

***Ordinary Affects* by Kathleen Stewart**

Reviewed by Kate Eichhorn

In *Ordinary Affects*, anthropologist Kathleen Stewart explores everyday life's "surging affects" (9) through a series of poetic fieldnotes. But this is not a book about knowing everyday subjects and objects, nor the spaces they inhabit but rather an enactment of the "intensity and texture" of the ordinary and the feelings it evokes. Stewart wisely rejects the discursive norms of her discipline – there are few citations and no diagrams. Appropriately, *Ordinary Affects* is a deeply vernacular text.

At times, there is a surprising beauty in the texture of Stewart's accounts of everyday "forms, flows, powers, pleasures, encounters, distractions, drudgery..." (29). More often, the texture is thread-bare and soiled. After reading the book, I am compelled to repeat her stories. Most of what I remember is ugly and abject, like the story about the handsome young man in the mechanic's uniform at the Walgreens who covers his mouth when he speaks – nothing can conceal his misshapen teeth. The image sticks because we share his embarrassment. But is it pity or repulsion we feel when Stewart tells us about the destitute handyman who sets out to cohabit with his ex girlfriend's paraplegic daughter, assuming she will be happy to take in any man who arrives on her doorstep? Feelings bind subjects to objects and here, as in everyday life, disgust proves especially sticky.

Stewart's stories spill over and threaten to contaminate both proper scholarly writing and any pretense of a stable American way of life. In *Ordinary Affects*, the homeless camp and trailer park are never far off, and the author, an associate professor of Anthropology at the University of Texas, rarely steps foot on campus. Like everyone else, she's too busy standing in line at the Target and Foodland buying vacuum cleaner bags and crib sheets and chasing her daughter up and down the aisles. Everyday labours, joys and necessities interrupt her investigation at every turn – but they also keep it on track.

By the time Stewart drags us into the "Utopian Hotel" on page 85, we've started to relax our judgment. The refrigerator stocked full of "ordinary frozen dinners" in the hotel lobby may be a chilling vault of disgusting trans fats, or a symbol of mass production and excess consumption, but we're with Stewart on this journey into the everyday, so the frozen dinners, like the people running the hotel, are "strangely gracious and homey..." – just part of a way of "doing things differently." For the same reason, there is no need for suspicion when the guy at the toll booth pays for the next car in line – sometimes people are just decent. What's wrong with that?

In *Ordinary Affects*, stress is palpable. People are stockpiling cases of coke, pumping their bodies full of health shakes, and shuttling their families off to gated communities. If "Free-floating affects lodge in the surface tension of stress, loneliness, dread, yearning"

(94), this book is written from the ground of a nation in crisis. But reading Stewart's fieldnotes on American life, the familiar also begins to look a little different. Through her attentiveness to the everyday, she offers a deeply political commentary refreshingly free of didacticism. In a brief introduction, which is marked by a familiar scholarly style of writing that seems strangely misaligned with her overall project, Stewart acknowledges that *Ordinary Affects* is concerned with neoliberalism, advanced capitalism and globalization, but explains that it is an "experiment, not a judgment" (i). But is her "experiment" effective?

As one reads through Stewart's successive entries, ranging in length from a few sentences to three or four pages, repeated themes, words and images begin to create patterns of recognition and force the book's subtle argument to the surface. Not surprisingly, many of her entries take place in and around the edges of department stores and malls. This is America. Shopping is part of the fabric of everyday life. Malls are monuments to the nation's bloated consumerism. But in life, contradictions are commonplace, so Stewart's malls aren't simply symbols of excess but also contact zones – places where people meet, form communities, swap familiar comforts. Even the RVers who congregate in Wal-Mart parking lots to refuel, stock up and sleep are given their due respect. A compelling geriatric subculture, the RVers brazenly shop without a conscience in an era when it is difficult to ignore the politics of shopping. But are these elderly nomads evil or simply distracted – too distracted to notice the employees locked inside the Wal-Mart all night or the "whirl-marters" on "non-shopping sprees" all day? If you approach Stewart's series of poetic fieldnotes looking for a critical commentary on neoliberalism, advanced capitalism or globalization, her depiction of these gas-guzzling retirees may appear too generous. However, where there is community and contradiction, is there not also the potential for change? Such lingering questions appear to be what Stewart's "experiment" is all about.

"All her life she's been yelling 'Pay attention!' but now she's not so sure that's such a good idea. Hypervigilance has taken root." But these are not the fieldnotes of a paranoid who has chosen to hunker down in a house buttressed with surveillance cameras and fortified with supplies for the next big attack. It is the distracted that Stewart seeks to challenge, and she does so simply by adopting a method rooted in a practice of everyday life – collecting.

As she observes in one of the book's briefest fieldnotes, when people collect "found objects snatched off the literal or metaphorical side of the road...all kinds of other things are happening too" (21). This succinct methodological statement reminds us that collecting is never simply an act of accumulation. Like Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which Stewart cites as one source of inspiration for her much more modest undertaking, *Ordinary Affects* transfigures the most banal practices and objects by juxtaposing them to cast new constellations. Stewart's ability to produce moments of illuminating tension through the careful arrangement of her fieldnotes may not express a single argument nor offer a definitive judgment on American life in the new millennium, but it does produce

both shock and reflection in the reader. And somewhere between the thick description of the fieldnote and the flow of the poetic line, she wakes us up – again and again – to the realization that in order to even begin understanding what’s going on, we must first simply take notice.

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