

Performing the Mundane

Interventions in Everyday Life

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“Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality. We must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviors which it gives rise to and which radically transform it.”ⁱ

Guy Debord

Artists have been concerned with ways in which art can address the more mundane aspects of life since at least the mid-twentieth century. Most notably, Pop Art integrated images from popular culture and Dada brought “found” art objects into the museum. In doing so, artists from both schools were interested in reframing the viewer's understanding and experience of familiar images. However, this recontextualization still occurred within the walls of the gallery – any extension of these ideas into the viewer's everyday life was purely serendipitous. More recently, a number of artists have emerged who attempt to do what Debord suggests in the above quote: Their work not only addresses the activities, behaviors, and routines of everyday existence, but it *directly intervenes* in these prosaic moments in order to transform them into spaces of possibility. Through design objects, performance, and the creation of instruction sets, these artists create spaces for play, ritual, and poetry in the midst of the everyday.

The three artists and groups discussed here differ radically in their approaches, but all achieve these goals. Andrea Zittel is an artist who creates designs and sculptural objects that address methods of organization and design for intimate acts of everyday experience. “Home furniture, clothing, food all become the sites of investigation in an ongoing endeavor to better understand human nature and the social construction of needs.”ⁱⁱ All of her art objects

and designs are directly utilized in her own life, making her process highly personal and intimate. Improv Everywhere, on the other hand, operates in the very public realm of performance art and urban improvisation. Their interventions into public space are participatory and satirical, interrupting the everyday routines of city residents to create magical and joyful experiences. Unlike Zittel, they create no tangible objects, but their use of video to document their interventions begins to evoke questions about the nature of the art object, and how technology, as a form of mediation, can often become the object itself. Tim Etchells expands these questions further in his cell phone-based piece *Surrender Control*, which uses a ubiquitous technology to interrupt and subvert our experiences of everyday moments. Through interaction with anonymous text messages, participants are asked to alter their behavior and create space for poetic or unexpected experiences.

Though these artists' methods vary widely, they all address the issue of transforming the mundane. Their central point of departure is the artists' recognition that "conventional social behavior is in fact a series of small, micro performances that accrue until they have amassed a historicity that is difficult to challenge."ⁱⁱⁱ All of the artists attempt to foster an awareness of the performative nature of these mundane acts, and through this awareness, create the possibility for change. In order to achieve this goal, the projects address activities or experiences that occur on a daily or almost daily basis, and that are generally performed with little thought or planning. As interventionist projects, they directly interrupt, alter, or reframe these activities by breaking social boundaries, ritualizing everyday behavior, and taking risks. In addition, though the pieces may be partially manifested in physical form, the

true expression of these pieces tends to lie in a set of instructions or rules that frame an experience – the physical piece, if it exists, is only part of the whole story.

In addition to these commonalities in methodology, the pieces discussed raise important issues regarding the nature of art. Since these artists all use everyday objects and experiences as their source material, how and why do we define them as art? Arthur Danto, in his book The Transfiguration of the Commonplace, offers a definition of art that addresses this question. In it, he attempts to analyze the difference between objects that are identical in form and content (such as Duchamp's *Fountain* and an ordinary urinal) and determine what makes one a work of art and the other simply a mundane object. The conclusion Danto arrives at is that “any representation not an artwork can be matched by one that is one, the difference lying in the fact that the artwork uses the way the nonartwork presents its content to make a point about how that content is presented”^{iv} In other words, the distinction between a work of art and its formally identical counterpart is that the artist uses the form rhetorically and self-consciously in order to make a statement, either about the content or about the form itself. In all of the projects discussed here, everyday activities are deliberately being used as a formal site of intervention in order to reveal their performative nature and to incite a rethinking of these “micro performances” on the part of the viewer or participant. In this way, these works are in fact representative of the highest goals of art – the desire to alter the perception of the viewer and to transform the mundane into the transcendent.

Andrea Zittel: Freedom Through Constraint

Andrea Zittel, under the auspices of “A-Z Administrative Services”, creates work that dramatically reconfigures such mundane activities as dressing, eating, and organizing one’s possessions. Her pieces are primarily concerned with organization and efficiency, streamlining the processes of everyday life by minimizing all unnecessary space, variation, and clutter. However, despite the austerity of her work, Zittel’s interventions also manage to be playful and fantastical. The majority of her works are centered around activities in the home, and in most cases, her own life is the site of intervention. Characteristic pieces include *A-Z Living Units*, complete modular structures for living that contain the bare necessities for living, working, and entertaining in a tiny amount of space; *A-Z Uniforms*, outfits intended to be worn for 4-6 months at a time; and *A-Z Bathroom*, in which bathroom supplies are rigorously organized by their intended function.

These pieces, and in fact all of Zittel’s works, seem to be intended as “post-optimal” or non-functional art objects. Post-optimal objects are designed in order to comment on an issue or design problem, but are not actually intended to be used in a practical manner. What is fascinating about Zittel’s work is that, despite this lack of functionality, she *does* use all of her pieces, not just once, but actually attempts to integrate her extreme “solutions” into her own daily routine. In fact, many of her design solutions were created to specifically address issues in her own life. For example, the idea for *A-Z Uniforms* grew out of her frustration working at a high-profile art gallery where she was expected to dress well every day but couldn’t afford

to buy a new work wardrobe. Where some people would simply solve this problem by buying their clothes at a thrift shop, for Zittel the experience “forced her to rethink her own relationship to the prevailing cultural and social codes of fashion.”^v Zittel says, “Just getting dressed became so complicated - what you wear and what that means. I could not possibly compete. I started thinking of how complicated it was to have different outfits every day. Having a uniform would be much more liberating. It freed me up psychologically.”^{vi}



A-Z Personal Uniforms, 1991-2006 exhibited at The New Museum.

This process of addressing everyday issues through solutions that extend the ideas of efficiency and organization to their extreme conclusions is characteristic of Zittel's work. In creating these seemingly drastic “solutions”, she comments on our cultural obsessions with finding efficiency and organization. For example, her *A-Z Living Units* are “customized living spaces that fold up to become large metal-framed wooden trunks on wheels”. They include “features such as beds, kitchens with electricity, vanity mirrors, and toiletry

shelves.”^{vii} The inspiration for these pieces was once again drawn from Zittel's life – specifically, from her experiences traveling in small, mobile living spaces with her family as a child and her more recent experiences living in minuscule New York City apartments. While most Americans would yearn for more space, she seems to appreciate the exquisite efficiency of design inherent to these tiny spaces, and her *Living Units*, which could seem almost fascist in their severe restrictions, take on a playful character in Zittel's hands.



A-Z Living Unit, both open and closed, 1993.

With regard to the form of Zittel's work, her pieces are closer to traditional art or design than the other artists discussed in that she is the only one who actually produces physical art objects. However, in most of her work, the object itself is only part of the whole meaning of the piece. The greater relevance of the work is the set of instructions, procedures, or rules that the objects necessitate. For example, her *A-Z Bathroom* includes four cabinets for toiletries, labeled “Addition”, “Subtraction”, “Correction”, and “Pathology”. While the cabinets are highly designed and crafted with care, it is not only the sculptural objects that comprise the artwork, but the modes of performing and thinking about everyday activities that the objects suggest. There is an activity implied by the objects, and without this activity,

the objects lose some of their meaning or power. Zittel embodies these implicit activities by actually using and applying her designs in her own life. It is this personal use and performance that makes Zittel's works *interventions*, rather than just conceptual pieces. However, when the art leaves the context of her life and into the environment of the gallery or collector, some of this sense of intervention and vitality is inevitably lost. As observed in one review of her work: “Critics don't quite know how to categorize her; some call her a Conceptualist, others an object-maker. A few of Zittel's collectors actually live with her creations, but most show and store them like sculpture.”^{viii}

Overall, Zittel's work is a compelling intervention into everyday life in that it invites viewers/users to see their intimate spaces and domestic activities as designed and performed phenomena. Her designs encourage deeper thought about the way in which our ideas and actions are shaped by mundane structures that we take for granted, such as clothing, dishes, and furniture. In changing perceptions about these intimate activities, she creates the possibility of rethinking or reformulating the minute details of everyday behavior.

Improv Everywhere: The Playground of Public Space

Improv Everywhere “causes scenes of chaos and joy in public spaces.”^{ix} Formed in 2001 by actor Charlie Todd, this continually growing and changing group of “agents” has staged over 60 playful interventions, primarily in New York City. These “missions” include shopping in slow motion at Home Depot, having agents dress in Best Buy employee uniforms and help

customers in the store, performing a synchronized swimming routine in the Washington Square Park fountain, and placing a bathroom attendant in a McDonald's restaurant.

Improv Everywhere's interventions inside stores and restaurants are particularly compelling in the context of this paper. While outdoor spaces, in parks and on the streets, are free for any kind of activity to occur (at least in theory), store environments reflect a much greater degree of social control. In particular, the national chain stores that are the sites of Improv Everywhere's antics have a strong interest in creating a uniform and tightly controlled shopping experience. The environment is carefully designed to exert psychological controls and keep shoppers confined to their roles as consumers. By breaking the rules, Improv Everywhere's interventions make these hidden constraints visible and ask shoppers to rethink the process of shopping as a ritualized, performed, and controlled activity.

In *Slo-Mo Home Depot*, a group of agents entered a Home Depot store, proceeded to first shop in slow motion for five minutes, then shop normally for five minutes, and finally, freeze in place for another five minutes. In the *Best Buy* intervention, approximately 80 agents donned the blue t-shirts and khakis worn by all store employees and proceeded to enter the store. Their instructions were: "Don't shop, but don't work either. If a customer comes up to you and asks you a question, be polite and help them if you know the answer. If anyone asks you if you work there, say no. If an employee asks you what you're doing, respond 'I'm waiting for my girlfriend/boyfriend who is shopping elsewhere in the store.' If they question you about your clothing, just explain that it's what you put on when you woke up this

morning and you don't know any of the other people dressed like you.”^x



Improv Everywhere agents before and during the Best Buy intervention.

While this violation of social norms is intended to be fun and playful, rather than offensive or demeaning, people often have very different responses to Improv Everywhere's pranks. These reactions tend to vary according to how comfortable the person is with having their expected routines altered. For example, the typical reaction to the group's missions in business environments is that “lower level employees laughed and got a kick out of it while the managers and security guards freaked out.”^{xi} In other words, those with the greatest personal investment in the status quo were the most upset by its disturbance. In this way, the interventions not only create a positive space of alternate possibilities in the midst of everyday activities, but they can also reveal people's attachment to routine and resistance to change.

Harold Takooshian, a professor of urban psychology, describes the group's method as “breaking the unwritten laws of everyday life in the city to get people to appreciate the

moment”.^{xiii} Improv Everywhere re-frames the possibilities inherent in a moment by performing an everyday act in a radically different and absurd manner. Their interventions make viewers and participants explicitly aware of the rigid expectations they have of their daily routines and ask them to rethink those expectations. However, unlike Andrea Zittel's work, which uses the private spaces of her own life as a site of intervention, Improv Everywhere's missions are highly visible and act directly in public spaces. Even people who do not knowingly participate in the action inevitably become participants. On one level, they are “actors” in that their routine activities are revealed as performative. In addition, they are forced to negotiate the unexpected interruption and alteration of their daily activities, and their reaction becomes a form of participation in the situation.

In addition to the live interventions, Improv Everywhere's work is thoroughly documented and lives on as an “art object” through video and narrative text. This documentation, through dissemination on the group's website, www.improveverywhere.com, creates a second audience for the work – those who experience the missions virtually rather than on site. Being a member of the on-site audience creates a more powerful and compelling experience, in that one's routine is interrupted and subverted by an unexpected experience. However, the ability to view documentation after the fact allows the knowledge of the intervention to extend beyond the immediate viewers, and while the viewing experience is not as immediate or powerful, one can still grasp the possibilities for transformation elicited by the performance.

Tim Etchells: Subverting Ubiquitous Technology

“My mobile makes the two-tone bleep that tells me I've got a text message. Scrolling down, the message reads "Write the word SORRY on your hands. Leave it there until it fades". What should I do with this instruction? Obey it? Delete it? What would happen if I did write SORRY on my hands?”^{xiii}

Tim Etchells's *Surrender Control* is a participatory mobile phone project using SMS messages as a method of intervention into everyday experience. At the beginning of the project, flyers were distributed throughout London asking the question, “Do you want to surrender control?” with the instruction to text the message “SURRENDER” to a mobile phone number. Shortly after subscribing in this way, participants would begin to receive text messages from an anonymous source – 75 messages in total over the course of five days. Most of the messages are in the form of instructions, which range from relatively risk-free mental exercises (“Think about an ex-lover, naked and tied to a bed.”) to more daring commands (“Touch two people at the same time” or “Do things slowly. If someone notices go more slowly”). At certain points, the messages build in urgency or frequency, such as this sequence of messages that arrives in the middle of the night:

23.00 hrs 40. Pinch your skin. Hard. Are you dreaming?

24.00 hrs 41. Are you dreaming?

01.00 hrs 42. Are you in love?

02.00 hrs 43. Do you love me?

03.00 hrs 44. Are you scared?

04.45 hrs 45. Are you awake? ^{xiv}

These instructions, questions, and dares intervene directly in the participant's daily life through the use of devices that are exceedingly intimate and personal. When one of the messages is received, it irrevocably alters the possibilities of the present moment for the recipient, whether or not they follow through on the instructions. In fact, actually acting on these dares is only part of the intended response. "The thought experiment is as interesting as doing it," Etchells says, "I'm trying to play with the possibilities of where a person is."^{xv}

Richard Clayton, in his commentary on the project, notes the ways in which even thinking about these actions changes the participant's perception of the moment: "You register the idea of transgression by becoming more conscious of your surroundings. Will you do it?

Who might see? What does your reaction say about you?"^{xvi} It is this heightened awareness of our own boundaries in the performance of everyday life that makes *Surrender Control* a successful intervention.

Surrender Control is the most ephemeral of the works discussed here in that it has no physical form at all, but is composed solely of a set of instructions and the responses elicited by those instructions. However, the instructions and actions are framed in a very specific way by the medium of the mobile phone, making the technology as much a part of the work as the texts themselves. Like many new media artists, Etchells uses a technology that was designed to be a practical tool and recontextualizes it in a way that not only alters the possibilities of the technology itself, but also questions how it has irrevocably changed our everyday experiences. "It shed light on how mobile phones can breach our solitude (damn, I

have to take this call), derail our thinking, exert suggestive power, spin our actions, and challenge us to set new boundaries for ourselves.”^{xvii}

Through its effective use of technology, *Surrender Control* succeeds in being the most direct and intrusive intervention of all the works discussed. Andrea Zittel and Improv Everywhere create new perceptions in everyday moments by changing their own behaviors and therefore suggesting the possibility for change on the part of the viewer. However, Tim Etchells's project is more invasive in that it directly challenges participants to alter *their own* behavior. The choice of form is particularly relevant in this project because, in addition to the issues mentioned above, these provocations would not be nearly as compelling through a different medium. Most media reflect a "one to many" paradigm of communication, such as we see in painting, film, or performance. One can only imagine that if a painting or a billboard exhorted you to "hug the next stranger you see", it might be a vaguely interesting concept, but would not put any personal onus on the viewer to respond. By employing mobile phones – objects that have become an personal extension of their users – and by using a paradigm of "one to one" communication, *Surrender Control* manages to invade the viewer's private space. This kind of intimate communication demands both attention and some kind of response (even if it is rejection) from the recipient.

Conclusion

Rather than perceiving “art” as something that operates outside of, or parallel to, our everyday lives, these three groups and artists intervene by weaving their artwork directly into

the fabric of daily routine. In doing so, their works expand beyond the traditional boundaries of the art object, as the pieces contain not only their innate content but also the content of the activities they interrupt and the responses they elicit. In most cases, it could be argued that the essential element of all of these works is not their physical manifestations, but the rules that they create or violate. In pieces such as *Surrender Control*, the artist makes this focus explicit by distilling the piece into little else but sets of instructions. By breaking everyday rules and customs of which we are usually unaware, these artists succeed in making those rules visible and ask us to question their usefulness or validity. Why wouldn't you wear the same outfit for a whole season? What stops you from touching the stranger next to you or swimming in the park fountain? In radically different ways, Andrea Zittel, *Improv Everywhere*, and Tim Etchells ask us to consider why our daily routines are what they are, and why they might not instead be sites of ritual, fantasy, humor, or magical transformation.

Endnotes

- ⁱ Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb, Berkeley, Calif: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981.
- ⁱⁱ Andrea Zittel, *Andrea Zittel*, 21 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.zittel.org/>>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ J. Klein, "Frenchmottershead: Micro Interventions Into Everyday Rituals," *Art Papers* 30 (2006): 24-27, *HW Wilson*, 1 May 2007: 25-26.
- ^{iv} Arthur Coleman Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace a Philosophy of Art*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1981: 146.
- ^v Gary Pearson, "Andrea Zittel," *Border Crossings* 25 (2006): 108.
- ^{vi} Molly Glentzer, "Dressing with a Higher Purpose in Mind: Exhibits Examine Wildly Contrasting Views of Clothes," *Houston Chronicle* 21 Dec. 2005: 1.
- ^{vii} Jan Garden Castro, "New York: Andrea Zittel: New Museum of Contemporary Art and Whitney Museum of American Art," *Sculpture* 25 (2006): 79.
- ^{viii} Karen Rosenberg, "The Non-Manhattan Project," *New York* 23 Jan. 2006: 75.

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- ix Improv Everywhere, 1 May 2007 <<http://www.improveverywhere.com>>: Home page.
- x Ibid: Best Buy page.
- xi Ibid: Best Buy page.
- xii David Hochman, "When Chekhov Meets Whoopee Cushion," *The New York Times* 27 Feb. 2005, 1 May 2007
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/27/fashion/27PRANK.html>>.
- xiii Matt Locke, "Are You Awake? are You in Love?" *Camerawork* 30 (2003): 30.
- xiv As cited in "SMS Art," *Rhizome TextBase*, 19 Dec. 2001, 14 Apr. 2007
<<http://rhizome.org/text/>>.
- xv As quoted in Richard Clayton, "The Message is the Medium," *Creative Review* 22 (2002): 36.
- xvi Richard Clayton, "The Message is the Medium," *Creative Review* 22 (2002): 36.
- xvii Angus Leech, "Private 2 Public: Artists on the Shifting Boundaries of Privacy and Public Space," *HorizonZero* 4 (2002), 14 Apr. 2007
<<http://www.horizonzero.ca/textsite/touch.php?is=4&file=4&tlang=0>>.

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