaker with pieces that at times have a documentary style, or the qualities of fantastic realism, or the structure of simple parables. The films are often focused around simple gestures, well-practiced movements of the hands that an individual develops in their line of work. The films never dramatize these movements. Instead, Everson composes these scenes in such a way that we come to pay careful attention to the way that people move or speak in everyday life and come to appreciate it. His attitude seems to be that nothing needs to be added to these moments but a frame.

### I. A Work Ethic

In *Sportello Quattro* (2002), a young African man at his job as a clerk in Rome stamps individuals' papers and hands them underneath protective glass to waiting clients. The camera focuses as the man grips the wooden and rubber implement and slams it down again and again to leave small round red marks on sheets of paper. This little rubber stamp, along with the stool in *72* (2002), and various other objects, are handmade by the artist and they often show up in Everson's early work. They are little pieces of art that are hidden among the every day objects that feature in his films.

As objects manipulated by the characters in the performance of their work, they act as catalysts for the actions and gestures that interest the filmmaker. Everson's interest in these objects and gestures recalls a section of Jean Baudrillard's book *The System of Objects* where Baudrillard describes how certain tools and objects have developed to fit to human hands over centuries, and in their form show the relationship between the human body and the work it performs. "Man's profound gestural relationship to objects, which epitomizes his integration into the world, into social structures, can be a highly fulfilling one, and this fulfillment is discernible in the beauty, the 'style', of the relationship in its reciprocity."<sup>1</sup> Everson's

<sup>1</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*. Trans. by James Benedict. 1996 (London: Verso, 1968), p. 48.



72, 2002

films express a regard for useful objects and the ways people use them. These objects act as props in the film, then stand alongside the film as individual sculptures and connect the work of his characters to other histories, cultures, and practices.

The interest in repeated gestures in Everson's films bears comparison to the artworks of the late 1960s grouped under the rubric "process art"—for instance, Richard Serra's splashed lead pieces. Serra's work is also characterized by the accumulation of simple gestures in materials that map a length of time.<sup>2</sup> Serra made this clear in *Tearing Lead from 1:00 to 1:47* (1968). Serra's film *Hand Catching Lead* represents another accumulation of repeated gestures. He filmed a hand attempting to grab a falling piece of lead over the course of 2½ minutes. As Rosalind Krauss points out, the film is a complex of repeated units: the gesture of the hand, the pieces of lead, the frames of film, and equally, the 150 seconds of which the film is composed. The characters in Everson's films mark time, but they do so by punching their time cards in time clocks, eating their lunch at a set time, or waiting for the next job. It is the waiting that we experience as film viewers as the camera focuses on the bored faces of Everson's protagonists as they wait for the work to begin again. Although Robert

Pincus–Witten described process art as a reaction to the cold factory–made austerity of minimal art, the repeated gestures that characterize this work do not point to the hand of the skilled artist or craftsman. The simplicity of the gestures involved in these pieces connect this work to the interest in industrial production that characterized art in the 1960s. This was part of an effort to avoid the preciousness of fine art sold in the traditional gallery. But the work of the 1960s never actually gets there. This is work made by artists, not everyday workers. The gestures are abstracted and the work is non–functional.

Everson, by contrast, presents us everyday work by everyday workers without aestheticizing or romanticizing it. As evidence of this, consider that the straightforward and truthful quality of these films often convinces people that they are documentaries. The work ethic that is featured in the films reflects Everson's own practice as an artist and reflects an interest in the connection between art making and any other kind of job. In Everson's films these simple objects become the loci of different sorts of connections. For instance, the rubber stamp connects the simple act of stamping papers to the mark making of the painter or print–maker. Halfway through the film *72*, the young cab driver sits on a short stool and reaches with a tool into the wheel–well of a taxicab. The skilled manipulation of a wrench refers to the history of sculpture.

Through these objects, Everson also makes subtle references to other histories that may not be associated with the work of everyday life. If you look closely at the stool the taxi mechanic sits on, you realize that the stool resembles those made in Africa and often used by royalty. Everson made the stool as a prop for a taxicab mechanic but it also references a longer cultural history hidden within the scene. In this small insertion, Everson connects the young man to his African heritage but he also upsets the hierarchies of working class and upper class implicit in the juxtaposition. A young, working class Black man is seated on a throne as he does his work.

## II. Art Work

Everson has gradually moved away from producing sculptural objects for use in his films. Instead, readymade objects and tools have become the means to link the activities of ordinary working people to the more celebrated events and actions of individuals in the realms of history, art, and politics. For instance, *Twenty Minutes* (2005) is a film that takes place in an overgrown yard where a man is working on a car. The old car has its engine exposed like the innards of a surgery patient. And in Everson's treatment of the color film, the hoses and pipes of the engine and the weeds in the wet yard take on the jewel–like colors of an old master painting.

The comparison is not an idle one, we discover. The mechanic, with practiced

<sup>2</sup> Richard Armstrong and Richard Marshall, *The New Sculpture 1965–1975: Between Geometry and Gesture* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1990), p. 28.



*Company Line*, 2009

hands, sets up a wooden frame and pulley. He attaches the chains to the engine and uses the pulley by himself to lift the greasy engine from the car's body. Using a split screen, the filmmaker connects this maneuver with an animated machine that is recognizable as a machine design worked out in one of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century drawings of Michelangelo. Once the engine is out of the car, the film is over. In this way, Everson connects the uncelebrated work of a contemporary Black mechanic with the work of the celebrated white Renaissance painter, anatomist, and engineer. The comparison presents a kind of genial politics that seeks to uncover the hidden "noble" origins of "degraded" objects and activities.

### III. Hidden Histories

Highlighting neglected histories seems to be one of the objectives in Everson's films but they always eschew a traditional narrative or documentary style. In *Fifeville*, (2005), Everson, a professor of fine arts at the University of Virginia, in collaboration with Dr. Corey D. B. Walker, uses the format of a film about making a documentary film to piece together the history of a traditionally Black neighborhood in Charlottesville, Virginia. In the film, we as viewers are in on each of the shots, watching as the clapperboard is clicked shut before the faces of various residents of Fifeville. As individuals talk about changes to the neighborhood, we get a sense of how the community developed and prospered as

a Black neighborhood with Black-owned businesses during segregation, and then gradually declined as drugs and crime took over. Now the University of Virginia is buying up land in the area.

We see Everson's students and Dr. Walker helping set up the shots in which members of the community express either regret over the loss of community or enthusiasm about the changes. In revealing the tools of filmmaking—clapperboards, multiple takes, interviewers and crew visible in the shots—Everson uses the medium of film to draw our attention as viewers to the fragmented process of putting together a history through the viewpoint of individuals in the present. As we watch the film being made, *Fifeville* becomes a meditation on both understanding history and on documentary making. The film does the work of revealing that documentary filmmaking has in it a great deal of artifice, from placing individuals in certain locations to speak, to taking several takes of one scene. The historical and personal anecdotes are framed by the apparatus of filmmaking and revealed to be as partial and fragmentary as the film itself.

In a more recent film *Company Line* (2009), the viewer gets only glimpses of a history that seems to have been all but forgotten, and must piece together this history out of the clues that the film provides. Filmed in saturated colors, public works employees tell about their work histories, and in the process sketch out the disappearance of

a Black neighborhood in Mansfield, Ohio. Called repeatedly to plow the streets of Wise, Rommel, and Reformatory Road, the snow plow operators each head out to plow an empty road in open country.

The film is made of carefully composed short scenes in which the camera is usually fixed and focused on a single thing: a snowplow swishes through socked-in streets; framed by a car window, a man lowers himself from a truck into mounds of road salt; a truck moves slowly down an empty country road. Enigmatic scenes of a young man pouring ice-blue wiper fluid down his windshield to clear it and a young woman stepping backward into footprints in the snow to the sounds of the Chantels are repeated in the beginning, the middle, and the end.

Still photographs, in turn, punctuate these short scenes—old black and white identity photographs composed in a standard head and shoulders format with each employee standing a certain distance from the camera measured by a focusing board. The employee numbers are written in blue ballpoint pen on each black and white image. These are contrasted to color snapshots of the same families of those employees all of whom used to live in the Company Line.

Everson organizes the film according to the rhythm of these numbers: vehicle numbers, employee numbers, and years of service. "948 please report to Wise, Rommel and Reformatory Road." "I have 16 years with



the city." "I came to Mansfield Joo—leye the 4<sup>th</sup> 1975." These are the numbers of the greatest significance to the employees at the department of public works. And as the numbers and years are relayed, we learn that an entire thriving Black neighborhood in Mansfield was bought up and plowed under, leaving open fields.

#### IV. Numbers

Artists of the 1960s and 1970s who were interested in Conceptual art also used numbers systems as ways of organizing their films. Bruce Nauman used the length of a videotape to determine the length of his filmed performances. The Fluxus artists made films structured by the number of frames in a second of film, and so on. These number systems were artificial devices that were incorporated into the artists' works. In Everson's films, the number systems come ready-made as things that shape the lives and fates of the characters in his films in the form of clock times, mortgage rates, lottery numbers, and pay scales.

*140 Over 90* (2008) is framed by a simple set of numbers. In it, Everson pins together two seemingly unrelated things: blood pressure measurement and coupon clipping. The numbers are presented simply as titles to the scenes of the men clipping coupons. The connection between the two is suggestive but unclear. Is it soothing for the old man to clip coupons? Or does the stress of poor financial circumstances lead

to his high blood pressure? And we can ask the same question of the coupon-clipping young man, as well. Is his activity a reference to how expensive fresh, healthy food is? Is he really clipping coupons? In bringing together these numbers and images that have no clear connection, Everson causes us to consider each more carefully—a line of inquiry that leads to a network of conditions between economics and health that we might not have considered before. The film asks us to search for the connections among seemingly unrelated conditions.

The film *Cinnamon* (2006) also begins with a list of numbers: a still shot of a receipt with numbers that records the time it took a racecar to barrel down a slick oily racetrack. *Cinnamon* is the opus in this collection of films and exemplifies Everson's skill in composing a film. This feature-length film tells the story of a young bank teller who spends her days reviewing the numbers on loan applications and negotiating mortgage rates for her customers, but who transforms into a racecar driver on the weekends. In the film, Erin's careful attitude to her bank work translates to her attempts to improve her reflexes on the racetrack. Under the tutelage of an older Black mechanic and racer, Erin learns how to improve her skills as a driver. As the film unfolds, it reveals to the viewer what it's like to be a Black racecar driver and to compete on equal terms in a sport dominated by white people.



*Cinnamon*, 2006

The film is a study in contrasts in which the daily rituals of the bank and racetrack play out like a carefully choreographed classical dance. These daily rituals are conveyed to the viewer both in terms of sounds, sights, and movements. Everson contrasts the quiet of the bank where high heels click on linoleum floors to the tense and raucous atmosphere of the racetrack where car wheels scream on hot tar surfaces and engines throb and roar. The visual composition of the film follows suit. The dull earth tones of the suits and furniture in the bank scenes fade against the electric blues and vivid reds of racecars and jumpsuits.

Preparations for a race are characterized by the repetition of certain maneuvers that are shown again and again in the film. Blue liquid is fed into the car engine. The driver waits for her mechanic to finish prepping the car. They gauge the weather and temperature. The driver practices reflexive movements with her coach, "1, 2, 3! 1, 2, 3!" The car is drawn up to the starting line and the tree lights go from yellow to red to green and the car springs down the track. And then the driver collects her receipt giving the results. It all depends on the numbers on the paper. And despite all the preparations, it depends on luck, everyone says. The careful preparations begin to look not so much like calculations as rituals to entice good fortune.

*Aquarius*, 2003*The Picnic*, 2007

Fortune, good and bad, is an important theme in Everson's films. Numbers games, lotteries, and horoscope messages turn up frequently. Everson's stories are shaped by good and bad luck. A young woman named Vanessa is in the wrong place at the wrong time, and is shot and killed by a violent boyfriend. Another woman in *Something Else* (2007) believes herself fortunate enough to win a beauty contest. In *Aquarius* (2003), which is shot in a beautiful sepia tone, a young child treads water while horoscope-like lines of advice float in the sky above him. In another, a hard-working family man plays daily numbers. These interludes in Everson's films are a reminder that despite consistent hard work and good intentions, it's difficult to beat the odds, especially if you're Black. Sometimes you need more than a little luck. Discerning patterns in random phenomena, hedging your bets, and playing it safe all become the means for obtaining an edge within a system that is inherently biased.

#### V. Boxers, Dancers, and Beauties

In his more recent work, Everson has been using found footage. This entails looking through boxes of archival footage from television stations, private collections and other sources. When he finds a batch of film that seems promising, he looks through it for images of people of African descent. The found film work uncovers for the viewer these artifacts of every day life that have been forgotten and discarded over time.

The pieces of footage that are chosen are often ironic, disturbing, or revealing of what it was like to be a Black person in the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. As with the hand-made props and the use of gesture in his earlier films, these bits of archival footage become the found objects at the centers of complex webs of relationships, lives, and histories.

In this collection, Everson includes several films of found footage about the pleasures and dangers of being Black, young, beautiful, and strong. In *Something Else*, a white news reporter interviews Miss Black Roanoke 1971. He asks her if she liked the idea of a segregated pageant. She gives him a beautiful smile and says that she's sorry to say it but a Black woman wouldn't have much of a chance in the "regular" pageant. The reply is remarkably gentle even as it reveals the speaker's bitter frustration at the injustice.

A few of these films examine what it is like to be a young Black man in this culture—to be admired, objectified, and feared. *Ring* (2008) consists of found silent footage of young Black men practicing boxing. As in Everson's other found footage films, there is an awareness of the quality of images and the grain of the film. The beautiful young men's bodies become moving works of art as they are lit by the film crew and move in balletic motion. Like his fellow filmmaker Steve McQueen's work, Everson's film speaks to the eroticization (but also the fear

of) the powerful Black male athlete's body in the context of spectator sports. In this film, the boxers' bodies become dancers'.

*Second and Lee* (2008) explores the way such admiration of Black men turns to fear and suspicion in other circumstances. As an old man, giggling, tells the story of youthful mischief, involving a car and a trip to Baltimore, footage is shown of young handcuffed Black men being pushed along through a courthouse. The old man's delight at speaking about his youthful indiscretion then turns serious. As we watch policemen with rifles and riot gear push a handcuffed Black man in front of them, the old man explains that a split-second decision not to run saved his brother from being shot—for stealing gasoline. "Second and Lee," the man keeps repeating in his story—as if that is the detail he needs to get right.

*The Picnic* (2007), by contrast, is a silent film about the pleasures of the body. It is an erotic film of the 1970s featuring a young Black couple that enjoy a summer picnic. They play in the sun, feed each other strawberries, and kiss while lying naked on their picnic blanket—recalling, the viewer realizes with some surprise, Manet's famous painting *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or a Renaissance *fête champêtre* painting. In Everson's hands the found film has turned from pornography into a venerable and universal theme about sensual delight that recalls important works from the history of Western painting.



Blind Huber, 2005

These bits of film have a historical and political significance that points beyond the film in which they are featured. They become both very specific in terms of the history that they relate, but also iconic in terms of the way they articulate the experience of individuals of African descent in the United States.

## VI. Webs and Networks

Everson uses creatures such as butterflies, bees, and wasps as metaphors in his films. They feature the themes of migration, adaptation, and even extinction. The films are populated by individuals who move around with the seasons, who migrate for their work, or who change to adapt to the harsh conditions of an Ohio winter or a bad economy. The *Spicebush* butterfly, the emblem of one film, ranges from the American South to the North, surviving by adapting to a variety of habitats. The butterfly's hardiness parallels that of the characters' in Everson's films who are often Black folks who moved up North after World War II and continue to migrate between North and South for work. The men featured in *Company Line* talk about how often they have moved between Ohio and the southern states. In *Sportello Quattro* too, the principal is an immigrant from Africa who is living in Italy, calling home to Africa from the neighborhood phone bank. These are the individuals who are forced to move by circumstance and are hardy enough to adapt to strange climates.

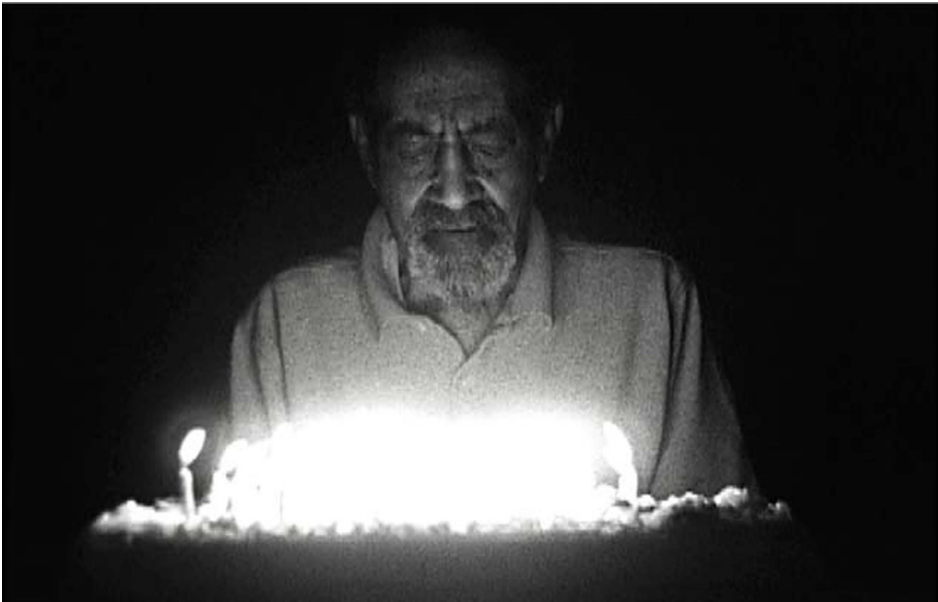
Like his characters and his emblematic insects, Everson's films move. The locations swing between North and South, East and West following the highways and routes of the artist's own work. For instance, *Nectar* (2007) is a metaphor for the pleasure the photographer and cinematographer take in the effects of light. Made in collaboration with his fellow photographer William Wylie, who also teaches at the University of Virginia, *Nectar* is a simple film showing *Pandorus Sphinx* moths and other insects clinging to an illuminated white sheet in the humid Virginia night air. The moths have been drawn irresistibly to the light and beat their wings in anticipation while the crickets sing around them. The moths become the eager photogenic models in a film about the bewitching effects of light. In *Blind Huber* (2005), another collaborative film, the honeybees of Southern Virginia become the musicians who provide the music for the words of a poem by Nick Flynn. The bees are another symbol of the poetic work aesthetic put forth in Everson's films.

The Trichogramma wasp on the other hand, is a foreigner imported to the United States to help agriculture. The insect symbolizes the history of the people of African descent working in America from the Colonial era to the present in a simple image. It is also the logo for Everson's film company and perhaps represents the filmmaker's relationship to the field of contemporary art practice as well.

## VII. A Work Aesthetic: "Gotta Make That Art"

Like their waspish logo, these films present a kind of politics that has to do not so much with political activism but with observation. The politics consists in continually drawing our attention to the complexity of the relationships, decisions and actions that have real effects on people's lives. The films themselves also demonstrate great respect for the care that ordinary individuals put into their daily work. And they do so with good humor and a sense of irony. The films' careful attention to materials, situations, and the way that individuals present themselves suggest clear-eyed and intelligent ways of engaging with the world. The quality of the films in this collection is the result of Everson's dedication to his art and his own strict daily work ethic. Everson is famous for yelling at dilatory art students to "Make art!" His way of making art results in films with a straightforward aesthetic that is true to his subject matter and the materials of filmmaking. But these films also glory in the possibilities of formal elegance.

*Ninety-Three* (2008) perhaps best captures the quality of Everson's work and working style. With a mischievous wink, so to speak, the work distills an entire life story, even an entire cultural history, in a simple film. In this 3-minute black and white film, played back in slow motion, an elderly African-American man engages in the ritual of blowing out the candles on his blazing birthday cake.



*Ninety-Three*, 2008

The light of the candles seems to melt the darkness of the room. With a great effort he inhales and blows out the candles—only to watch them reignite immediately—an effect accomplished through film editing. Undeterred, he blows again, and again, and again, until, finally, all the candles are blown out, the room goes dark, and the film ends.

**Monica McTighe** is an Assistant Professor of art history at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts where she specializes in art since 1960. Her research focuses on the history of site-specific art and installation. She has written on the work of Renée Green, Tony Cokes, and Ann Hamilton, and she is currently finishing a book on the use of photography, film, and video in installation art.



Video Data Bank

School of the Art  
Institute of Chicago  
112 S Michigan Ave  
Chicago, IL 60603

T 312.345.3550  
F 312.541.8073  
info@vdb.org  
[www.vdb.org](http://www.vdb.org)