Ludic Mode:
:Irony & Wearable Devices

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INTRO

A jester, a narr, or a fool is a historical figure mainly associated with medieval Europe, although it has a longer history worldwide. The well-known tradition in medieval royal courts was to employ entertainers, among them a court jester. He was a distinctly dressed figure who was allowed to speak controversial issues and even make fun of the king. It was believed that the sharp eye and the tongue of a jester disguised in humor were often pointing to 'the truth' in the issues concerned. The jester was an entertainer but also an adviser and a critic of the world. An appreciated figure with low social status, but more freedom to speak out on problematic issues.[1]

This paper investigates how irony and humor function in artistic wearable works. These are works that frequently use and reference technology, but do not necessarily follow the typical approaches of wearable design, nor have the typical characteristics expected from wearable computers, such as invisibility, hands free usage, and an ability to sense what the user senses. (Barfield and Caudell, 2001) In contrast these artistic devices are experimental; they are commonly playful in nature, and often highly visible

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[1] http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/640914.html [accessed 10.2.2008] Fools Are Everywhere, The Court Jester Around the World by Beatrice K. Otto (2001), http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jester

in comparison to the disappearance of technology.

The playful nature of artistic wearable works, as well as a certain kind of humoristic attitude, points to a probable ironic aspect. The assumption is that these kinds of works can be scrutinized via the concept of irony, which opens up a possibility for multiple interpretations. "Irony is about humor and serious play" as Donna Haraway has written. (Haraway, 1991) I propose that playfulness and irony in this kind of art works enables fresh viewpoints into the role of technology and its meaning to us.

In this text I am using, among others, the following terms; irony, playfulness, device and wearable art:
-In the first section of the text I am introducing briefly the concept of irony.
-Playfulness, as well as humor, is a concept, which is often related to irony. In the text I am using it to refer to artistic and creative action that combines various elements and often produces amusing results, some of which can be seen as ironic.
-A definition for a device by several online reference dictionaries is for example: "an instrumentality invented for a particular purpose; "the device is small enough to wear on your wrist"", or "something in an artistic work designed to achieve a particular effect". With the term 'device' in this text I am referring to an artifact that contains technology and is small enough to be portable (by a human). The concept of Device Art is introduced in its own chapter in the paper.
-With the term wearable art I refer to artistic productions which are wearable or portable, and which contain technology.

IRONY

The concept of irony is rooted in western culture with a long tradition and many scholars -for example, Socrates- throughout the centuries have theorized about it. The word 'irony' appeared in English language as late as 1502, and not before the eighteenth century was the word 'irony' in general use in literature. (D.C.Muecke, 1970) During the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century the concept of irony went through a radical transformation, and new meanings were developed. Earlier irony was considered mainly intentional 'figure of speech'. Later, in the early nineteenth century irony could be seen as observable relationships between humans and the world, or reality. Muecke calls the former as Instrumental Irony –someone being ironical- and the latter form as Observable Irony, which means that things are seen or presented as ironic.

> Where before irony had been thought of as essentially intentional and instrumental, someone realizing a purpose by using language ironically… it now became possible to think of irony as something that could instead be unintentional, something observable and hence representable in art, something that happened or that one became or could be made aware of…; from now on irony is double-natured, sometimes instrumental, sometimes observable. (D.C.Muecke, 1970)

This concept was further developed by Friedrich Schlegel, for him the ironic situation of man is to be a finite being attempting to comprehend an infinite and incomprehensible reality. (D.C.Muecke, 1970) Schlegel considered irony as paradoxical and dialectic. It was an instrument of positive engagement at the same time that it was an

instrument of detachment. (Knox, 1973)

The term 'irony' is familiar to all of us, and its importance in the wide field of modern and contemporary art is obvious. Irony has been analyzed in various fields, notably in the field of literature, theatre and philosophy, but also in music, in visual arts, and even in politics.

Irony is easily associated with humor and it is often related to playfulness. Irony is not something specific, which makes us smile, but more as a kind of a position where literal meaning is contradicted by the context of the work or event or by other parts belonging to the work. This contradiction exposed to the observer or reader makes her doubt the literal meaning, and further on interpret a new often contradictory meaning to the work. Irony is produced in this kind of conjunction of the said and the unsaid. Norman D. Knox has defined irony quite clearly,

> as the conflict of two meanings which has a dramatic structure peculiar to itself: initially, one meaning, the appearance, presents itself as the obvious truth, but when the context of this meaning unfolds, in depth or in time, it surprisingly discloses a conflicting meaning, the reality, measured against which the first meaning now seems false or limited and, in its self-assurance, blind to its own situation. Irony "lies," but it does so only as a dramatic means of bringing two meanings into open conflict. (Knox, 1973)

However the purpose of this paper is not to engage into a detailed debate on irony, but to investigate how irony functions in visual arts, or more precisely in artistic wearable works. The paper will primarily consider irony in its modern meanings.

CASE 1 Maurizio Cattelan.

Italian Maurizio Cattelan's works are often sculptural installations or performances. They can be described as being both comic and tragic, peculiar and familiar. These works seem to be telling something about our world and us, simultaneously they are challenging the dominant structures of the contemporary value system. His works are blurring the distinction between art and reality to provoke a reaction. (Arie, 2004) Cattelan is reproducing reality, familiar things which we are able to recognize immediately, for example such as the figure of the Pope in his installation 'The Ninth Hour' (1999)[2]. Yet Cattelan is not using the representational sculpture of the Pope in its original or expected context, but is creating a new meaning for it by subtly manipulating the context in the created imagery, in this case the Pope has been struck down by a falling meteorite. The irony is produced in an almost classical sense, by intentionally saying one thing but meaning something else, and inviting the reader, or the observer, to interpret the meaning.

In irony the one and the same perspective is able to produce contesting views, like explained earlier, the reader or the observer is directed to distrust the literal meaning by some kind of inconsistency in the presented context, or in their relation to the reality. It is

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[2]   "La Nona Ora", 1999

interesting that it seems irony is able to unmask preconceptions and appearances, and that the paradoxical character of irony is able to reflect the two-faced nature of reality.

CASE 2 Upside-Down Glasses

Carsten Höller's Upside-Down Glasses (2001)[3] is a work where the users visual field is manipulated with various types of optical transformations, such as inversion, displacement, reversal, magnification or scrambling. Höller has said that his intention is in the spreading of doubts, the user needs to re-consider what is reality, is there reality and how is reality. This Höller's work, which belongs to the field of fine arts could fall under a category of augmented or mediated reality, however it is also a wearable device.

WEARABLE ART & TECHNOLOGY

My (the author's) current research focuses on the artistic use of wearable and mobile technologies. The research is specifically concerned about artistic works and experiments that seem in some ways to contradict the predicted direction of technological development, for example towards ubiquitous computing. (Weiser and Brown, 1996)

The majority of projects and papers in the general area of wearable computers and - design are focused primarily on functional and user-interface issues, as well as inventing solutions for implementation of hardware into soft materials and wearable systems. However, an increasing amount of artistic experiments with wearable and mobile technologies are emerging among this field, which are, seemingly intentionally, not following the assigned criteria. Contradictorily the works often appear as absurd, highly visible looking wearable devices with playful characteristics and aesthetics, nevertheless wearability is a standard feature. These kinds of works reference technology in a playful manner, rather than utilize it directly in a purposeful and functional way.

CASE 3 Fruit Fly Farm

Fruit Fly Farm by Beloff (2005-06) is a wearable space station designed for fruit flies. The constructed nest for the flies is located in the center of this traveling artificial habitat that is also embedded with a camera mobile phone observing the entire community of flies. The public can access the phone camera by sending a text message, which will trigger the camera to capture an image. The image will be sent back as a reply and also uploaded to a dedicated website, where the received SMS-messages (comments) will be displayed together with the accompanying image. Traditionally fruit flies are considered to be a nuisance and a pest, but in this work they are treated as a living community that can be observed by the public. For the "owner" of this wearable Fruit Fly Farm, it is a pet that requires responsibility and care. The nest capsule, which is located in the middle of the Ø20cm transparent acrylic sphere, contains rotten fruits and needs to be re-filled approximately once a week. The outer sphere and the nest capsule are perforated with holes and the flies are free to fly in and out of the nest. The audience members are invited to adopt the work and become responsible for the fly farm.

Wearable artistic works can also be considered from an ironic point of view. When a work is constructed as wearable it apparently references wearable technologies and

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[3]   C. Höller references the famous scientific experiment from 1890s by George Stratton, where Stratton experimented with perception by wearing upside-down glasses eight days in a row.

wearability, and in this way the work gets placed into the context of wearable technologies. However the absurd functionality and the peculiar aesthetics of the work create mistrust in the observer about the purpose of the work. This puts the observer into a situation for making an own interpretation about the work and its context. It allows an observer to consider different criteria, which possibly opposes the criteria assigned to projects with primarily functional purpose.

Additionally many artistic wearable projects not only create a commentary on the role of technology, but they commonly offer a concrete experience with technology. Instead of creating functional tools the artist offers for the public a playful experience with technology, which points to the possibility to reconsider the values and expectations usually assigned to technology.

The ironic nature of the works opens them for multiple interpretations -as well as for possible misinterpretations. Obviously irony is just one possible way or interpretation to look at these kinds of artworks. Linda Hutcheon argues that to call something ironic (or nostalgic) is less a description of the entity itself than an attribution of a quality of response by active, emotionally and intellectually engaged subjects. "Irony is not something *in* an object. Irony "happens" for you (or, better you *make* it "happen") when two meanings, one said and the other unsaid, come together, usually with a certain critical edge." (Hutcheon, 1998)

CASE 4 A Bitman

Ryota Kuwakubo's and Maywa Denki's Bitman is a simple "shaker" device to be worn around the neck. When the user shakes the device the Bitman will start dancing in the device, the more one shakes the faster the Bitman dances. The device is a simple wearable 8 by 8 pixel LED-screen with an animated figure. It became a mass product in 2001 and currently one can find it sold online for about 50 USD. Bitman is an example of the Japanese approach to media art: Device Art.

DEVICE ART

Swedish theorist Johan Redström has written following about the practice of design & technology from the Western point of view:

> though phenomenological, sociological and other studies have challenged and expanded our understanding of technology, practice still seems to be dominated by an instrumental perspective. Central to our understanding of technology still lies notions of use, the idea that technology is the means for achieving certain ends, often by amplifying the power of our actions. …And so, design as it relates to technology seems to involve the specification and implementation of the ways it should work, and what actions it might support. We describe technology in terms of its functionality. (Redström, 2005)

It is interesting to compare this western attitude to a perspective from another culture. One of the differences in the tradition of understanding art between Western culture and Japanese culture is that in Japan the separation between fine art, applied art, design, entertainment and high art versus low art didn't exist. Japanese tradition has

embraced these fields as continuous form of visual culture (Kusahara, 2007) whereas Western culture has developed quite rigid separation between them. For example, design and fine arts are considered separate although related disciplines, in a same way as craft and design.

It seems that in the western approach the artifacts emerging from the fine arts area are expected to be unique, single pieces with no specified functionality or concrete relation to everyday life. Whereas commercially (mass-)produced artifacts are considered to be design and generally expected to have a functional purpose.[4]

Device Art, as a concept, has been created in order to offer a different viewpoint to the relationship between art, science, and technology, as well as between art, design, entertainment and commercial activities in comparison to the Western notion. In defining Device Art as an approach to Japanese media art Machiko Kusahara writes that artists visualize what technology means to us, and help to reveal what is happening inside the black box of technology when information technologies become more invisible and ubiquitous in our daily life. According to Kusahara Japanese artists have often a playful and humorous approach in their artistic practice while still involving criticism. When artists visualize what technology means to us, which –as stated by Kusahara- can be a form of being critical without necessarily being negative towards technology. "It is important that an artist who understands the nature of media technologies creates a space where viewers – participants can share such understanding through their own experiences." (Kusahara, 2007)

When art has no straightforward practical purpose the works of Device Art, as well as other similar types of art works often result in an ironic or playful character. This presents a request or desire for a variety of interpretations for technology and its use.

HYBRONAUT.

Irony has been said to be rooted in time, location and in the culture where it is taking place. Not everything that we see as ironic will be seen similarly by someone from another culture. Linda Hutcheon writes "its [irony's] inability to free itself from the discourse it contests-- there is no way for these cultural modes to escape a certain complicity, to separate themselves artificially from the culture of which they are a part." (Hutcheon, 1998)

Hybronaut is a concept, or a figure, immersed in a context of wireless networks and mobile & wearable technologies. The concept of Hybronaut was created to be able to consider a user and a wearable device as a single unit instead of investigating them separately.(Beloff, 2007) The name Hybronaut refers to a concept of hybrid space, which is a concept defined among others by Adriana de Souza e Silva. In short, within hybrid space social practices occur simultaneously in digital and physical spaces. In other words physical and digital spaces merge into hybrid space via their simultaneous (social) use. (de Souza e Silva, 2006)

Hybronaut becomes a kind of space traveler, who is equipped to be able to exist within hybrid space and explore its possibilities. It is a concept combined with constructed artistic equipment, which offers the public a non-standardized experience with technology. Hybronaut is created within the realm of art, as an attempt to pin down

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[4]   As M.Kusahara has noted: "Duchamp's Rotorelief and Schoffer's Lumino did not succeed in a society in which art was divided from everyday life." (Kusahara)

(or categorize) an increasing amount of artistic works, which appear in a form of wearable technologies, but do not otherwise follow the typical characteristics of wearable and mobile development. The focus is in works, which are wearable or portable, mobile and networked, either via digital network or with another distinct connection to the surroundings. While being a Hybronaut, the user is not only appearing in a physical environment, but is simultaneously 'appearing' in a virtual sphere, therefore the possibilities for a variety of concretely linked relations are expanded via the means of technology. These relations can include persons, environment, nature and other artifacts, whose presence is emphasized in the Hybronaut's equipment with a constant connectedness, and with a constant awareness of the connectedness.(Beloff, 2008)

The often curious looking wearable device, which is an essential part of the Hybronaut, raises curiosity through its visual appearance, which further on fosters interaction and communication with the public. Like in irony, which is emerging in the conjunction of two or more contesting views, Hybronaut is located into the context of wearable technologies, and at the same time Hybronaut offers an unexpected perspective into that context. One could say that Hybronaut functions in the manner of a jester; as an entertainer attracting the public, but simultaneously as a critical researcher investigating the possibilities and impact of wearable technologies and our experience with them.

CONCLUSION

Playfulness in relation to technology, as well as humor and irony combined with an awkward appearance opposes the existing ideals commonly related with commercially produced wearable or mobile devices. The use of irony's abilities to create contesting viewpoints with one and the same perspective, and the concrete experience offered to the public with the wearable art works, can be seen as important factors when trying to understand our relation to technology and its meaning to us.

Irony can be an intentionally chosen tactic by an artist to engage the subject matter with humor and at the same time gain critical detachment from it. Irony allows one to playfully deal with the topic or the context of the work and simultaneously make crucial inquiries about it.

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