Critical Appropriation Between Art and Activism

Martin Zeilinger

Abstract:

This talk uses as its point of departure the desires and tendencies to reuse, copy, and collaborate that are generally shared among human beings, and asks how we can free these activities from their contemporary stigma of fostering theft, interfering with private property, and stymying creativity. In surveying the manifold ways in which individuals and collectives continue to use appropriative practices in order to challenge myths of originality and authority, to learn and teach, to express themselves creatively, even to survive, I explore how creative appropriation – the copying and repurposing of existing cultural matter – may realize its critical potential and become a transformative praxis in the political sense of the term. In particular, I examine some highly effective examples of recent appropriation art that aim to radically change our perception of what is at stake in accepting – or challenging – the integrity of the 'original' and the permissibility of copying activities. Martin Arnold's found footage film Alone. Life Wastes Andy Hardy (1998), for example, discovers hidden meaning within existing cinematic works, and comments on the ideologies underlying mainstream narrative genres by locating abstract, 'repressed' significations within the stories they produce. Manu Luksch's video Faceless (2007), on the other hand, tactically appropriates surveillance footage to turn it into a dystopian narrative that performs the power dynamics already inherent in the legal regime which generated the appropriated material. My talk will conclude with the proposition that critical appropriation can be effective beyond interventions operating on the level of content (Arnold) and form (Luksch). Touching on discourses of open source media activism, the cult of the author, theories of intellectual property, and the tensions between neoliberal ethics and radical cultural politics of the common, I show that appropriation art's transformative quality has never only referred to the ways in which it rewrites and remixes already-authored works. Instead, I posit appropriation as a vehicle for socio-political change – a vehicle that is on the brink of leaving the realm of the artistic and making itself manifest in the corporeal world of global political practice precisely as the logic of endlessly copyable, immaterial digital code begins to dominate cultural, political and economic landscapes.