

# Encounterism

The Neglected Joys of Being In Person

An extract

Andy Field

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First published in 2023 by September Publishing

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Printed in Poland on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by  
Hussar Books

ISBN 9781914613234

Ebook ISBN 9781914613241

September Publishing  
[www.septemberpublishing.org](http://www.septemberpublishing.org)

## Author's Note

# About Dazzlement

Like a lot of children, when I was young I was fascinated by all the banal details of the adult world—those little everyday things that my parents and the other adults around me seemed to hardly notice any more. I remember how exciting the idea of a drive-through restaurant was, or going to the hairdresser's. How on holiday we would stand on some foreign street corner and hail a taxi and it would stop just for us. The way car drivers flashed their headlights to say “thank you” to one another and how I could call the receptionist at my dad's office and be transferred right to his desk. Rather than putting on little plays for my family, one of my favourite games was setting up a shopfront at my bedroom door and asking my brother to request various items so that I could go and check if we had them in stock. This adult world, it seemed, was a place of infinite complexity and wonder. A treasure trove of weird rules and routines just waiting to be discovered.

## ABOUT DAZZLEMENT

It is hard to retain this excitement as you get older, and to some extent this is probably a good thing. To move through life in a state of relentless wonderment would be both exhausting and time-consuming; stopping to marvel at every vending machine, thrilled anew each day by the process of ordering a coffee. Nonetheless, as an adult I have found it useful to try and keep hold of some of this fascination as a way of drawing my attention back again and again to the parts of the everyday world that often get overlooked.

“We must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street,” the artist Allan Kaprow once declared, and that dazzlement is what I have spent much of my life chasing. How do we allow ourselves to be amazed by something we encounter every day? How can we approach the world around us with the kind of concentration we normally only reserve for things we deem important or special?

One of the ways I have tried to answer these questions is through the work I make as an artist. I have spent most of the last sixteen years creating unusual performances in everyday locations—in cafés and cinemas, on rooftops, in parks, and out on the crowded streets of towns and cities. Doing so has meant spending a lot of time thinking carefully about these everyday spaces and the kinds of encounters we have in them. Using performance to render the ordinary briefly strange in the hope that doing so might enable people to see it differently.

## ABOUT DAZZLEMENT

This book is an extension of that work. It draws from this history of messing around in everyday life to tell stories about a range of ordinary human encounters. The kind of interactions—with hairdressers, nightclubbers, or strangers we pass on the street—that would normally disappear unnoticed into the great ocean of activity occurring around them. Our lives are littered with these encounters. Little interactions occupying a grey space between ritual and routine. Ways of meeting we have grown accustomed to, perhaps even taken for granted.

This book is a story told in nine essays about some of those encounters. Some are encounters with strangers, others with friends and acquaintances. Some happen out in the world and others in places like cinemas and public parks or even on the phone.

Although the idea for this book predates the coronavirus pandemic, much of the writing of it took place in the caesura it created, when most of us found ourselves separated from the activity of our ordinary lives and these familiar encounters were temporarily rendered distant and strange. As the world has opened back up again, I have found myself approaching it with a renewed enthusiasm, ready to be newly dazzled by the wondrous complexity of our interactions with each other.

I hope that you, too, might find yourself dazzled by the nine ordinary encounters I describe here. By writing about them in such detail, I hope to encourage all of us to take greater care over them, and by doing so to take greater care of each other.

## Chapter 1

# The Importance of Care

In the beginning, there was only hair. Tangled, muddied brambles of hair. Primordial forests of hair. A great, lumpen Pangea of hair. Hair as far as any eye could bear to see. And then, at some point, there must have been the first haircut. Not hair pulled out from the root in anger or despair, but hair cut deliberately and with some degree of care.

The bare skulls of our earliest ancestors tell us little about the hair on their heads, and although we know humans have used sharp stone tools for hundreds of thousands of years, we don't know if those tools were used for haircutting. What we do have is human remains from as long as twenty-five thousand years ago, and we know that by that time some women wore their hair long in braids whilst some men had theirs cut very short. And by three thousand years ago we have a description of a haircut in the first known work of literature, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. At some point, then, people grew used to sitting down in the shade

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of some wide tree or by the warmth of the fire, breathing that little bit lighter as they felt the sharp blade moving close to their soft skin, talking or perhaps not talking, but trusting enough to know that they were safe, that they were being looked after.

And now, many thousands of years later, here I am, sitting in a metal chair in a quiet salon on a busy East London street, staring at my reflection in the mirror and waiting. Outside, people stroll along in the June sunshine, talking on their phones, music pouring out of the windows of passing cars, but in here the world feels remarkably still. The chair I'm sitting in is big and sturdy, all chrome and worn red leather and, with a cape fastened tightly around my neck, I feel ten years old again. I close my eyes and remember.

We would all ride the bus into town, my dad, my brother, and I, to go to Il Barbieri on Magdalene Street in Cambridge, where we would sit and wait our turn for a short back and sides, reading old magazines and bickering. I remember the wet, perfumy smell of the barbershop and how, when it was my turn, they would lay a stack of folded white towels on the chair to boost me up to the right height and how I would sit as still as I could, staring down at a framed picture of the boxer Rocky Marciano propped neatly on the sideboard, gloved fists held up to the camera.

In my present-day salon there are no framed pictures of boxing legends, only shelves full of expensive-looking haircare products, but the feeling is still the same. Propped up on my temporary throne, I am one part sun king, one part human sacrifice.

This is a familiar feeling but one I have not had for a while.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CARE

Whilst the pandemic smouldered away, all the hairdressers and barbershops in London were shut and people made do with self-administered trims or the best efforts of a flatmate or a loved one. Hair grew wild and free again. But now the world is reopening and for some reason I have made this trip to the hairdresser the first stop on my tentative journey back out into it. Why is that? Why begin here?

It is more than purely vanity. I have missed the experience of being in this salon. I have missed being sat here in this chair, swaddled in a cape, listening to the radio and the soft chirping of the scissors. I have missed the other less visible ways that a haircut prepares me for my entanglements with the social world. It is clear to me that I am not just here because my hair needs cutting, I am here for an encounter. I am here to experience a particular kind of care. A care that can be found nowhere else.

\*

My hairdresser is called Susana. She is from Zaragoza in Spain. She has tattoos all the way up each thin arm and today is wearing a black vest top with the words *Daughters of Satan* written in big white letters. She is a pleasingly incongruous figure against the polite olive-green walls and designer tiles of the salon where she works.

Susana tells me that she always wanted to cut people's hair, that when she was little she used to cut all her dolls' hair, shorter and shorter and shorter until there was no more hair to cut, at which point she would run to her mum in tears. During lock-



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down, whilst her work as a hairdresser was temporarily suspended, she began rescuing sick and injured pigeons from the streets of London, bringing them to her small flat and slowly nursing them back to health. A year later she has created her own pigeon hospital and regularly receives calls from friends and rescue services about housing injured birds. She is currently looking after nine pigeons. She gives each of them a name when they arrive, all of them named for classical gods. Her most recent arrival is called Zeus.

According to Kurt Stenn in his book *Hair: A Human History*, some of the earliest hairdressers would have been medicine men, “spiritual caregivers” who made no distinction between treating the body and cutting hair. Their role was to balance the spirits of life and illness in the body, and to do so they would use “incantations, bloodletting, trepanning (boring holes into the skull), and hair removal to eliminate noxious spirits.” These were mysterious and powerful figures in their communities, given responsibility for the bodies and the souls of those to whom they tended.

Susana may not look much like a medicine man or a witch doctor, but there is something quietly mystical about her. She wears that old magic lightly, but she wears it nonetheless. Susana has cut my hair for several years now. She is kind and friendly and talkative, but I am still also a little afraid of her.

It’s not just Susana, though. I have always been a little afraid of hairdressers. It might be some lingering vestigial trace of their ancient, spiritual authority or it might be all those sharp scissors, but either way, in the chair I am in their power. There was the

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CARE

man at Il Barbieri in his plain white T-shirts with his picture of Rocky Marciano; the friend of my mum's who would come to our house seeming somehow more glamorous than anyone in our small village was entitled to be, like a visiting dignitary or an undercover Hollywood film star; there was Magda in Edinburgh, who ran a pop-up hairdresser's out of an anarchist café and offered each person who sat in her chair a shot of vodka; there was Richard at Open Barbers, who moved my parting from one side to the other in an act of unprecedented personal transformation; there was even, once, a nine-year-old boy who cut hair as part of a piece of performance art; and then there was Susana with her tattoos and her pigeons. I was in thrall to all of them.

Finding the right hairdresser is important. A 2018 survey by YouGov America found that over a third of Americans say they always get their hair cut by the same person, increasing to around half of those over the age of fifty-five, whilst a similar study in the UK found that over half of the women surveyed rated their relationship with their hairdresser as one of the ten most important relationships in their life.

When you find a good hairdresser you keep hold of them like few other things in your life. In their book *Hair Story*, Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps tell the story of a man called Cecil Brown who spent thirty-one years looking for the perfect barber until he finally found him at a barbershop in Philadelphia. Now, on Saturdays, he gladly travels nearly an hour to the barbershop and then waits several hours more for his moment in the chair.

This commitment, this fervour, is about more than aesthet-

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ics. Of course people want a hairdresser who can cut their hair nicely, but they also want someone they can spend an hour or two or three in intimate proximity with. It is important that hairdressers know what they are doing when wielding sharp blades so close to our eyes and ears, and it is just as important that they know what to do with our secrets, our worries, our banal small talk, our weird opinions. We need to believe that they will use their old magic wisely. That when we are under their power, they will take care of us. A relationship with a hairdresser is a mystical, intangible thing. It is about chemistry, perhaps even a kind of alchemy. And when that alchemy works, you hold on to it.

\*

I am sitting in my metal chair ...