Networks, Art, & Interruption

Matthew de Kersaint Giraudeau

The Bad Vibes Club is a forum for research into the productive possibilities of negative states. It produces original research and hosts lectures and reading groups at galleries and institutions. Matthew de Kersaint Giraudeau started The Bad Vibes Club in 2014 whilst an Associate of Open School East in London, where there is still an ongoing lecture programme and reading group. You can see upcoming events and explore The Bad Vibes Club's archive at www.badvibesclub.co.uk

For the past year or so myself and an artist called Sam Mercer have been working together under The Bad Vibes Club name on a project called *Interruptions*. We have been looking at how artists in Britain have used interruption as a technique for making art since the 1970s, and looking at artists working today to see how they use interruption. Alongside this art historical understanding of interruptions, we've also been looking at the history of interruption in other practices including politics, activism and marketing.

This essay was originally given as a lecture with slideshow at Overwhelming Imagination in 2016. In the first section I describe a historical example of an artist using interruption as a technique, and from that I produce a simple definition of the artist-as-interrupter. Then in the next section I take that simple definition and try to complexify and problematise it. Then I talk about the contemporary landscape of interruption within which people live their lives, and within which artists also operate. Then, in the third section, I offer up some examples of contemporary artists who work with the particular possibilities afforded by that landscape, as well as some contemporary interruptive phenomena from around the world. Then I write about an artwork by *The Bad Vibes Club* that came out of our research into interruption. Finally, I sum up and mention some possible shifts in our understanding of the role of interruption in artistic practice.

INTERRUPTIONS

What is an interruption? The best working definition I have found is by Lisa Baraitser, from the introduction to her book, *Maternal Encounters: the ethics of interruption:*

An interruption is an insertion or break between or among something that is otherwise continuous[…] To interrupt is to perform a stop in this flow, to punctuate the flow thereby creating a 'between' or 'among' in an undifferentiated continuum. And, of course, paradoxically the break gives rise to something. It creates a segment, a discrete object where before there was just flow. In doing so, this intervention into flow shows up flow as flow.[1]

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1. Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: the Ethics of Interruption* (London: Routledge, 2009), 59.

In 1971, David Hall broadcast 10 films on Scottish Television. The films were collectively titled Television Interruptions. Broadcast unannounced but with full cooperation from the broadcaster, these self-¬conscious, self-¬reflexive works were defined by an impulse to break the viewer's passive relationship with the screen and produce an active form of attention.

Seven of the works have been screened many times in galleries since then under the name of *7 TV Pieces*, and their place in British art history has been assured by the story told about their original broadcast.

The way British artists think about interruptions has been heavily influenced by David Hall's work.[2] From the title of "TV Interruptions," the word "interruption" has gathered art historical and political weight over the years. And from the claim that the TV Interruptions were broadcast "unannounced and uncredited," a certain method has been ascribed to interruption as an artistic practice that positions the artist as an anonymous outsider, a shadowy figure breaking into a powerful institution through the back door. Much like the artist as an avant-garde figure, the artist as interrupter is meant to break new ground and disrupt existing hierarchies. And, in the common understanding of art as interruption, we're meant to root for the artist interrupter as a hero who challenges orthodox ways of working.[3]

PROBLEMETISING INTERRUPTIONS
THE INTERRUPTED

I'd like to suggest that there might be different ways of understanding interruption than the simple idea of the artist interrupter as hero that I've just outlined.

I'm going to do this in two different ways. Firstly, I'm going to outline a philosophical and psychological understanding of what it means to be interrupted from the work of Lisa Baraitser. Secondly, I'm going to talk about recent historical changes in the media landscape that change the way we use screens.

As I mentioned above, Lisa Baraitser wrote a book called *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption*. Her interest is in motherhood and interruption, and her book is about interruption by The Other in the form of a child - from a baby's cry to the stammering attempts of a toddler to draw the attention of their mother. The crucial point is that Baraitser's interest is in the person being interrupted, rather than the person doing the interrupting.

The focus of the book is on what kind of subject is formed by interruption. She uses the term 'subjectivation'[4] which refers to the construction of a new subject through the experience of motherhood. And this experience, she writes, is the experience of relentless interruption.

"…In this elusive moment - the moment in which we are interrupted by the other, something happens to unbalance us and open up a new set of possibilities."[5]

So there's an affective, or emotional experience that happens to the person being interrupted. Interruptions are felt as moments of unbalancing, events that destabilise us, but in that moment of destabilisation, offer up a new set of possibilities for the person we might become in the future.

NEW TECHNOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

I also want to think about the changing screen media context within which artists can use interruption as a technique.

In 1971, when David Hall's TV Interruptions were being broadcast in Britain there were only 3 nationwide analogue television channels. Television was the only mass screen media available to many millions of people in their own homes, and it was their main access to news and entertainment. The potential audience of television was huge, it was passive - with no way to respond to or interact with the television in real time. It was also captive - with no other screen media available in the home.

Compare 1971 with today's screen media context. These days, normal media access might include multi-channel digital television, a

2. There were a number of artists working in a similar way on television across Europe and America around this time, and there is plenty of wonderful writing about them so I won't deal with them here.
3. The Bad Vibes Club produced a video essay about British artists working on television called Screen Interruptions that you can watch at http://tinyurl.com/fbscreeninterrupt.

4. Subjectivation was a concept coined by Michel Foucault and developed further by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.
5. Baraitser, 59.

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laptop computer using a web browser with multiple tabs accessing different parts of the internet, portable and handheld devices like phones, tablets and netbooks all able to operate on and offline. Not to mention the digital video advertising screens in cities and at transport hubs.

This change in the screen media landscape has gone hand in hand with technological developments in video capture and distribution. In 1971, artists working with moving images would have shot on 8mm or 16mm and edited their films by hand. For those films to be shown on TV they would have been transferred to video using expensive technology and specialist expertise.

Nowadays many of us have the ability to record video and upload it to YouTube or another online distribution channel on our mobile phones and tablets. Sharing videos and images is easy and ubiquitous. Most people intuitively understand techniques of interruption from advertising and social media and most people have sought (in some form or another) the attention of other people from content they have created and distributed - whether that's a professional looking video on YouTube or a camera phone image of their family on Facebook.

All artists who work with interruption must work with and within this context of an attention economy, where interruption is the norm and not the exception. It is a context in which audiences are knowledgeable (and sometimes cynical), and they intuitively understand the role of the interruptor and the interrupted.

CONTEMPORARY INTERRUPTIONS

I'm now going to show you some recent examples of interruptions. Some of them are made by artists consciously working with interruption as part of their practice, and some are more like phenomena that have arisen as part of the contemporary landscape of interruption.

REFLECTION

(reflecto porn) was published on an Australian auction website in 2001, supposedly selling the kettle depicted in the advert. If you look closely at the kettle you can see a naked man reflected in its metal surface.

These images started popping up on auction sites around the world. It seemed that people were purposely uploading photos where their naked bodies were reflected in the surfaces of consumer items that they were pretending to sell.

In 2003 a writer called Chris Stevens came up with a name for this phenomenon. He called it "reflectoporn." In order to do their work, but also not be intercepted and found out, the reflectoporners have to work within the form of the auction sites by setting up real adverts and perhaps actually auctioning off some of the items so that they can retain a good feedback score on the site.

It's a complex kind of interruption because the reflectoporners don't seem to desire immediate, mass attention - if they made their naked bodies too obvious then they would be immediately shut down by the moderators of the site because of the number of people reporting their images for explicit content. Theirs is a slow burn interruption. They want the flow of the auction site to continue for the most part uninterrupted, apart from a small - horrified or appreciative - audience that recognises their craft.

NO FUN

This is a video piece from 2010 called *No Fun* where Eva and Franco Mattes simulate a hanging on the chat website chat roulette. Chat Roulette is a website where users are randomly paired up to have video conversations, and what's interesting is that the idea of interruption is already built into the Chat Roulette interface, with each user able to interrupt the conversation and move on to the next one whenever they get bored. To realise the artwork's interruptive potential, the artists have to interrupt a context which is itself already full of interruption. They do this by disrupting the one thing that Chat Roulette is founded on - the ability to communicate with the person on the other end of the camera. The hanging body - still and unresponsive - interrupts the endless flow of speaking smiling faces. The participant in this artwork can only comment on what they see. There is no possibility for communication with the body hanging from the rope.

WEBDRIVER TORSO

Webdriver Torso is a YouTube account that posts mostly 11-second videos consisting of blue and red rectangles that change position, accompanied by a series of beeps which change in pitch. As of March 2016, it has uploaded over 490,000 videos.

They don't look like the majority of videos on YouTube. If people happen to stumble across these videos whilst searching for other things then they are an interruptive force, disrupting the flow of YouTube videos with their strange aesthetic and harsh sounds.

Because of their unexplained appearance on the video sharing site, they were the subject of much speculation by internet forums - variously thought to be messages for spies, transmissions from aliens, and some kind of recruitment test for intelligence agencies. Eventually, someone worked out that the Webdriver Torso channel was an internal channel where Google tested video compression and upload speeds for YouTube. Google never officially recognised this, but they have subtly acknowledged it in a number of ways - for example when you search for Webdriver Torso using the Google search engine, then you get a little animation in the top corner of the results page that looks like the Webdriver Torso videos, with blue and red rectangles changing position.

My assumption is that the videos were generated by an algorithm and automatically uploaded in order to collect data on process, so they were not for public consumption - not even really for human consumption. But, for whatever reason they were uploaded to a public channel on YouTube. This is an interesting feature of the Webdriver Torso videos - they had this interruptive potential inherent in their form, but they weren't designed to interrupt. These non-human produced videos required the social context of YouTube and an audience of human interpreters in order to be understood as interruptions.

DE RE TOUCH

Benedict Drew's *de re touch* (2015), was a commission for the London Underground train network. It is a super short, 10 second video that played on digital video advertising monitors that line the escalators and walkways of the underground network.

It's interruptive potential was realised in a straightforward way - the organisation that funded the commission worked with the company that operates the advertising screens in order to get permission to show Drew's film. Of course, this doesn't stop the work being interruptive - it's an ugly set of images unlikely to appear in a normal advert. The film depicts the unsexy orifice of the ear, alongside a clenched fist and a protruding sac of fluid overlaid with pulsating text. Its form is very different to the other adverts shown on those screens - it's cut very quickly and it's very short. It's a sharp disruptive burst energy, but, as with David Hall's Television Interruptions in the 70s, its interruptive potential is made possible through a careful balance of diplomacy in gaining permission, and a captive audience with no way of changing the channel.

THE 'COINCIDENCE DETECTOR'

A while back neo-Nazis and white supremacists began to use triple brackets (((()))) to harass Jewish public figures online.

Nazis call them echo symbols, and I'm not going to bother explaining why they signify Jewishness because it's racist bullshit, but the point is that racists use these triple brackets around a person's name on Twitter and other online forums. This alerts other racist trolls that the person is Jewish and flags them as potential targets for harassment and abuse.

More recently, someone designed a Google Chrome extension that did this to any Jewish name that happened to appear on a webpage you were browsing. The software was called the "coincidence detector" because it supposedly alerted you to a "Jewish conspiracy."

For example, a user might be reading a news story and this software would place triple brackets around the name of the writer whose name was on the database of the Coincidence Detector, and that would signify that the writer was Jewish and therefore the user should dismiss the article as part of a Jewish conspiracy or even get in touch with the writer in order to harass them.

It's a very peculiar technology which reflects its racist foundations because racism is a very peculiar ideology. The Coincidence Detector reaches into your browsing experience and highlights one

thing - Jewish names. Then it interrupts you with this single, meaningless piece of information over and over again. If you think about it, that's also a good critical description of racism as political ideology. Racism focuses on race as the only meaningful political signifier, and focuses on it as the cause and condition of all political issues to the exclusion of everything else. The Coincidence Detector is an interruptive technology, but it's not critical - it doesn't understand itself. And, it plays right into one of the wider problems of the internet: confirmation bias. If you're a racist, then it re-confirms your racist beliefs over and over again, but if you're not, then it's completely meaningless.

DON'T REMIND ME

Don't Remind Me (2015) by Erica Scourti is a series of screenshots of automated reminders as they pop up on the artist's iPhone. The text on the reminders are a series of short phrases that Scourti devised, and then programmed as reminders to appear at some future date. Scourti here is both the interruptor and the interrupted, and it's an interruption across time. So Erica in the past interrupts Erica in the future.

It also makes very clear the important relationship between interruption and context. Each time a reminder appears, the screenshot also captures the webpage Scourti is reading, or email she's writing, or messages she's responding to. I use reminders on my phone all the time - normally to get me to respond to an email, let me know I've got a meeting or provide me with some other practical, important and banal information. Scourti here has twisted that tiny, everyday feeling of being interrupted by yourself from the past who wants to change your priorities, using it to create a new kind of concrete poetry or an interruptive text aesthetic.

INTERRUPTIONS

Interruptions was a Chrome extension artwork by The Bad Vibes Club that augmented, modified and interrupted the user's browsing experience. Performing mostly during one week in July, 2016, *Interruptions* changed the way users browsed the web, providing them with unexpected moments of visual, aural and conceptual interruption dependent on the time of day, the websites they visited, and the content they saw.

Interruptions was both a collection of individual artworks by Sam Mercer and Matthew de Kersaint Giraudeau, and a collaborative work with Field Broadcast, who commissioned the *Interruptions* project.

CONCLUSION

Interruption is still an important technique for contemporary artists, particularly those working in the digital realm where the attention economy has made explicit the interruptive techniques of advertisers and content providers.

Artists working with interruption today have to deal with a number of issues that might not have been so pressing to an artist like David Hall when he made his work for television in 1971. These include technological developments that have resulted in the everyday use of multiple screens by most people and an audience wise to the techniques of interruption used by advertisers and artists. Contemporary artists might also be seen to be more interested in the dual nature of interruption - taking on the roles of both the interruptor and the interrupted, or questioning the political meaning of interruptions once they have been absorbed back into the context from which they emerged.