

Merge/Multiplex

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Abstract

The tradition of modern and contemporary art seems to be characterised by an endless pushing back of the boundaries separating art and everyday life, art and the sphere of the social. This is typically interpreted in terms of a work of merging and blurring – an effort of interference that affects dimensions of both art and life. This paper suggests an alternative conception. Drawing upon the metaphor of electronic multiplexing, it argues that, while never simply absolutely distant from one another, art and the sphere of lived relations and social interaction are closely interleaved and yet retain a sense of distinct, differentiated identity. The energy of their relation, their potential to suggest new relations, depends upon an interplay of heterogeneous and always contingently determinable component signals.

Keywords: everyday, socially engaged art, interference, multiplexing

Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of interference in another context. Not in terms of the spectre of a machinic economy of the image, in which visibility precisely is put at risk, but in terms of the aesthetic identity of socially engaged art. I am thinking of interference specifically as a form of blurring – the apparent obfuscation of identity. There is the conventional sense, for instance, in which contemporary socially engaged art blurs the lines both between art and ordinary social life and between art and other disciplines (ethnography, social work, etc.). Despite this specific focus, I am hoping that the issues I raise have more general implications, addressing not only the limits of art but also the limits of strategies of interference. Towards the end of this paper, my aim is to propose an alternative to the blurring of boundaries, to suggest the possibility of another way of drawing into relation multiple signals – not interference, but multiplexing. Multiplexing involves the spatial or temporal interleaving of multiple signals within an overall signal. The signals are combined but maintain their distinct identities and can at any time be separated into their component parts. This provides a means of conceiving socially engaged art practice differently, less necessarily as a site of aesthetic ambiguity than as one of unexpected clarification. Indeed these tendencies are not so easily opposed.

Everyday Practice

The title of a recent book on socially engaged art practice, “Living as Form” (Thompson 2012), suggests a contemporary transition beyond ordinary artistic means and ordinary contexts of art. Life itself now takes shape as a form of artistic practice. Of course the danger here, in this specific context of blurring and interference, is the one-sidedness of the relation. Rather than equitably merging, life appears to be sublated within art. The title suggests a very conventional Hegelian framework in which art discovers a relation to its other, consumes its other and renders the other in its own terms. This issue of which of the two dissolves into the other, or how precisely they can find means to collapse together in a non-subsuming manner, is always fraught and never easy to resolve. Of course this title and the modes of social engaged art that concern it link to a very long tradition of utopian avant-garde practice that aims to disrupt the boundaries between art and everyday life and to foster new contexts for engaged living.

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, for instance, Peter Burger argues,

The European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life of men. (Burger 1984, 49)

We can find all sorts of evidence for this in the manifestos of the early 20th century avant-garde, from the Italian Futurist, Umberto Boccioni's, call for a "[l]iving art" that "draws its life from the surrounding environment" (Danchev 2011, 11) to the Russian Constructivists, Naum Gabo and Anton Pevzner's, insistence that "[a]rt should attend us everywhere that life flows and acts...at the bench, at the table, at work, at rest, at play" (Danchev 2011, 193). It is evident, as well, in French Surrealist, Andre Breton's, summoning of an "absolute reality, a surreality" (Danchev 2011, 247), in which dreaming and living are combined, and in Romanian and French Dadaist, Tristan Tzara's, proclamation, "Freedom: DADA DADA DADA, a roaring of tense colours, and interlacing of opposites and of all contradictions, grotesques, inconsistencies: LIFE" (Danchev 2011, 144). For my purposes, the interesting thing about these early examples is that they suggest less a seamless merging of art and life than an abrasive, energising interrelation. They acknowledge that life has its own richness and poetry. The relation, in other words, is not unequal, is not predicated on an assumed division between a dynamic, healing sphere of aesthetics and a moribund sphere of ordinary life. On the contrary, if anything, art risks its notional and disabling integrity to engage with a dynamism that exceeds and attracts it.

Later, of course, things appear a bit different as the initial integration of art and everyday life fails and, more generally, as the experience of vibrant industrial modernity passes into the experience of commodity capitalism. Theodor Adorno famously cautions against conflating art and dimensions of direct social existence, arguing that "art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art" (Adorno 1997, 296). Art, in his view, necessarily inhabits a contradictory space – it withdraws in order to engage. Any effort to reconcile the distinction between art and life would only serve to obscure the genuine bases of antagonism, the genuine forces that make reconciliation impossible:

By emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they [art works] bear witness that the world itself should be other than it is; they are the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation. (Adorno 1997, 233)

But this hardly puts a stop to efforts at aesthetic intervention. In the wake of Henri Lefebvre's foregrounding of the sphere of everyday life, in which he portrays a profoundly elusive and ambiguous layer of experience, which figures as both a site of alienation (shaped by the spectre of consumption) and as a site of utopian potential (a realm of interference, in which the schemata of capitalist relations come unstuck as they are played out, as they are lived) (Lefebvre 1961, Sherringham 2006), Guy Debord emphasises the need for strategic intervention in the everyday. He begins by acknowledging its central importance, "Everyday life is the measure of all things: of the (non)fulfillment of human relations; of the use of lived time; of artistic experimentation; and of revolutionary politics" (Debord 2006, 92), but moves on to argue that, as a sphere of "separation and spectacle", everyday life lacks adequate means on its own to serve as a genuine site of resistance. There is a need for conscious, radical, critical agents to intervene within the everyday and transform it. The urgent task is to "replace the present ghetto with a constantly moving frontier; to work ceaselessly toward the organization of new chances" (Debord 2006, 95). While initially this was conceived in terms of artistic strategies of unitary urbanism, *detournement* and *derive*, the Situationists are famous for shifting beyond aesthetic intervention, for refashioning their critique and their modes of resistance in more explicitly political terms. Their work engages a tension between their commitment to pass away from the language of spectacle (whether cast in aesthetic, political or consumerist terms) into the realm of direct action and their awareness that every

situation, every effort at subversion, is inevitably subject to recuperation (becomes an image, becomes distanced from its immediate, vital social energy). In this sense, despite serving as a continuing model for currents of activist art, the spectacle of the Situationist International disrupts any neat sense of subversive artistic agency. Art and agency are awkwardly configured, even opposed.

The 'activities' of Allan Kaprow, which involve the re-performance of everyday actions (brushing teeth, etc.) in an attentive, engaged manner, may seem very distant from Debord's more politically charged conception of the 'situation', yet they share a common assumption that the everyday requires active intervention, that it dissolves into habit and routine if left to its own devices. Although apparently emblematic of a concern to merge art and everyday life, his activities establish a tense and uncertain relation between the two. He describes his activities as having a paradoxical relation to art. They are performed, he argues, without any particular thought of art at all: "I could, of course, have said to myself, 'Now I'm making art!!' But in actual practice, I didn't think much about it" (Kaprow 1986). What is it then that links the notion of the activity to art? Kaprow acknowledges its logical position in the tradition of historical avant-garde resistance to the field of autonomous art ("developments within modernism itself led to art's dissolution into its life sources" (Kaprow 1986)). In this fashion, his non-art activities have a kind of inevitable relevance to art – they bear the imprint of art's own motion of self-critique. Yet there seems to be more to it than just this. The very act of re-performing the everyday has very evident aesthetic implications. It involves a work of making strange, of fostering heightened perceptual awareness. It follows a legibly conventional avant-garde critical model: life, the experience of life, has become empty and routinised; there is a vital need to renew it from within, to discover means to lead it to fully engaged reflective apperception. In short, the aim is to re-animate life, but this can only occur through a strategic withdrawal – if not via the traditional means of drawing, painting and sculpture then through the insertion of the slightest layer of difference within the texture of ordinary activities; the sense of re-performance rather than the blindness of action as such. Despite Kaprow's resistance to the field of art-objects, to the autonomy of images, he describes this layer of difference precisely in terms of the language of images:

This was an eye-opener to my privacy and to my humanity. An unremarkable picture of myself was beginning to surface, and [sic] image I'd created but never examined. It colored the images I made of the world and influenced how I dealt with my images of others. I saw this little by little. (Kaprow 1986)

The metaphors are all of images. They all relate to a coming to visibility, as well as a shift away from the specific to the general. Kaprow recognises this. He catches himself slipping into the terrain of the aesthetic, so insists on bringing things back to the specific aesthetically alienated field of the activity itself:

But if this wider domain of resonance, spreading from the mere process of brushing my teeth, seems too far from its starting point, I should say immediately that it never left the bathroom. (Kaprow 1986)

Overall, Kaprow struggles to position his activities beyond the frame of art, or just across its exterior threshold, but it could be argued that this alternation, this shift back and forth between interior and exterior, image and non-image, experience and reflective apperception, specificity and generality is the very motion of the aesthetic itself.

I lack the scope in this short essay to trace this history of ambivalent relation between art and everyday life, art and social action, convincingly through currents of conceptual, post-object, feminist, community and relational art to contemporary social engaged art and so-called social

practice (the latter abandoning the mention of art altogether), but many of the main thematic contours are in place. It is worth mentioning, however, that different, less grand, conceptions of resistance have emerged. Apart from Nicolas Bourriaud's (2002) social models and micro-utopias, there is also Jacques Ranciere's notion of an aesthetically grounded politics of “*dissensus*”, involving conflicts “between two regimes of sense, two sensory worlds”(Ranciere 2006, 56), which inevitably suspends dimensions of cause and effect, which, in a manner not altogether dissimilar to Adorno, brackets any simple, unmediated relation between art and the social. Also worth mentioning the efforts by critics such as Grant Kester (2004) and Ben Highmore (2011) to re-conceptualise the aesthetic, not as a terrain of separation and distance, but as fundamentally founded in the sphere of everyday experience and dialogic interaction. Finally, and most saliently for my purposes, is the Austrian philosopher, Gerald Raunig's, Deleuzian and Guattarian conception of the transversal relation between art and political activism; “[c]ontrary to models of totally diffusing and confusing art and life”, Raunig “investigates other practices [...] in which transitions, overlaps and concatenations of art and revolution become possible for a limited time, but without synthesis and identification” (Raunig 2007, 17-18). However, rather than pursuing these various debates in depth, it may be more useful to consider two contemporary examples of socially engaged art which demonstrate, as Claire Bishop suggests, that “art and the social are not to be reconciled or collapsed, but sustained in continual tension” (Bishop 2012, 40-41).

Game Over

In March 2011 the Belgian-Mexican artist, Francis Alys, produced a short video entitled *Game Over* (Alys 2011). It documents the process of the artist crashing an old VW beetle into a tree at the botanical gardens in Culiacan, Mexico, then getting out of the car and walking off. This is followed by a brief inter-title explanation and a concluding statement, “Nature will do the rest.”

The botanic gardens commissioned Alys to produce the work, which he conceived as a kind a road movie, in which he'd drive his car the entire way up to Culiacan only to crash it into a tree. He initially pitched it in terms of its capacity to establish “empathy between nature and culture”: “[t]he plan was for the car to remain in the site and devolve into a sort of giant flowerpot for the garden's flora and fauna, becoming integrated with the local ecosystem” (Faesler 2011).

However, the absurdity and violence of the act clearly lends it wider implications. The town of Culiacan and Sinaloa state generally are notorious for drug-related crime. But even more than acknowledging this violent social background, the work emerges as a reflection on the dilemmas of socially engaged art. As he is driving intently towards the “wretched tree”, Alys describes a sudden moment of realisation: “[i]t was as if I'd been punched in the chest by the absurdity and tragedy of this art mission in this lost town of Sinaloa. I don't know; a lot came to my mind . . .” (Faesler 2011). The work pointedly confronts an awkward and unresolved problem. It acknowledges that fond dreams of art-driven, ecologically inflected, social amelioration fail to adequately speak to the complex and intractable local situation. It interferes then by suspending interference, by representing it instead as a moment of bathos and indirection. In this manner *Game Over* takes shape as a charged crystallisation of the contradictory forces which shape it.

In its relatively discreet insertion into the more general tissue of social events, *Game Over* also corresponds to my notion of multiplexing. Rather than confronting the social field directly, the work is interleaved within it, yet without abandoning its sense of separate, forlorn and impertinent identity.

Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women

The work of Austrian art collective, *WochenKlausur*, appears very different. The group produce tactical activist work that aims to intervene within society and improve it. They have an unashamedly instrumental orientation, employing art as a means of achieving what they regard as

socially useful ends. *Shelter for Drug-Addicted Women (WochenKlausur* nd (a)), one of their early works, was produced in 1994 in Zurich, Switzerland. As the title indicates, the work involved setting up a day-time shelter for Zurich's drug-addicted and typically homeless prostitutes. The role of *WochenKlausur* was to act as an innovative social catalyst. They arranged a series of meetings in boats on Lake Zurich, in which politicians, journalists, legal and medical professionals came together to consider possible solutions. In short, *WochenKlausur*, produced a novel context for social policy dialogue that led to the development of an appropriate solution – the establishment of a women's shelter.

This would seem a clear example of a work in which the limits of art have become ambiguous, in which art has effectively merged into ordinary political activism. Yet the issue is not as straightforward as it seems. I would argue instead that *WochenKlausur* have discovered a very specific niche for intervening within society. They speak very clearly of taking advantage of the cultural prestige of art and its peculiar freedom to accomplish practical tasks (*WochenKlausur* nd (b)). So at the very same time that they are subverting the autonomy of art, they draw upon that autonomy for instrumental purposes. In this manner, they effectively play a trick on both art and society. This dimension of trickery, of employing all available means, whether in terms of adhering to the institutional demands of institutional art, publicising their actions in the media, manipulating local officials or conspiring with community groups, suggests a very different notion of interference. Not the interference of a pure and exterior form of artistic resistance, but the complicit, embedded interference of a tactically positioned cultural actor. Rather than fundamentally blurring the relation between art and the social, *WochenKlausur* suggest a new social identity for art and a new play of integration and distance. The gap between art and non-art is at once both exploited and rendered less pertinent. The important features now are skills, goals, tactical advantage and institutional authority. Within this context it is more important to pay attention to the multiple streams of differentiated social signals, to recognise their endless multiplexing and de-multiplexing, than to describe merging, blurring and ambiguity per se.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that throughout the history of avant-garde art practice and even within the context of contemporary transdisciplinary and socially-instrumental art projects there is still a gap evident between the art signal and the signal flow of the social as such. It is not that art lies beyond the social – that it supervenes and intervenes from without – but rather that it preserves dimensions of distinct identity within an overall, complex and multiply stranded field. Socially engaged art works more to stage its own dissolution than to literally enact it. It obtains its critical force precisely in terms of the limit play it opens up between artistically marked social actions and social actions generally.

Multiplexing indicates not only an alternative way of conceiving the relation between art and the social, emphasising dimensions of interleaving and distinct identity, but also a specific artistic strategy that shifts away from notions of interference - whether conceived in terms of blurring or in terms of some capacity for integral subversion – envisaging, instead, a more discreet and cunning etiquette of attachment and separation, correspondence and sidelong glances.

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Bio

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