

Art of the Everyday

Role of artists in the context of 'art of the everyday'

Essay Title:

“Mostly, I believe an artist doesn’t create something, but is there to sort through, to show, to point out what already exists, to put it into form and sometimes reformulate it.”
(Annette Messenger, *Word for Word*, 2006)

Discuss Messenger’s sentiment with reference to the art of the everyday.

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The everyday surrounds us; we are inside it and outside it. The everyday includes the ordinary, the mundane routines that we take part in each day and each week, even the observations and reflections of our day to day actions are part of the everyday. All of us take part in repetitive actions, rhythms and cyclic time schedules that organise and dictate our daily lives. But the everyday is not the same for all us; the everyday in Paris is different from the everyday in Milan, Mumbai or Sweden, in 1950 and in 1990. It is also different for you and me. Factories, schools, work places and relations between colleagues also have their own everyday experience. Yet all the different 'everyday' co-exists in the same space and world. The overwhelming everyday which includes everything and everyone we interact with on day to day bases changes when put in the context of art. The concept of everyday is then found in the "in between space, the interstices, the margins and the distinctive zones of the social"¹. Where there is a possibility of understanding the everyday interactions, instead of studying them, to find opportunities for social transformations. The 'art of the everyday' is not searching for the deeper understanding of the society or a system of escape from the usual but it is interested in the relationship between the individual and the overall. As Nikos Papastergiadis writes in '*Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place, and the Everyday*', the 'art of the everyday' recognises "the way workers seize the moments that brakes their drudging routines...the transformation of a foreign space into private place called home, or even the deep embrace of a pop song as the personal anthem"². 'Art of the everyday' focuses on the everyday realm to find opportunities for adaption and alteration in the everyday through the use of art. As Henri Lefebvre believed, the everyday provides us with opportunities, perceptions into the weak points and gaps

¹ Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place, and the Everyday*, pg.22. Taken from an electronic document, URL: <http://www.networkcultures.org/uploads/tod/TOD%235.pdf> (Last accessed on 1/03/2012 at 15:23)

² Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place, and the Everyday*, pg.23-24. Taken from an electronic document, URL: <http://www.networkcultures.org/uploads/tod/TOD%235.pdf> (Last accessed on 1/03/2012 at 15:23)

through which social transformation is possible. A theory that was previously ignored by the structuralist theorist of social and cultural studies.

This new concept of the everyday encouraged new starting points and intrigued the creative minds to consider how it may fit into the context of art. Before the 1980s art, mainly paintings, were generally used as a medium for propaganda. By using art the government wanted to alter the social, Soviet Realism is an example of how the government can approve a type of art to serve the dictatorship of the proletariat. Due to this practice of art artist were concentrating on understanding the link between art and political struggle. But the new understanding of the art of the everyday brought into focus the politics of representation, with better understanding of “the local and the global, the materiality and location of art as well as a new framework of interpreting the so called popular art forms like video and photography”³. This new understanding also meant that art no longer had to be read in the classical form of paintings and the process and concept of the art work was appreciated more than the technical execution. Art work by artists such as Tracy Emin, Sophie Calle, Richard Billingham and Garry Winogrand were no longer seen as trying to represent political struggle but were recognized as pieces that were trying to create art work that changed the rules of representing cultural identity and social studies by engaging the everyday.

Annette Messager’s believes that the role of an artist is to ‘sort through, to show, to point out what already exist, to put it into form and sometimes reformulate’. Tracy Emin, for example is an artist who sorts through everyday objects and forms them in a gallery space, she does so by using mediums such as neon signs, drawings, notes, video appearances, installation/sculptures and photographs. The installation that brought her to public attention, and is her signature piece, is

³ Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place, and the Everyday*, pg.31. Taken from an electronic document, URL: <http://www.networkcultures.org/uploads/tod/TOD%235.pdf> (Last accessed on 1/03/2012 at 17:00)

'*Everyone I Have Slept With*' (c.1995). This piece consisted of a tent inside which Emin had carefully sewn and embroidered the names of everyone she had ever "slept" with. Another one of her famous installation was '*My Bed*' (c.1999). This installation shows Emin's bed after a nervous breakdown, there are empty alcohol bottles, cigarette butts, the sheets are stained with worn panties on the bed. By using materials that she has interacted with every day and by reformulating these materials and private, intimate experience in a gallery context – a public space Emin's shocks the viewers. By placing objects such as cigarette butts – an object that she has had an intimate connection she allows the audience value their own interaction with everyday objects as souvenirs, showing they hold as much value as something else that is considered as important. As Tracy Emin said about '*Everyone I Have Slept With*' "It's about conception, sleeping in the womb with my twin brother, up to my last friend or lover that I slept with in 1994. That's what the tent's about. It's about sleep, intimacy, and moments" (Tracey Emin)⁴. Emin collects, sorts out and reformulates objects of her every day and ask viewers to recognize the everyday objects that we invaluable and moments that we do not consider, in this case sleep and intimacy.

Sophie Calle, like Emin, sorts through the everyday interactions and reformulates them in a photographic documentation. For example '*Suite Venitienne*' (1979) was a photographic documentary of a stranger – "Henri B" she followed travelling to Venice. She followed this stranger for fourteen days, during this period she photographed him walking, taking photos, sitting in a café and other normal interactions. She observed the city from his perspective; this resulted in a collection of black and white photographs and a narrative that resembles "Henri B's" itinerary. By documenting these daily movements Calle had sorted through and recreated a stranger's everyday away from the original context. Similarly Richard Billingham used photography as a way of documenting other's everyday. Billingham spent six years from 1990 to 1996, while he was a

⁴ Adrian Gargett. "*Going Down*" the Art of Tracy Emin for 3 A.M Magazine. Taken from an electronic document, URL: http://www.3ammagazine.com/litarchives/oct2001/going_down.html
Last accessed on 12/03/2012 at 18:00

student at Sunderland, photographing his family. First he only photographed his alcoholic father. Later, when his parents re-united he photographed both of them. These photographs are not staged, they are not the generic family photos that one would take, and they are more of a documentation of his parent's day to day routine. He captured intimate moments, emotions and poverty of his family. He captured his father Ray and mother Liz doing mundane boring things in a council flat with menagerie of pets. Billingham did not have an agenda for taking such intimate photographs, as he said "it's not my intention to shock, to offend, sensationalize, be political or whatever, only to make work that is as spiritually meaningful as I can make it...I just used the cheapest film and took them to be processed at the cheapest place. I was just trying to make order out of chaos"⁵.

Another photographer of the everyday is Garry Winogrand. From 1960 to 1965 Winogrand photographed women walking on the streets of California. One of the famous photographs from this period is '*Los Angeles, California*' (1969). This photograph captures people and their surrounding so we are put in context. The focus is on three young, beautiful women who are taking a quick glance at a man in a wheelchair with a begging cup between his knees. The way Winogrand captures the momentary glance the women give the man makes it the focus of the photograph. We immediately notice the contrast between the women's youth and well-being and the man's poverty. This makes the photograph thought provoking. It captures an everyday incident that happens on the streets almost everywhere in most cities. The contrast and the activities of this photograph convey and reconstruct an everyday incident into something meaningful.

The artists mentioned above worked under the influence of modernism, the time when 'the everyday' was beginning to redefining itself in the context of art. Thus the artists' works discussed above are generic of that era, making it easy to justify their work as pieces that observe "in between

⁵ Luhring Augustine. *Untitled* for Art Scene Soho.

URL: <http://www.artseensoho.com/Art/LUHRING/billingham97/billingham1.html>

(Last accessed: 18/05/2012 at 16:43)

spaces, the interstices, the margins and the distinctive zones of the social”⁶. However, their work does not necessarily justify Annette Messager’s belief; “artist doesn’t create something, but is there to sort through, to show, to point out what already exist, to put it into form and sometimes reformulate it”⁷. What Messager describes is part of the artistic process, it helps artist to opionate, but putting into form and reformation in my opinion is to merely re-create or represent an incident. Therefore I consider Tracy Emin as one of the few artists of the time who prove Messager right. She sort through and showed us the objective and use materials that she directly interacted with, sort through them and reformulated - recreated it in an odd, unexpected for the context, environment. Even Richard Billingham’s and Sophie Calle’s photographs can be considered to be true to Messager’s words as they documented people they were directly interacting with everyday and most importantly they photographed these people interacting with everyday objects and people. However, other artists although they sort through and point out what already exist, have an agenda. They do not simply remake an everyday interaction as they experienced it and leave it to the audience to take whatever they want to, they add their agenda to it. Barbara Kruger’s ‘*Your Body is a Battleground*’ is an example of how artists remake everyday experiences and hide their thought behind it. Kruger’s ‘*Your Body is a Battleground*’ plays on a topic that most females deal with everyday by layering the found photograph from existing sources with aggressive text makes the beholder see the right thing, not what the mass-consumerist society wants the society to see.

I take Messager’s belief to be one of the many perspectives of analysing modern and contemporary artists and their work. Her belief, to me, seems to be an indefinable generalisation of the artistic process. We live in the everyday, it surrounds us, we are besieged in it therefore it only seems apt that artists are influenced by the everyday. To sort out and reformulate the everyday, as I

⁶ Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place, and the Everyday*, pg.28. Taken from an electronic document, URL: <http://www.networkcultures.org/uploads/tod/TOD%235.pdf> (Last accessed on 1/03/2012 at 18:23)

⁷ Annette Messager, *Word for Word*, 2006. Taken from the essay question above.

comprehend it, means to simply re-present it not analyses it or create a new meaning. However, most artists are trying to achieve an awareness of a situation amongst the public. “meaning and sense are the outcome of an interaction between artist and beholder”⁸, the viewer’s always take away opinions and thoughts from art exhibitions therefore an artist always does more than sorting through the chaos of the everyday The artistic process may include Messenger’s idea of the role of artist but I believe artist do more than just sort through and “point out what already exist”⁹. They convey something bigger than that, “artistic practice is always a relationship with the other, at the same time it represents a relationship with the world”¹⁰.

⁸ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Les presses du reel, France, 2002) pg.80.

⁹ Annette Messager, *Word for Word*, 2006. Taken from the essay question above.

¹⁰ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, (Les presses du reel, France,2002) pg.80

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