Embodied Perspective by Incongruity: Environmental Critique in an Age of Everyday Performance

Richard Besel
Performance on Behalf of the Environment

Edited by Richard D. Besel and Jnan A. Blau
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More than ten years ago, self-proclaimed “vaga-bum” Daniel Suelo stopped using money (Suelo, “Living Without”). Living in a cave an hour outside of Moab, Utah, Suelo’s personal decision to abandon the world of material consumption has been met with looks of both admiration and disdain. Some believe him to be an environmental prophet while others believe him to be mentally unbalanced—judgments the generally cheerful ascetic often uses to his advantage. According to Suelo, “I’ve been totally without cents since Autumn of 2000 (except for a couple months in 2001). I don’t use or accept money or conscious barter—don’t take food stamps or other government dole” (“Moneyless World”). Although the humorous homonym (“cents” versus “sense”) might suggest Suelo sees his lifestyle decisions in a lighthearted manner, the point he attempts to make is anything but trivial. Environmentally aware, philosophically informed, and deeply spiritual, Suelo notes: “When I lived with money, I was always lacking. Money represents lack. Money represents things in the past (debt) and things in the future (credit), but money never represents what is present” (qtd. in Osborne). Daniel Suelo’s rejection of capitalism combined with a devout mindfulness of the “here and now” not only have earned him local celebrity status in eastern Utah, but it garnered “him national media attention and a growing list of internet admirers” (Mills 35).

Although Suelo’s decision might be read as one of personal choice, it is also simultaneously a performative critique of mainstream society’s obsessions with consumption, excess, and waste. While many environmental communication studies have addressed “high-profile environmental controversies,” activist and environmental performance scholar Dave Horton argues, “environmentalism is also about the everyday” (63). Suelo’s lifestyle choices thus act as an important case study that allows us to explore the microphysics of power as they function in response to a complex assemblage of hegemonic discourses, a part of everyday life that Horton argues is “an important, and frequently overlooked, part of contemporary environmentalism” (63). Drawing primarily on the works of Michel de Certeau and Kenneth Burke, I contend Suelo’s persuasion does not function by forcing observers to confront an individual who simply uses tactics of resistance in his “everyday life,” but instead, it functions because his everyday life is a tactic. By juxtaposing Suelo’s life with their own, audiences are confronted with an alternative way of seeing their relationship with the world. In other words, Suelo’s lifestyle choices become an embodied “perspective by incongruity” (Burke, Permanence).

In the following analysis, I first explore the theoretical connections between the concepts of performance, “everyday life,” and “perspective by incongruity.” This is followed by an analysis of Suelo’s rhetoric and performances found in interviews, on his website, and on his blog. After analyzing these texts, implications for understanding the rhetoric of everyday life and environmental performance as a means of producing new, alternative worldviews are discussed.

Performance and Perspective

In recent years, studies across a variety of fields have recognized the importance of methodological approaches that allow for the exploration of performance. As a result, according to Nigel Clark, the “growing interest in the performative dimensions of human existence amongst certain sectors of the social sciences and humanities has served to accentuate the ‘doing’ side of social life as opposed to the ‘being’ or givenness of particular social identities or categories” (165). However, the notion of performance can be understood from a variety of theoretical and practical perspectives. Performance studies scholars Elizabeth Bell and Stacy Holman Jones have argued there are at least three “metaphorical stages” from which one can view performance: the theatrical stage, the streets as global stage, and the stage of the everyday (199). In the first two metaphorical stages, performance was traditionally viewed as a discrete event, one that had a clear beginning and end. A theatrical performance often began at a predetermined time and often ended once the script had been articulated in a particular context. Likewise, a protest that was organized to begin at a predetermined time could also come to an end once the protesters had dispersed. Mary Frances Hopkins captures this view of the first two stages in her observations about the performative turn taking place across disciplinary lines: performance “once referred to an event
somehow set apart from everyday actions, an event that might be separated, or bracketed, from what the audience perceived as “everyday life”" (229). This chapter subscribes to a broader view of performance, one that does not see performance as only a matter of special, discrete events, but one that emphasizes what Bell and Jones would say fits onto the third stage—the stage of “everyday life.” Doing so allows and encourages scholarly understanding that reaches beyond the limited spaces of special and often isolated performances.

According to rhetoric scholar Philip Wander, in his introduction to Henri Lefebvre’s book Everyday Life in the Modern World: “‘Everyday life’ refers to dull routine, the ongoing go-to-work, pay-the-bills, home-ward trudge of daily existence. It indicates a sense of being in the world beyond philosophy, virtually beyond the capacity of language to describe, that we know simply as the grey reality enveloping all we do” (vii-viii). It is in this “grey reality” that people find themselves the targets of systems of power. The everyday is not just something we live; it is something that is actively created. Influenced by the pessimistic assessment of capitalism articulated by Marx, Lefebvre trenchantly argues that “the everyday is a product,” one that “constitutes the platform upon which the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism is erected” (9). In other words, Lefebvre follows Marx’s pessimism in vilifying capitalist influence—our everyday interactions involve the articulation, maintenance, and support of systems that promote false consciousness. Equally pessimistic, Michel Foucault’s work on disciplinary suggests everyday life is vulnerable to the exercise of external systems of power, especially through hierarchical observation, normalization, and examination (170-194). As society shifted from an age where humans were controlled through public display (punishing bodies in stocks or public executions) to one where humans were controlled through more subtle means (self-policing and surveillance), power structures tightened their grips on the everyday actions of individuals. For cultural studies critic John Bolton, “This pessimism [in Foucault] is tied to a view of everyday life as a passive field waiting to be dominated by disciplinary structures. The lines of influence are all one-way. Thus it would only be a small step from the argument that discipline creates individuals to the argument that it also creates the everyday” (328). But this pessimism may be an oversimplification of lived experience. Is it not possible to find acts of resistance in the everyday? Although Foucault does not rule out this possibility, it is left largely undeveloped. In a well-worn quote, Foucault notes that, “Where there is power, there is resistance” (95). Foucault under-

stood that concluding the everyday offers no room for individual agency would be a mistake. This is precisely where the work of Michel de Certeau becomes pertinent.

Michel de Certeau explicitly engages Foucault’s pessimism and offers a slightly more optimistic understanding of the everyday. For Certeau, everyday life constantly “invents itself by poaching” on instruments of power and processes of control (xvi). In other words, individuals make use of existing structures in ways that were not intended by the very forces that attempt to control those individuals. The institutions and assemblages of power noted by Foucault make use of what Certeau calls “strategies” in “the calculus of force-relationships” that enable the exercise of power (xvi). The use of strategies can be challenged by subjects through the use of “tactics.” Tactics are “the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend[ing] a political dimension to everyday practices” (xvii). People are often finding unique and improvisational ways to manipulate, undermine, and take advantage of the very discourses forced upon them. Although Certeau’s work is often interpreted as a “corrective” to Foucault’s, both perspectives have much to offer. Foucault can be appreciated for highlighting the use of power by systems and institutions, while Certeau can be appreciated for underscoring the creative means by which individuals resist those systems and institutions in their everyday art of making do.

A simple example Certeau offers to explain the difference between a tactic and a strategy can be observed in the French example of la perruque, or, the “wig.” The “wig” “is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer” (25). One can imagine typists a personal email at work as a kind of poaching, a use of a tactic, a small act of resistance against the dominant powers attempting to control you to keep you producing in a docile, compliant manner. Although this example is prosaic, there are a range of other examples one can imagine as a kind of poaching in a variety of contexts. However, Suelo’s performative resistance does not blend seamlessly into Certeau’s strategy/tactic dichotomy. It seems clear Suelo is resisting the strategies employed by capitalism, but it is not so clear that Suelo is relegated to the use of tactics in his everyday life. What makes Suelo’s use of tactics significantly different from examples such as the “wig” is that Suelo’s life is openly observable to others. One who poaches often attempts to fly under the radar of those in power. It is through making his life visible to others that audiences are able to juxtapose their own lives with Suelo’s life. In this sense, Kenneth Burke’s explication of perspective by incongruity becomes salient.
According to Burke, each of us has an expectation of—an orientation toward—"how things were, how they are, and how they may be" (Permanence 14). When one's expectations are violated through a juxtaposition of things that do not fit together—an incongruity—the perspective on how things were, are, and will be has the potential to change. Words and ideas—as well as habits and behaviors—that do not ordinarily go together are bonded just as those that do ordinarily go together are divorced. Perspective by incongruity serves as an "opening wedge" that unbalances our understanding of how the world does and ought to function" (Whitbread 48). However, to fully understand Burke's notion of perspective by incongruity, that is, how expectations can be violated to effect change, one must also explore what Burke means by "piety."

Following Spanish poet and philosopher George Santayana, Burke sees piety as a "loyalty to the sources of our being" (Permanence 71). In other words, "Piety is the sense of what properly goes with what" (Permanence 74). Piety is thus not limited to the religious sphere: "where you discern the symptoms of great devotion to any kind of endeavor, you are in the realm of piety" (Permanence 83). Perspective by incongruity is impossi"insofar as it attacks the kinds of linkage already established" (Permanence 87). But this is precisely what makes perspective by incongruity such a potent rhetorical tool. According to Naomi R. Rockler, "Perspective by incongruity is powerful because, if successful, it jars people into new perceptions about the way reality can be constructed and may encourage people to question their pieties" (38). Burke's perspective by incongruity meshes with Certeau's theoretical perspective in the sense that piety is "beliefs and values people have come to accept and expect in everyday life" (Besel and Besel 56). For Suelo, everyday performance provides the perspective through which he can expostulate people to impious actions, actions that challenge what he believes to be the corrupitive hegemony of late capitalism.

Suelo's Everyday Life

Daniel Suelo was not always environmentally sensitive and spiritually aware. An anthropology major who graduated from the University of Colorado, Suelo was once like any other "normal" person subject to the pressures and constraints of capitalism. He had a job. He had money. He had credit. But then something changed. The turning point in his life came in 1987, when he joined the Peace Corps and was sent to an Ecuadorian village in the Andes to offer basic medical services (teaching first aid and handing out medicine) to the people who lived there. Despite being removed from the everyday interactions of modern North America, Suelo noticed that as the local populations became increasingly wealthy, their cultural values and health practices began to change. He recalls: "It looked like money was impoverishing them." (Ketcham 66). Although it was his two years abroad that allowed Suelo to reconsider his place in American culture, it was not until 2000 that he decided to reject the use of money and retreat to an economically spare, but highly natural, lifestyle.

For the last five years Suelo has taken up residency in a cave outside Moab, and he has done so with very few modern amenities. According to Christopher Ketchum, a journalist who made the trek to the cave for his interview with Suelo: "From the outside, the place looks like a hollowed teardrop, about the size of a cello case. Inside it's as wide as an Amtrak bathroom, with enough space for a few pots that hang from the ceiling, a stove under a stone eave, big buckets full of beans and rice, a bed of blankets in the dirt, and not much else" (66). From his refusal to participate in modern economic systems to his choice of where to sleep, Suelo appears to be practicing what he preaches: how we choose to live our everyday lives matters for the development of the human spirit, the wasteful consumption of material, and the persuasive potential to influence others.

Wild Nature and Spirited Sharing

The spiritual antecedents of Suelo's philosophy on life began in his early childhood and were further strengthened by his travels. According to Mills, Suelo "was raised in a strict evangelical family." He often "wondered why so few Christians who considered themselves devout were not prepared to adopt the ascetic lifestyle espoused by Jesus" (35). Trips to places such as India and Thailand later exposed him to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism and the Hindu sadhus, "the holy men who wander the country without money or possessions. Suelo began to wonder if he could become an American sadhu—a wandering ascetic in "one of the most materialistic money-worshipping nations on earth...to be a vagabond, a bum, and make an art of it" (Mills 35). According to Suelo, "this idea enchanted me" (Mills 35). This spiritual theme saturates much of Suelo's rhetoric and performances and animates his willingness to share
all that he has, because as Suelo would argue, the items he shared were never really his to begin with. After all, "ownership is but an illusion" (Suelo, "Moneyless World").

For Suelo, the idea that one does not truly own possessions is rooted in an understanding that humans are a part of nature. As such:

Wild Nature, outside commercial civilization, runs on gift economy: "freely give, freely receive." Thus it is balanced. Commercial civilization runs on consciousness of credit and debt (knowledge of good & evil); thus it is imbalanced. What nation can even balance its own budget or environment? Gift Economy is Faith, Grace, Love - the core message of every religion. The proof is inside you. Wild Nature is your True Nature, crucified by commercial civilization. ("Living Without")

In this excerpt, Suelo makes use of the well-worn environmental trope of "balance." The simple binary of associating a life outside commercial civilization as being balanced forces those who hear him and see how he lives to reconsider their own lives: "Am I upsetting the natural balance?"

Additionally, the last portion of this excerpt allows for an introspective understanding: Suelo seems to suggest that we do not necessarily have to engage in large-scale environmental policymaking to combat the environmental consequences of capitalism because the answers are "inside" each of us. The religious illusions are unmistakable. However, this inward turning for answers about how we should remain in "balance" with nature is not a onetime event—it is a constant questioning and unending process. Through his actions and introspective lifestyle, Suelo illustrates the performative power of everyday decisions. By calling for a new perspective through his everyday life, Suelo denaturalizes one's assumptions about everyday lifestyle choices. For Suelo, this constant and repeated questioning is "the essence of all life. That's what doesn't end and what we can every day cultivate within ourselves" ("Moneyless World"). Following Foucault and Certeau, Suelo's actions may be read as an attempt to free individuals from policing themselves in a world obsessed with excessive consumption. It is at the level of individual action and performance where one can make meaningful change.

Suelo's everyday practices exemplify the religious foundations of his beliefs. By turning inward, Suelo concluded his "possessions" were not really his; so he gave them away and used only what was readily available. However, he claims this was not done for attention or congratulations:

We must wake up and realize that sharing is no act of goodness, nothing that deserves reward or praise, but simply a natural act like breathing free air in and out, or a natural act like the sun sharing its energy on ALL life forms, expecting nothing in return! Working with no thought of reward or ownership is a constant theme of the Bible, the Baghavat Gita, the Quran, the Buddhist Sutras, the Tao Te Ching, the Guru Granth Sahib, the Bahai scriptures, the Book of Mormon, and the Jain sutras, and the practiced philosophy of Native Peoples all over the world. Christians, what does Jesus say but to be like the servant who works because it is his duty, not even expecting thanks. Only we who fool ourselves think we own anything to give! Muslims and Mormons, your Quran and the Book of Mormon especially stress this fact. ("Moneyless World")

Suelo's principle is universal: to share and give is a natural act. Hoarding resources, possessions, or money, are all counterproductive to the spiritual underpinnings of all religions systems. In giving up material possessions, Suelo suggests we can finally be free of the hold systems of domination have over us: "Actually, when we finally realize we own no possessions, we have nothing to steal, and nobody to trespass against us, and nobody can have power over us" ("Moneyless World").

The spiritual dimensions of Suelo's rhetoric provide for an interesting contrast with other interpretations of various religious systems. For example, it has long been argued that Christianity contained within it the seeds of environmental devastation. One of the most widely circulated accounts of this argument was advanced by Lynn White, Jr. in a 1967 Science article. For White, "Human ecology is deeply conditioned by beliefs about our nature and destiny—that is, by religion" (1205). For one view of Christianity, the Earth was given to humans to use and the end of days doctrine will make any environmental issues moot, so why not deplete resources? Why not live out of balance? Suelo explicitly rejects this understanding by emphasizing an alternative morality: "You can keep procrastinating and wait for billions of years for Messiah to come to zap everything right. Or, you can realize what your own scriptures teach you, that Messiah is in you, your Hope of Glory. You are the Hands and Feet and Eyes and Mouth and Breath of Messiah. Wake up and realize that Messiah will never, ever, ever come, except through you. Take Responsibility" ("Moneyless World").

Although the spiritual elements of Suelo's discourse are important factors to consider, many observers might worry about where they would get their next meal if they did not have the money to buy it. The answer
Suelo offers is a simple one: “Have faith that everything comes as you need it in the moment” (Suelo, “Moneyless World”).

Present Opportunity and Everyday Materiality

It is in living in the moment that the material aspects of Suelo’s performances come into sharp focus. According to one observer,

Suelo lives an abundant albeit frugal life, thriving on the waste of a small town. Every week, he inspects Moab’s trash, finding more than he needs. Supermarket throwaways keep him well-fed. He eats healthily, often eschewing the abundant supply of day-old doughnuts or expired sweets – although, he says, chocolate is “my gold.” The wild onions, watercress, prickly pear fruit, serviceberries, globe mallow and pine nuts that grow near his home add fresh-grown flair to the trash-bin-derived dishes he cooks over fire-branded coffee cans molded into stoves. He occasionally cooks roadkill gathered around Moab, and says he has never fallen ill from spoiled food. (Blevins)

Suelo’s life decisions, including where and what he eats, allow others to see an alternative way of living, one where identity is not tied to an economic position. How much one pays for his or her meal, and how and where one eats that meal, does not determine one’s worth. This observation is also noted by Horton: “People literally eat their way into identity positions. Like food shopping, the eating of some foods and the refusal of others powerfully communicates lifestyle” (71). The lifestyle Suelo wishes to live is one that is consistent with his spiritual understanding of how humans should exist in balance with nature.

The idea of using what is readily available does not mean Suelo is a Luddite. In fact, Suelo is technologically savvy, making use of public resources such as computers available at the public library to disseminate his ideas via his blog. Suelo gives his blog readers another example of how living day to day, free of capitalistic concerns, was liberating and a blessing. He tells of an encounter he had while “dumpster-diving at the thrift-store to find warmer clothes for winter,” how he was thinking about how nice it would be to learn how to play the guitar:

The dumpster was so full of junk it was overflowing—stuff piled around it. I dug around a bit and found a booklet on how to play the guitar. “What a coincidence.” I thought, “But I don’t have a guitar,” my other voice reminded me, again. As I was getting ready to leave the dumpster, I took a last glance back and noticed I hadn’t checked the stuff piled against it. I lifted up a box and noticed a guitar case underneath. “Nice case, I have friends who might need it,” I thought I lifted it, and it wasn’t empty! I opened it up, and, voila, a guitar! “Surely there must be something wrong with it for it to be here,” I thought. I brought it back to the farm, checked it out the next morning, and found it was virtually new and flawless! There were also some instructional DVDs included in the case and two extra strings. If ever I get a clear message to do something, this time it was, “Learn to play the guitar.” (“Moneyless World”)

Suelo’s real life experiences inform the narratives found on his blog and in his interviews. Living in the moment saturates all that he does. When filling out a common online list of “get to know you” questions often circulated in spam emails, a conscious awareness of the here and now is ubiquitous. His favorite movie: “The movie I am watching now.” His favorite music: “...the sounds around me right now.” His favorite book: “I’m living my favorite book and you are too.” Not a moment is unappreciated.

Of course, Suelo understands that not all of his narratives make his lifestyle sound rosy to his readers or those who speak with him in person. But struggle is natural and not something to shy away from: “That it’s hard is exactly the point, he says. ‘Hardship is a good thing. We need the challenge. Our bodies need it. Our immune systems need it. My hardships are simple, right at hand—they’re manageable.’” (qtd. in Ketchum 69). Whether dumpster-diving or living in the moment as he experiences the joyous sounds of nature, Suelo is also aware that his life is a performance for others to see, an act(ion) to which they can respond.

Natural Living as Performance and Perspective

Suelo is indeed keenly aware that others are watching him. His life is so different from the mainstream lives of those working within capitalism that it is not unusual for Suelo to draw the gaze of others. His response to the attention is simply to make his beliefs transparent for all to see: “I’ve been saying for the past few months that I decided to make my life an open book, including the good, the bad, and the ugly” (“Moneyless World”). There is a brutal honesty to Suelo’s everyday performances, a kind of perspective that forces observers to see something about their
daily lives that they had not observed before. After all, he was once like his observers. However, he noticed things in a slightly different manner. Take, for example, what SueLo has to say about his life within capitalism before he stopped using money: “Every time I made a resume for a job, signed my name to a document, opened a bank account, or even bought a banana at the supermarket, I felt a tinge of dishonesty, like I was not letting my yes be yes and my no be no” (“Moneyless World”). SueLo provides us with an alternative form of being in the world, a way of engaging nature not available to all within capitalism. By making his life an “open book,” he allows audience members to see how he started as someone just like them, but became someone else, someone who arguably lives in harmony with nature.

Although SueLo does not explicitly say he is out to persuade others that his way of living is the right one, there is a hint of this intent in his writings. SueLo’s creations of a transparent life could simply be a way of inviting others to see what it is he sees. But there is more to his life choices. Indeed, there is a clear persuasive element to what it is SueLo is doing. Take the following excerpt as an example of SueLo’s clear sense of advocacy in favor of a different form of being in the world: “Live communally right here, right now, where we are, in this very society. Infect society with it, until people wake up and realize money and possessions are simply illusions, realizing that there can be no balance until everybody freely gives & freely takes” (“Moneyless World”). SueLo asks his readers and all who see his life to not only change the way they live their everyday lives, but he asks them to also become advocates on their own. Of course, when an alternative to systems of power exists, systems of power and those influenced and/or controlled by it will often attempt to maintain and defend what they believe seems “normal.”

**Audience Reactions**

Assessing SueLo’s effect on those who have read his writings or heard him speak in person is difficult. There seem to be two major reactions to SueLo’s everyday life as a form of performative critique. Predictably, some audiences accuse SueLo of being a hypocrite; a parasitic bum who lives off the generosity of others. According to Mills, SueLo has, “also ignited an angry backlash from others who complain that he is only too happy to make free use of the costly Internet facilities that others are paying for through their taxes. ‘Who do you think pays for the Internet at the library where you write this blog?’ complained one reader. ‘You have the qualifications to get a job but, instead, you choose to leech off society’” (35). For another writer, “It seems fair to suggest that SueLo couldn’t have the lifestyle he has now if everybody else did the same. For a start he doesn’t seem to be producing his own food or clothes” (Osborne). But how do we make sense of these reactions? According to one of SueLo’s college friends, Damian Nash, “I think he makes people angry because they have this belief that if only they had a little more money, they’d be happy,” Nash says. “His lifestyle is a challenge to their Holy Grail, the American consumer capitalist dream” (Blevins). But we can further explain this negative reaction in Burkean terms: those who accurately perceive SueLo’s critique against modern capitalism as one requiring a significant change in lifestyle see his life as an impious one; they remain devoted to the piety of free market economics. There is a breakdown of what Burke would call the “identification” process (Rhetoric 19-28). In other words, the perspective by incongruity has functioned to draw the fire of those living a mainstream lifestyle. Unable to identify with the impious position advocated by SueLo, their only recourse is to attack SueLo in order to remain pious to their own beliefs and values.

But how does SueLo answer the charges made by his critics? Is he really a “leech”? For SueLo, using the free Internet access at the local library is not a hypocritical act. He often offers an analogy to explain his position: If a bird were to build a nest using human-made materials, or build that nest in a human-made structure, would humans be angry at the bird for living as naturally as it could? If not, why be angry with SueLo? SueLo sees nothing wrong with using materials that are freely given and freely taken. In fact, according to one observer, living naturally means one is more connected with things and people rather than less:

Self-sufficiency isn’t a goal in his moneyless life, he says. So, he will sometimes house-sit, but it makes him antsy and he pines for his cave. If someone offers him something, he doesn’t argue. He recently began taking yoga classes offered by a friend. If they insist on giving him money, he gives it away immediately. ‘We are all completely dependent on everyone else. The point is to live freely, in the present, freely giving and freely taking, which is the way of nature,’ he says. ‘The idea is to give up control of credit and debt, and just trust the cycle of nature…’” (Blevins)

Despite the critics, SueLo seems to be undeterred. He continues with his unorthodox preaching and everyday performances. In fact, SueLo’s re-
sponse to his critics may be read as a commentary on their performances. The scripts his critics follow in defense of “normal” lifestyle choices illustrate the incongruity between their respective positions; each side defends what Burke would call a piety, while appearing impious to the other.

Although Suelo has received his fair share of criticism, others have looked at Suelo’s life and have seen much to admire. They are confronted with a different perspective, a perspective that appears to be giving Suelo benefits few others find. Nash observes, “He is truly the happiest person I have ever met. He is so deeply peaceful, it’s contagious.” Nash continues, “He is living proof that money can’t buy happiness” (Blevins). While many may feel sorry for Suelo, that he most likely will die somewhere in the wild, for Suelo the thought is not a depressing one: “I’ll do what creatures have been doing for millions of years for retirement,” he says. “Why is it sad that I die in the canyon and not in the geriatric ward well-insured? I have great faith in the power of natural selection. And one day, I will be selected out” (Ketchum 66). Suelo’s life—his everyday performances—bring the larger questions of what it means to be a part of nature to our attention. What is Suelo doing? How are we to live our lives? Is there another way? For Suelo, the answer to the latter question is a definitive “yes.”

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined Daniel Suelo’s everyday life as a form of embodied performance and environment-related critique. This case study underscores the way that persuasion can not only function as a tactic to be used in a performer’s everyday life, but, more importantly, how a performer’s everyday life is a tactic against the strategies employed by dominant systems of power. This analysis has implications for understanding the strengths and limitations of Burke’s perspective by incongruity as it is used to advance environmentally friendly actions and Cersteau-inspired conceptions of everyday performance.

To the extent that Suelo’s everyday performances provide a point of comparison for observers who live their lives within the confines and discourses of capitalist and environmentally damaging systems of power, audiences of Suelo’s self-performance are forced to see the world in a new and alternative fashion. In this sense, audiences are exposed to an embodied perspective by incongruity where they are invited to alter their notions of “how things were, how they are, and how they may be” (Burke, Permanence, 14). But what are we to make of this invitation in light of the mixed audience response? How do we make sense of the visceral and vilifying reactions when placed next to the reactions of worship and praise? On the one hand, it is possible to argue that Suelo’s performance is partially successful in the way that the incongruity jars audience members out of their comfort zones. Suelo has successfully used perspective by incongruity as an “opening wedge” for a number of observers to rethink their pious positions in relation to economics and the environment (Whedbee 48). However, an equally strong reading is one that argues Suelo has taken the incongruity too far. The idea that Suelo’s incongruity gives that appearance of not having enough in common with his audiences is not lost on Suelo:

But I do think there’s a certain kind of person who is willing to go to eat at something like Free Meal or Food Not Bombs. It’s a person willing to forget class and ideology and sit humble on the grass with everybody else and just be sincerely human. I’m realizing that that’s what’s the only real common [thing] among us all: simple human-ness. When we try to find people with things “in common” with us, trying to find people who “think” like us, that’s not the common I’m talking about here. Our common-ness isn’t in what we think. Our common-ness is when we give up thinking. It’s not about belief, it’s about Being, which is the True Faith. (Suelo, "Moneyless World")

With such a strong reaction against the norms of everyday life—as it is experienced by the majority of observers who still use money, live in houses, and concern themselves with what they have “in common” with others—Suelo has alienated many of his onlookers. Even Suelo’s understanding of what “common” means is different from how members of his audiences may understand it. In other words, Suelo’s performance is so incongruous it has created a problem for the identification process Burke so highly prized in persuasive appeals (Rhetoric 19-28). Suelo’s performance is, in essence, divisive. It is in this division where we encounter the paradoxical strength and limitation of using perspective by incongruity in environmental performances.

As activists of all stripes begin and continue to use perspective by incongruity as a powerful tool to advance their agendas, they should do so with caution. Audience members should ideally think, “If he can do it, so can I,” not “He can do it because he’s not like me.” In addition, scholars who further investigate the use of perspective by incongruity as it is
used with environmental performance critiques, such as in the recent film No Impact Man, should make it a priority to investigate cases where incongruity does not lead to audience alienation. At what point does the identification process breakdown? How far can activists push the envelope? These are questions that have yet to be sufficiently addressed. Although Suelo’s performance does not allow us to answer these questions here, and, in fact, gives us more questions than answers, it does provide us with an important point of comparison for future studies.

In addition to allowing observations about the strengths and limitations of perspective by incongruity as it is used in environmental performance critiques, this case study also allows us to address Certeau’s tactic/strategy dichotomy. While Anna Scholer has criticized Certeau’s work by noting strategies and tactics, “never appear in a ‘pure’ way,” this chapter articulates another concern with the dichotomy (qtd. in Bell and Jones 230). While it is easy to conceptualize the powers Suelo is fighting against as the same systems of power that Certeau would say employ strategies to maintain their positions of privilege, it is not so clear that Suelo’s acts of resistance in his everyday life are reduced to being categorized as tactics. Unlike the example of “the wig,” Suelo’s life is openly observable. Of course, this is not to say that all tactics must be hidden from the surveillance of those in power, nor should scholars oversimplify Certeau. It is to say that the dichotomy of strategy and tactic must be amended and expanded upon. Suelo’s embodied performance and environmental critique clearly illustrate additional possibilities for understanding resistance in and everyday life. One does not resist during one’s everyday life; one’s everyday life is the act of resistance.

In their now canonical article on performance studies as a paradigm of intellectual scholarship, Ronald J. Pelias and James VanOosten have observed that the case has been made “for viewing performance as fundamental to everyday life” (223). Indeed, Bell and Jones have gone so far as to call the “stage of everyday life” one of three major strands in performance studies perspectives. Turning to Suelo’s self-performance has allowed us to further extend the stage by complicating the dichotomy found in Certeau. As we better understand how postmodern theories have “shifted the emphasis from ‘grand narratives’ of oppressive power to the local, the subaltern, and everyday practices as resistance in micropolitics of contemporary life,” we are reminded of the importance of what it is we do to “make do” on our stages (Bell and Jones 200). Every act is reactive, every stage is a restaging of everyday power relations.

On October 27, 2010, Suelo participated in an online meeting with other “lifestyle gift economists” (Suelo, “Moneyless World”). Using public libraries and free Internet connections, the “economists” could chat and network with other like-minded individuals doing the best they could to change the world. Garcia notes:

Though Suelo’s story is a particularly riveting one, less radical communities of “freegans” are cropping up in places like San Francisco and New York. These groups have risen out of a desire to boycott what is seen as an unethical corporate system and to minimize the waste of resources. To varying degrees, freegans salvage edible food from dumpsters, squat in abandoned buildings, and encourage a reconsideration of the benefits of leisure and play as opposed to excessive work.

That there are others like Suelo living their lives in ways that differ with the “mainstream” and “normal” only highlights the importance of studying the connections between environmental performance and environmental critique. Even if one does not become a dumpster diver or a building squatter, the lesson to be learned is a valuable one: we should all harness the power of self-performance—what many may see as the only real form of agency we have left—to act favorably on nature’s behalf.

Let us hope that freely giving and freely receiving is one day part of the everyday for everyone.

Works Cited


Embodied Perspective by Incongruity


