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# The Institute

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# The Institute

**Abstract**
This is a film review of *The Institute* (2013) directed by Spencer McCall.

**Keywords**
Games, Reality

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*The Institute*

Directed by Spencer McCall

(Slamdance Documentary Feature)

*The Institute* is a mind-boggling documentary (or is it a documentary…?) about a live game (or is it real? or is it art?) purportedly played out in the cityscape of San Francisco (henceforth SF) roughly between 2009 and 2012. This game attracted players by distributing intriguing flyers around SF and Oakland. Some of them discussed something called the "Jejune Institute," some of them revealed the benefits of "nonchalance," and others were a plea for information for a woman missing since the 1980s named Eva. When the curious called the phone number, they were directed to an office building in downtown SF, where they were led to an "induction" room. From then on, the game was afoot. Initiated players would receive phone calls, texts, flyers, maps, radio programs, and other signals to pursue an elaborate scavenger hunt through the city streets – though without really knowing what the ultimate goal was.

Jeff Hull
(Photo by Dereck Daschke)

The film depicts the game as the brain child of artist Jeff Hull, who wanted to find a way to make the mundane, workman-like aspects of an urban center seem mysterious and magical, forcing participants to see their surroundings anew for the first time. Everything around them might be a clue; to what, who knows? As they participated in the emerging story, some of them found themselves becoming part of the story, or even "programmers," authoring parts of the game for others. The parallels with a "God's-eye view" of human life are obvious, and in fact the game pushes the spiritual aspect in several areas – the concept of "nonchalance," which seems to borrow from various "divine fool" traditions; the mystical powers apparently developed by the missing Eva, perhaps in conjunction with her father, who invented the mysterious "Algorithm" which may allow people to enter an alternate form of existence called "Elsewhere"; and especially in the "cult"-like attributes of the Jejune Institute and its autocratic director, Octavio Coleman, Esq. The participants interviewed all seem to be transformed by the experience – including one for the worse, who only goes by the handle Organelle and claims to have suffered such injuries at the hands of the Institute that he has not left his house in two years. Organelle, shown only in shadow to obscure his identity, implores the audience of the film not to think this is some

kind of game thought up by some SF artist – the Institute is real, and you have no idea what it's capable of.

Throughout the film, one is never quite sure whether to take the purported documentary at face value; the events and characters depicted seem so strange and unlikely that they must be fictional, right? Certainly that is the purpose of this delightfully off-kilter film, to get viewers to constantly question the meaning of everything they see, and be prepared for uncovering unexpected surprises by doing so. Two incidents, certainly unplanned by the audience, demonstrated the effect of this film in this way even during the Q&A session with director Spencer McCall. When one audience member excitedly requested more information about what drove Jeff Hull to create this game, McCall suggested he simply turn around and ask Hull himself, who was seated directly behind the questioner. Two women then shared that they had slipped into the showing not knowing what it was about, only to find that the Institute's induction room was housed in the office building in SF where they both worked. What one is to make of any of the levels of reality presented in

Spencer McCall
(Photo by Dereck Daschke)

this film likely lies solely with the individual, but no one who views it will fail to be challenged by the game at hand.

— Dereck Daschke