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Making Exceptions: Media Art and Everyday Life

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Making exceptions: media art and everyday life

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to develop a concept of exceptionality as a useful contrast to the concept of everyday life and the domestication of media artefacts as they have been developed in the literature. First, I demonstrate that media objects that carry symbolic communication are not fixed in the time and space of everyday life. Instead, the articulation of forms of symbolic communication such as painting and television are continually negotiated by the individuals and social groups that use these objects. In the second part of the paper, I consider how artists employ the concept of exceptionality as a strategy for contrasting media objects from the rhythms of everyday life. The analysis of several examples of artworks suggests that by making use of exceptionality, media artists are able to interrupt commonplace activities including the processes of domestication and convert them into useful resources.

1   Introduction

The preoccupation in this paper is with the existence of media art, specifically art that employs new media to deliver its symbolic content and its relationship to what might be called the 'everyday'. The concept of the everyday has been applied successfully to the study of cultural artefacts - from canvases to televisions - that carry symbolic content. In this paper the notion of the everyday is shown to be tied to a discourse that frames the design and use of new media, such as desktop computers and mobile phones. This, it is argued, presents a significant challenge to those who seek contact with media that do not fit easily within the conventions of everyday life.

2   From 16th Century Dutch Paintings to Television

In a lecture given in 1977 at the Courtauld Institute in London and later reproduced as a chapter in *The Uses of Images,* Ernst Gombrich (1999:108) attempted to trace the history of what he called the 'domestication of the easel painting'. His research analyses artworks of northern-European painters and printmakers of the 16th and 17th century in order to understand the placing of these works in the middle-class domestic interiors of homes of the period. These artworks provided him with an opportunity to see the ways in which art was integrated into the everyday lives of families. By examining many paintings over time, he found progressive aesthetic shifts in the spatial arrangements. An example is the changes in the hanging of paintings on household walls from the upper reaches of the walls in the 16th century to the middle of the walls in the 17th century. Similarly, he observed how the frames of paintings became larger and more ornate over time. This was of particular interest to Gombrich because it enabled him to develop an understanding the use of paintings beyond the professional or specialised spheres of cathedrals, museums and galleries.

It was difficult for Gombrich to draw definitive conclusions about the reasons for the changes he observed for two reasons. The first is that he did not know if the paintings

accurately represented the spatial arrangements of the period as the artists depicting the easel paintings within a domestic scene might have taken artistic licence, such as embellishing the frame or moving the painting to make it 'fit' the composition. Second, the artworks did not necessarily depict the ways in which the paintings were viewed or integrated into the temporal rhythms of everyday life. Gombrich, therefore, hesitated to draw firm conclusions about the selection of rooms in the houses for certain kinds of paintings:

> *Some paintings would have been considered more suitable for the boudoir, others for the salon or dining room. I do not think, however, that we should regard this type of attention to subject-matter as very widespread or very firm. Where there was a choice, you may have preferred to put the picture of the nude in the bedroom and the still life with enticing fruit or game in the dining room, but if subject-matter had always counted for so much, the painters of landscapes or animals would have had an even harder time, for where should the painting of cattle go in the house? There must always have been members of the middle classes who simply wanted a painting to place over a sofa or in an equivalent gap, irrespective of any moral or message they contained.* (Gombrich: 126)

This passage highlights the difficulties of drawing conclusions about the uses of paintings. The easel painting's formal properties and physical locations in the home could be examined but the significance of the locations and the temporalities could only be suggested.

Fortunately, social scientists have been able to go into the homes of contemporary families to gain insight into how media objects are domesticated. One example of this research is that by Roger Silverstone and his colleagues on the domestication of television in the home (Silverstone 1994, Silverstone and Haddon 1994, 1996, Silverstone 2006)[1]. Their results illustrate how it is feasible to witness the practices and conversations that surround the use of the television in the home. They examined when members of the household viewed the television, where it was placed and why.

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[1] For related work, see also Bakardjeva (2001, 2005), Haddon (2004) and Silverstone and Hirsch (1994).

Silverstone developed a methodology for following the *career* of the media object in the home (Silverstone and Haddon 1996). He suggested that, to understand how such objects are integrated into everyday life, one has to understand the process of consumption and the use of such objects over time. This process of consumption or domestication includes the object's commodification, its appropriation and, finally, its conversion. Commodification includes the design and marketing that help to define how a media object is used, both practically and symbolically. Appropriation is the act of consuming a technology and conversion is the act of transforming an object's context and projecting its use to others. Analysis undertaken in this way helps to reveal the power relations influencing the use of television and other media objects and the transformations accompanying their arrival into the dynamics of household routines.

The work by Gombrich and by Silverstone and his colleagues seeks to demonstrate how media objects that support/contain symbolic communication are appropriated. In both cases, this appropriation is located in everyday life and as part of the process of 'domestication'. In both cases, individuals or groups of individuals develop uses for symbolic communication technologies. The term 'symbolic communication' describes communication that itself is not 'everyday' communication but, which instead caries symbolic meaning (Mitchell 1994). The 'everyday' is a time and place in which individuals and groups negotiate a context for symbolic communication involving media objects.

3   Design and Use for Everyday Life

'Everyday life' is a powerful concept that allows us to examine the daily rhythms of individuals and groups. It is a concept that can be 'wrapped' around a person's activities, allowing us to analyse their routines or commonplace activities. Michel de Certeau traces it to Freud's *everyman* and Wittgenstein's quest to understand the *everyday use* of language (de Certeau 1984: 9). It stands as a reaction against, or a suspicion of, 'the expert'. In his work *The Practice of Everyday Life,* de Certeau focused, for example, on the practices of 'reading, talking, walking, dwelling, cooking, etc.' (de

Certeau: Xvii). Similarly, Norman (2002: 8) describes contemporary everyday objects as 'things with knobs and dials, controls and switches, lights and meters'.

Erving Goffman, in contrast, studied conventional forms of talk in order to understand what he called 'everyday talk' (1981). He demonstrated how conventions of public speaking, for example, help to define the way in which an act itself is performed both by the speaker and the audience who is listening. For example: I know, when I sit down in an amphitheatre at a University to hear a professor present her latest research that she is likely to stand at the podium to speak. If she does step away from this podium, it is often to convey (by intention or by accident) the impression of being more informal or of departing from prepared notes, an example of what Goffman called 'fresh talk'. The performance of everyday life, from Goffman's perspective, is constantly interspersed with complicated conventions. Everyday media objects can therefore be understood as backdrops that provide support for symbolic communication.

The concept of everyday life is particularly fruitful in the study of the production of cultural objects. Research on the everyday aspects of life can allow us to go beyond the hyperbole of cultural producers – the genius of artistic creations, for example - to examine the routine of performing artistic roles (Peterson and White 1989). The analysis of the everyday also allows us to understand the complex practices that surround the use of media objects (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley 1991).

However, everyday life can also be conceived of as being oppressive or blinding in cases when 'everyday objects' do not interrupt our performance of the user role. The following example provides an illustration of the application of these theoretical insights.

4   Hole-in-Space, 1980

Hole-in-Space, is an artwork that was presented in November 1980 by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz and which was described by the artists on their website as follows:

HOLE-IN-SPACE was a Public Communication Sculpture. On a November evening in 1980 the unsuspecting public walking past the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York City, and "The Broadway" department store located in the open air Shopping Center in Century City (LA), had a surprising counter with each other.

Suddenly head-to-toe, life-sized, television images of the people on the opposite coast appeared. They could now see, hear, and speak with each other as if encountering each other on the same sidewalk. No signs, sponsor logos, or credits were posted -- no explanation at all was offered. No self-view video monitors to distract from the phenomena of this life-size encounter. Self-view video monitors would have degraded the situation into a self-conscience videoconference.

If you have ever had the opportunity to see what the award winning video documentation captured then you would have laughed and cried at the amazing human drama and events that were played out over the evolution of the three evenings. Hole-In-Space suddenly severed the distance between both cities and created an outrageous pedestrian intersection. There was the evening of discovery, followed by the evening of intentional word-of-mouth rendezvous, followed by a mass migration of families and trans-continental loved ones, some of which had not seen each other for over twenty years.

(Rabinowitz and Galloway 2000)

The work itself was embedded in a particular way in everyday life. The audience did not encounter the work in the everyday life of the home, but instead, in the everyday life of the urban sidewalk: walking to work, or taking a stroll (*flâner*) or visiting the city as a tourist. The artists inserted an 'exceptional' media object into everyday life. It was 'exceptional' in that it constituted a novel use of a particular technology that was not accessible to most people. It was exceptional because it reproduced conventions of everyday life on the sidewalk while also suggesting different practices (an example of the former is the conventions of using a phone booth on the side walk; an example of the latter is long-distance, synchronous, public communication on a sidewalk). An event isolated in time and space was generated that was unfamiliar to those who participated. 'Exceptional' is used here in opposition to the everyday. It does not

suggest that the event was in some way 'superior' or 'special' but that it was 'out of the ordinary' or 'particular' – in contrast to everyday life.

Gombrich's research provided insight into an unfamiliar spatial and temporal order of a particular media object. The renaissance paintings of his time mostly were found in museums, not in their original contexts of use on a living room wall. Contact with these objects at the time was mediated mainly by museum environments or by other art institutions. His was an attempt to return these media objects (and their symbolic communication) to their early uses within everyday contexts where they were first appropriated, thereby revealing new insight into one facet of the careers of these artworks.

Silverstone's research demonstrates how various groups, and particularly families, are able to appropriate media object as a form of symbolic communication, whereas other analysts have tended to regard television as a hegemonic, one-way, top-down, form of communication from media producers to media consumers (Postman 1985). Examining the domestic, everyday, appropriation of this media object allows us to see it in a different light; that is to consider its form from a less familiar angle. This angle allows us to see the trajectory of the media object's career within the home as a series of transformations in everyday time and space. This media object's arrival in the home may have interrupted daily routines, but the object's place and its symbolic communication were negotiated within the 'moral economy' of the household (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley 1994). Today, the desktop, laptop, and mobile or handheld computers are ubiquitous to the point that they are becoming everyday media objects. The concept of the 'everyday' can be usefully applied to study how these newer media objects are appropriated into the home or the workplace. Examples of the exceptional in relation to desktop computers and other digital networked media objects include the 'product launch' or purchase of a new media object for the home. In the case of these events there is an initial contact with a 'commodified' media object where the seller attempts to initiate a process of domestication in which the object may be appropriated. It is an exceptional moment while it is waiting to be 'tamed'. What frames our reaction to such exceptions in the moment when they take place?

Hole-in-Space's exceptionality distinguishes it from other exceptional encounters with new media objects such as the 'product launch'. Silverstone's moments of domestication are helpful in suggesting how *Hole-in-Space* contrasts with other media objects. The individuals participating in this event chose to engage with this artwork despite the fact that they did not know the artists' expectations about how the object was to be used. The introduction of the media object in both locations was possible as a result of collaborators such as the Broadway department stores, the Lincoln Centre for the Performing Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and others (Rabinowitz and Galloway 2000). None of these organisations took credit for the work and the moment of commodification was limited to the artwork's installation. As for the artwork's appropriation, the audience was given the opportunity to develop uses for the artwork, but only for three days. Although it intruded into everyday life, its period for appropriation into everyday life was very short. Its conversion was also divergent from other common media objects. Unlike in the case of a product launch, it is unclear what the parties contributing to this event stood to gain from their event, other than an encounter with its exceptionalness. Also uncertain is whether the event's audience converted their experiences into more than a novel story to be related to friends and family. It is possible that the artwork's participants did not 'know' they were taking part in an artwork.

Hole-in-Space's artists, on the other hand, were able to convert the artwork into something of benefit to them. The authors of the work, Galloway and Rabinowitz, were able to integrate the work into their artistic corpus, thereby contributing to their artistic careers. The event's exceptionality was relative to and mediated by individuals, institutions and technologies. The present author's encounter with this artwork occurred while reading Stephen Wilson's *Information Arts* (2002), an MIT Press compendium of late 20th century media art. *Hole-in-Space*'s appearance within an academic canon of media art suggested a kind of "art related" exceptionality. The granularity of the event's significance and the degree of exceptionality was amplified for me through an institutional history of media art. *Hole-in-Space* cannot be understood simply as '(1) an artefact (2) upon which some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation' (Dickie 1971: p. 101). The artwork's insertion into, and subsequent distinction from, the fabric of everyday life as well as its reproduction of and contention with the social conventions of

a public urban sidewalk highlight its complex ties to social spheres beyond a singular artworld.

To further develop the concept of exceptionality in relation to media objects, we turn to a similar, yet contrasting, example. Martha Rosler's (2004) *Housing Is a Human Right*, presented in 1989, was similar to *Hole-in-Space* in that it was located in a public space (only a few blocks south in New York's Times Square). The work used the large electronic billboards of the square's buildings to display the words 'HOUSING IS A HUMAN RIGHT'. This message might be unusual in an iconic commercial public space such as Times Square. But the media object was not itself exceptional in this place and time. The electric billboards were present before the artwork and remain there. In this case, the exceptionality of the artist's intervention was created by a departure from the media object's conventional use (displaying a social rather than a commercial message). The foregoing discussion suggests that media art can offer exceptional contact with media objects through encounters with the unfamiliar media object and through encounters with the exceptional use of everyday media objects.

This is not to imply that the goal of media art is to generate the exceptional. Media art offers many examples of the design and use of media objects that do not fit easily into a model of new media which can be explained by a process of domestication for everyday use. A media object such as *Hole-in-Space* may instead be designed for use only once without being designated as an example of an unsuccessful product or practice. It is therefore instructive to examine other exceptions in the design and use of media objects to understand their articulation in society.

5   The Exception to the Rule

This analysis of the exceptional serves as a useful contrast to the domestication process which has been shown to occur in everyday life. Unlike concepts such as 'innovation', analysis of the 'exceptional' does not look at the dissemination of technologies to understand social or aesthetic transformations. Simply, this approach considers breaks or hiccups in everyday time and space in order to understand the

relations between media objects, their careers and their roles as new means of symbolic communication within society. It can be employed to analyse how these breaks are introduced and how their exceptionality is framed or influenced by individual users and by institutional actors.

The first part of this paper demonstrated how research into time and space in everyday in relations to media objects helps us to understand their integration into, and transformation of, the rhythms of our everyday life. In the latter part of the paper, I have shown that a conceptualisation of the media object as being designed or used for everyday life is limited because it does not give sufficient attention to the way 'exception' influences the way media objects, especially artworks, can become embedded within our everyday lives.

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