



Anita Delaney, *Well*

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<https://aemi.ie/works/anita-delaney-well/>

A dizzy momentum of living is powerfully expressed in Anita Delaney's compact and wryly humorous *Well* (2020). It's packed with the most unassuming of objects – keys, phone, slipper – objects that smack against domestic surfaces in moments edited together in rapid succession. Coming in at well under 2 minutes, it's a work that is over before you fully comprehend it, before you know why you're now floating in a state of heightened déjà vu.

Alongside Delaney's film, Ruairí McCann's text bridges timescapes in his unpacking of *Well*. His positioning of the work poetically weaves in and out of 1980s philosophy, comedy and post-punk scenes, before concluding with an exploration of *Well* within the bleached aesthetics of contemporary self-care industries.

This 'aemi online' screening of *Well* is available with closed captions. To activate the captions, click the CC button at the bottom of the screening window, and select English (Ireland) CC.

Introductory text by Ruairí McCann

In his book, *Into the Universe of Technical Images* (1985), the philosopher Vilém Flusser issued some utopian, and foreboding, conjectures about our burgeoning techno-future. One prediction was that intimate, physical contact between living, conscious flesh and the inanimate, would become increasingly charged with meaning. To not only maintain this modern world, but to actively live in it, the average person must undergo an unceasing regimen of switch flicking, dial twisting, button pressing and now, the tapping of screens. These digitized, in both senses of the word, interfaces have also enabled the simultaneous shrinking and expansion of public life. Many of our social spheres are simultaneously contracting and becoming hyperactive, like collapsing stars. They occupy a smaller space, just four walls perhaps, but proliferate out, online and through images, into new forms of communication and relationships, as well as new neuroses and prisons.

Anita Delaney materializes this nervous energy with *Well* (2020), a short and explosive moving image work of violent caresses. Shot in jittery close-ups and cut to a rigorously timed but fevered pace, with the average shot racing in and out at one or two seconds, it's a sequence of rhyming, esoteric actions. An unnamed and unseen individual, in a barely furnished undisclosed place, waves, shoves, throws, and spills an assorted range of domestic goods and foods. Some of the actions seem caring or joyous, like a quizzical terrier and a blister pack of pills being raised to the heavens, as if they were a new-born baby or a hard-won trophy. Others are more disruptive, like two glasses of liquor colliding, and a mug of tea spilled to the floor. This string of loud but furtive behaviour is occasionally interrupted, and somewhat explicated, with typed-out, sexual demands, like "touch me please", "touch me in the home" and "mount me like wallpaper", which scroll by on monitors and phone screens. These coolly presented intimations suggest that the film is the psychological made physiological. The status quo of computer-assisted cabin fever, alienation and stifled desire is not only expressed but revolted against, through a volatile scrambling of everyday life and its props.

It's a work of hair-trigger absurdism but composed using precise formalism. The likely root to this approach is in Delaney's training as an animator and her experience working in commercial film. She incorporates into her practice certain techniques that are staples of film production at its most industrial and determined, but less common within avant-garde and art gallery contexts, such as extensive pre-production processes with scripts and storyboards. Delaney's work could also be put in a lineage of artists, from Władysław Starewicz to Jan Švankmajer to Jodie Mack, who have turned from 'pure' animation tools and canvases, such as drawing, clay and puppetry, to using unconventional materials, such as everyday objects and live action. A rich acuity for the intricacies of texture and movement, that has been honed through animation, is then transposed to the 'real world', with new avenues for uncanniness – as well as unexpected humour and pathos that arises through the mechanization of the human body or the incarnating of the inhuman.

Delaney's distinctive combination of strict technique and an irreverent and bolshie mien is given an explicit reference point with the film's only spoken words, or rather not spoken, sung. One of the lengthier shots consists of a speaker blaring a snippet of *Repetition*, an early tune by The Fall. We hear the group's singer, mad master and only constant member, Mark E. Smith, chanting, 'repetition, repetition, repetition'. It's both an acidic jeer, and something of a mission statement: Smith and The Fall's

'three Rs'. As one of the integral forces of British pop's key era of hyper-accelerationist modernism – the 'post-punk' era of the late 70s and early 80s – The Fall would reinvent themselves again and again, exploring a myriad of different styles and tones. All of this while maintaining rock's sturdy foundations; a tightly interlinked and propulsive rhythm section, a strict order not only underpinning but fertilizing experimentation, which could apply to *Well* and much of Delaney's work.

Delaney is not only inspired by this holy terror of British music but also by some of his iconoclastic contemporaries in comedy. In an interview for 6X6 Project, Delaney mentioned "English political comedians of the 80s" as a formative influence, and one could detect a kinship between her anarchic sensibility and aggressive, disjointed expression of the human body and the performance styles and personas of Alexei Sayle and Rik Mayall in the sitcom *The Young Ones* (1982-84). Or to point to a later, more avant-garde contingent of the British alternative comedy tradition, Chris Morris's *Jam* (2000), which along with Delaney's practice occupy a strange hinterland between satirical comedy, horror and the schools of expressionism and surrealism. This particular brew is especially prevalent in a series of films Delaney made in the early to mid-2010s, which share many of *Well*'s attributes: short but dense runtimes, frantic but carefully metered out pacing, 'narratives' as off-kilter Rube Goldberg Machines of closely observed absurd behaviour. However, works such as *Huh* (2012) and *PIs* (2013) are more overtly sinister and turbulent beasts, situated in Stygian surroundings and preoccupied with the marring and scarring of flesh and objects. This full tilt approach reached its apex with *YOU ME AND IT* (2015) which features some of Delaney's most aggressive editing and uses of music, text and voice.

Well represents Delaney exploring this same style but down a stripped-down route, with sparser insertions of music and words, and with clinking glass, rather than hot wax scorching a human hand, as the most violent image. Its relatively low-key character makes it a work of sublimated tension, whose satiric source is possibly hinted at with the title. *Well* could refer to 'wellness', with the dominance of white in the film's colour palette – and its spartan production design evocative of the aesthetics of certain strains of the 'self-care' industries; industries which treat insecurities of mind, body and sexuality by preaching repression, gussied up with the rhetoric of empowered paucity. Delaney subverts this minimalist aesthetic by reshaping it into a bold and brash, and comic, flow of images.