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Everyday, everywhere and the erasure of measure

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ABSTRACT

Since the 'readymade', contemporary art practice has claimed for itself a space belonging to both art and the everyday and yet belonging completely to neither. It exists as a set that belongs only to itself. Barbara Formis (1) has characterised this incoherent doubling as the 'intervallic' nature of the readymade when considered in relation to Alain Badiou's concept of the 'event'. This intervallic or undecidable element of contemporary art practice in the 21stC encourages the emergence of new forms within the engorged image field of contemporary global culture. This indiscernible state offered by the collapse of difference between the everyday and art creates a new context and the opportunity to open a portal of equivalence and the potential to influence both the everyday and art.

This paper will examine the 'intervallic' nature of contemporary art and its capacity to interfere with global culture. The paper will examine the digital photo-image artworks of New Zealand /Korean artist Jae Hoon Lee as a proposition which simultaneously addresses and then undermines our sense of conviction of what dimensionality represents, or indeed how it is represented at all. His work offers a critique of the utopian and idealised confections of global culture presented as a type of positive 'nomadism' and represents this state as an exemplar of the means by which we suppress the local in order to fabricate the global and erect a circumstance that facilitates exploitation within the instability of the space between art and the everyday.

KEYWORDS

Readymade, interference, everyday, memory, art

Since the readymade, contemporary art practice has claimed for itself a space belonging to both Art and the Everyday, and yet belonging to neither. This indiscernible state is the subject of Barbara Formis' interesting examination of the readymade as a modern art paradigm, considered in terms of Alain Badiou's concept of the event, in her article "Event and Readymade: Delayed Sabotage". (Formis, 2004.)

Badiou's theory of the event defines a state of rupture occurring within a situation that leads to its transformation. The specific point of emergence within a historical situation is defined in his theory as the 'eventual site'. Additionally, the event's appearance within the situation is one of disappearance and this is what he refers to as the 'effacing inscription' in which the active agents of the event are effaced. Importantly the character of the event always requires its being described as illegitimate and therefore prohibited by the situation. (Formis, 2004. Pp. 250-252)

Formis has shown that the readymade can be defined as an event in Badiou's terms. In her analysis two major eventual sites are established by the example of the first exhibited readymade, the 'Fountain' by Marcel Duchamp. The first of these eventual sites is historical and the second is ontological, the first being the exhibition itself and the second the revealing of the hidden elements of Art as practice.

As an industrial object the readymade was prohibited by the situation of Art because its acceptance would have overturned and rendered invalid the existing definition. Its appearance is both a rupture of the existing order of Art and a positive gesture leading to a deeper understanding of the hidden material characteristics of Art. These elements within the production of Art that are 'present but not represented' reveal that Art is always at the ontological level a readymade. (Formis, 2004, pp, 249-250)

This identification by Formis of the two eventual sites of the readymade, the historical and the ontological, creates a relation between artistic procedure and Badiou's theory of the event. The readymade like the event involves the passage of some elements from presentation to representation. In the case of the readymade Formis also establishes that this process took from 1917 until the 1960's to be accepted and recognized and hence the term 'delay' in the article's title referring to the readymade's 'sabotage', the sabotage of artistic procedure through the effacement of each of the operational elements, the object, the spectator's gaze and the artist's actions. The readymade's prohibition by the situation of Art at the time of its appearance in 1917 and then its later delayed return in the 1960's until today in its final

canonization as the universal emblem of contemporary Art fulfils Badiou's terms for the definition of an event. (Formis, 2004, pp.253)

However, Formis raises some novel concerns regarding the readymade as event, since the readymade can never be considered as a work of Art or as an ordinary object but must always be both, indeed the paradox of the readymade is identified in its undecidability. She argues that the readymade presents itself "as an interval between its own name and elements of its ontological eventual site". This multistability renders its nomination paradoxical, a paradoxical duality, and it is this state that Formis identifies as what she calls its 'intervallic' character. Duchamp himself had drawn attention to this unique and seemingly elusive state in his defined concept of 'infralim', the situation when the difference between two or more characteristics of an object cannot be identified. This is the origin of his famous example of the odour of tobacco smoke being married to the smell of the mouth which exhales it. The readymade at the very least establishes an erratic relation between the work of Art and everyday objects and raises the prospect of a special interrelationship.

Significantly Formis further explores the intervallic nature of the readymade, and examines the position that since Art and the everyday have become indiscernible, and this state of undecidability has transformed the perception of Art, might not the more complex possibility of reciprocal relations back from Art to the everyday be possible? The establishment here of an equivalence makes for the possibility of the consideration of a representational object (artwork) as a presentational one (banal object). It is in this passage from Art to non art that perhaps exists an undiscovered terrain of revolutionary potential. (Formis, 2004, pp. 255)

The space opened up by the readymade, considered as a Badiou event and thought of in these terms, could be characterised as a kind of portal, that allows for the passage as has been established from the everyday into Art, but also back from Art into the everyday. This latter aspect has not been sufficiently understood as a latent potential within the possible. Thus far and with rare exception this has been understood by artists and has operated in practice, only as an extension of Art itself, but a portal offers greater possibilities for subversion, even the opportunity for the interference and upheaval of the everyday itself.

What then of the situation today and the opportunities for the displacement of the everyday?

In the 21stC we exist as contemporary beings in an ocean of information and this situation is akin to the recent discoveries regarding our relations as biological organisms to bacteria. We, the authoritative we, exist as perhaps only 10% of the cells that make up our bodies. We are

host to many other cellular life forms, indeed we exist as a kind of collective ecosystem. The myriad bacteria that vastly outnumber our own cells include not only bad bacteria that we understand as invasive pathogens but also good bacteria referred to as commensals (from latin for sharing the table). These bacteria aid and assist us in important ways including the operation and effectiveness of our immune system. We consider ourselves operating within this system as pure and removed or even absolute beings, the we within the constitution of our biological presence as a particular entity, and we exercise a hierarchy as a result but this is perhaps untrue or unhelpful as a way to think and is based on an active suppression of our total biological being that goes unrecognised. (Ackerman, 2012, pp.21-27)

We, in this circumstance, the we within consciousness establishes similar hierarchies as thinking subjects, we identify reaction and reflection as responses to stimuli and experience these as the most common forms of ordinary mental activity. We can reserve the special status of absolute thought for those rare intermittent moments, perhaps twice or three times in a lifetime when real lucubration overtakes and overwhelms us. But is this hierarchy any longer valid in our contemporary situation of utter immersion within the fields and oceans of data and information?

Thinking as an activity, be it garden variety reacting, reflecting or pure lucubration, establishes a gap between the multiplicity of our being and its appearance to us as our being in the world. But how does our being appear to itself? (Zizek, 2004.p.174)

Thinking as an active demonstration of being establishes something particular in relation to subjective recognition, from within such a situation even the ignorance of or failure to recognize the irruption of original thought into the field of consciousness must at least always already be accounted for in terms of its effect upon everything else appearing within that situation. It is within this new special relationship to information that thinking functions in a perhaps more complex and subversive manner. Here the image arises of subjectivity as a product of sources external to its own dynamics, read as thinking being into existence, subject to the constant stream of stimuli from the field of the already extant. This is the emergence of the new as a special disturbance within the field of the always possible. (Zizek, 2004, P.179)

In this context thought as pure lucubration and as an intermittent event represents an articulation of the potency of agency as that which is forced through the portal between the exterior and the interior. Badiou has said that he thinks of our interiority as being 'exactly composed of our exteriority'. In terms of the event this can be thought of, as Zizek observes, as the event being nothing but its own inscription into the order of being. For Badiou there is no higher being, no beyond being, only being that inscribes itself into the order of being, and

in any case what really matters is not the event itself but its consequences, the new discourse that emerges from the event. (Zizek, 2004, p.179)

In this regard the engorged field of thinking activity that each human subject now possesses via the impact of digital information and the new social media means amongst other things that the old divisions between professional and amateur, particular and universal, begin to break down. The ubiquitous presence of others is the hallmark of social media's impact in allowing for the expansion and participation of individuals in global dialogues. My own research team at Griffith University has been examining the role of these media on the developments of Edemocracy. Crucially there remains the question of whether this new media reconstitutes along banal lines of connection and communication, establishing little more than an expanded frontier of friends and acquaintances. The presence of this media offers the more radical potential for the re-emergence of an ancient conception of citizenry where the best of our lives happens in a public sphere rather than behind closed doors in individuated privacy. The best of our lives could happen, or potentially happens, in a new and enlarged community of others.

A part of the desire for transdisciplinarity may well be the seeking of this ambiguous state and the emergence of new forms of practice and conceptions of the artist, not inter relationships within cognate fields of practice but new relations arising from a radical insertion of practice into new and even unwelcome fields. New definitions, although perhaps also reminiscent of Duchamp's old definition of the 'anartist', a figure who becomes an artist by ceasing to be one, by a process of becoming something else, something subversive like an infiltrator.

I have chosen to look in this paper at two artists working locally, Jae Hoon Lee, a Korean / New Zealand artist and Debra Porch, an Australian / American artist of Armenian descent.

Jae Hoon Lee's works *Residue 1* and *2* function as a kind of monstrous remembrance, a monument to the forgotten and the discarded, an image of a collective mass of information in the process of absorption into the mind, a system of recollection and of sifting, identifying, selecting and deselecting and ultimately rejecting and forgetting.

His works raise questions regarding the nature of location and our perception of 'land'. In these images we see presented an unsettling order of familiarity and unfamiliarity. They speak of another order of geomorphological possibilities and evoke memories of primal material experiences of soil and water, but presented to the viewer in such a way that they

resist accommodation by our recognition, they contain some potential to exist as new forms, as an impossible possibility. Jae Hoon establishes in these works a visual equivalence for the rhythmic shifts of disappearance and appearance as characteristics of memory and the function of repetition serving to collect and aggregate both the identified and the dynamically misremembered.

In erecting these disparate and uncommon landforms he evokes a peripatetic sense of vision over determined by movement, and this has an acute resonance with his own displaced lived experience and insertion within cultural communities from India to New Zealand. This practice echoes the sense of other migrations and other peoples movements. The mobilized spatial movements of peoples in the contemporary world is anything but free, it is an experience of movement and displacement utterly conditioned by the political and economic status of individuals and their circumstances.

The experience of peoples contemporary migration from the land to the city or from one country to another is not one of free floating aspiration embarked upon some vicarious form of the derive, they are not people seeking a vague illusion of freedom, these are peoples who do not wish to be free, they wish to be embraced, they are most commonly displaced, homeless, devoid of work, without status or future, lacking cultural or sexual identity, they are the dispossessed on a journey from unemployment or persecution to uncertainty and probable underemployment. In an era characterised by the terror and control of movement they represent an instructive direction in which the interference capacity of Art could be directed at 'borders', be they real or imaginary. (Zizek, 2004. Pp. 169)

In Debra Porch's recent work in Armenia she speaks eloquently to this contemporary dilemma of where is anywhere? She constitutes the practice of the 'anartist', a practice based on cultural insertion and subversion.

From the window in the schoolroom in Yarravan that served as her studio and the site of her installation we see the imposing edifice of Mt Ararat. Fittingly this mythic and famous peak was the only land to become visible following the flood, the biblical icon of total disaster, and within this early mythic blockbuster the principal survivors functioned as a kind of selective ecosystem permanently adrift until the mountain appeared on the retracted horizon.

In Porch's work the mountain functions more as a fulcrum on which the memory and erasure of Armenian culture pivot. The mountain figures centrally in the mythology of the Armenian diaspora and is held as an unchanging icon of remembrance aligned against the determined

erasure of Armenian cultural presence both through the actions of Turkish suppression and genocide and the selective forgetting of subsequent Soviet era regimes and Euro-North American global commercial interests. The image of Mt Ararat now appears printed on everything in Armenia, on the currency, the stamps, even the passports of the citizens, an icon of an authoritative ghost of memories past, and this is especially revealing given that the mountain itself is no longer on Armenian but Turkish soil.

The situation for the Armenian diaspora is to exist within the operation of a type of negative synecdoche where the identification of the non part operates in relation to the whole. The unrecognized material experience of a place that has been so completely transformed by scarring memory and erasure that it is framed by the globalised rhetoric of Armenia as a now independently constructed state whatever the circumstances of its actual borders. (Zizek, 2004. Pp. 66-68)

Everything should be accepted into this limitless unfolding, the past should be forgotten, this disappearing is a form of contemporary depoliticization, it is the same everywhere, a return to a state of abatement, a stasis, even when there is a cry of fatigue for such a state of 'normality' arising from people at the very moment of revolutionary liberation, as we have seen recently in Egypt and Greece. The dilemma of what to construct in the non space of contemporary politics is always the circumstance of those subtracted from the state as a presence not properly represented. (Zizek, 2004. pp. 180)

Debra Porch's work positions the icon of the mountain in the same frame of the windowed school room and produces a daily meditation on the state of the retracted horizon interrelated with the zig / zag memories of her own displaced familial and historical migrations. This space is presented as the unstable dynamic of a linear schematic, a creative rendering of space / place as an imaginary construct locatable only within the persistence and erasure of memory and evoking Armenia as an unrepresented presence.

Both these artists use a form of interference, a going where they are not wanted, an insertion of the artist as non artist or as 'anartist' within an existing situation, offering the opportunity for subversion as a type of systems invasion. Their works achieve a disruptive viral intensity in a clamour of community aspiration and constitution, against their own disappearance within that cultural field, they offer the difference between the undecided and unaccounted actions of struggle, as opposed to the blandishments of professional Art practice.

NOTES

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