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Scripting Artworks: Studying the Socialization of Editioned Video and Film Installations

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# Conclusion

It was in the exhibition space that this doctoral dissertation began. More precisely, it was when I noticed that Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time* had encountered a variation in its display and the number of components exhibited. I wondered why two manifestations of the same artwork could present such variations. When I began delving into the subject, I learned that video and film installations were sold in limited editions; that in order to remain exhibited, they had to be preserved, a process that might lead to modifications in the appearance of the work; that artists sometimes reinterpreted their works for the occasion of an exhibition, which led to the making of a new version of it, yet, that this version would be considered another version of the same work, and not a new work. Therefore, when trying to articulate the identity of these artworks, many parameters had to be considered: their concept and their materiality, but also the history of their exhibition, distribution, and preservation.

My initial observations led me to identify a certain number of features of video and film installations, among them their time-based nature, their multi-instantiability, and their limited life span. Also, I learned that they are two-step artworks: their physical manifestation in the exhibition space is preceded by the interpretation of a series of notations prescribing how they should be displayed. Therefore, only when exhibited do these works physically exist.

Another feature of video and film installations is that they can be released as editioned artworks. Similarly to photographs and lithographs, which are usually sold in limited editions, it has been current practice since the 1990s to sell video and film installations in limited editions. The limit of the editions available on the market is nevertheless artificial, as the reproduction of these works could, in principle, be infinite. All the same, limiting the editions is what enabled these works to be integrated into the art market that has for centuries been based on the idea of unique works of art. In most cases, video and film installations are sold in editions of three to five, and, in theory, all the editions are the same. If an artwork is sold in an edition of three, it means that three institutions or private collectors can acquire it. It also implies that the work can be exhibited concurrently in three different places, and in three different manners because the instructions leading to its physical manifestation could have been interpreted in slightly different ways. Taking into account all these features, determining the identity of these artworks is challenging because there are many variables to consider.

Besides the fact that they are editioned, another complicating factor is that these artworks often exist in different versions. For instance, a moving image-based artwork can exist as an installation, presented in a museum, and as a film projection, screened in a cinema. This is the case of Andy Warhol's *Outer and Inner Space*, which can be projected in a cinema either as a single or double projection, or it can be exhibited in a museum as a double

projection. Moreover, since the film reels have been migrated to more recent formats, the artwork can either be presented on 16 mm, DVDs, or HD video. When the artwork is exhibited, decisions need to be made: how is it going to be presented (single or double projection)? And in which format (film, DVD, HD file)? Like many other video or film-based artworks Warhol's *Outer and Inner Space* offers different presentation formats.

In summary, the majority of video and film installations are editioned and exist in different versions. These features affect these works differently. The first feature makes them multiple works that are – in principle – all equivalent. Indeed, in theory, editions 1/3, 2/3 and 3/3 are all the same. Yet in practice, as the research in this dissertation has shown, while these editions increase the visibility of these works, it also means that they start to lead lives of their own, with slight variations occurring each time the works are exhibited. The second feature, their existence in different versions, complicates matters even more in that the material composition changes with each exhibit, often greatly impacting the aesthetic appearance of the work. Similarly, as the case of John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* discussed in Chapter Five shows, the appearance of a new version might send the previous one into oblivion, thus potentially erasing part of the work's identity.

There are other reasons why these artworks exist in different versions, why they have *plural immanences*, as Gérard Genette would say. One has to do with the fact that they are two-step artworks. Since the prescriptions about how to install the work in the exhibition have to be interpreted by various persons, the end result can vary. Moreover, if the artist is involved in the display, he/she can use the installation process as an opportunity to alter the work. These interventions by artists can raise ethical questions, as the work is not simply being reinstalled, but reinterpreted. Another reason why variable media artworks can change over time has to do with the technologies used to create and exhibit them, due to the fact that they have a limited lifespan. In order for these artworks to remain presentable, they have to go through a preservation process that will affect their functioning as well as their appearance. In some cases, the difference is barely noticeable; in others, the difference is striking.

One of the major issues when dealing with artworks that have a variable nature, like video and film installations, is to determine their identity: what they actually consist of, both conceptually and materially. In the same way that a person's identity is not stable, the identity of a video or film installation is unstable. The identity of a human being develops over the course of many years. During this process there are always features that remain the same, as for instance a person's genetic material, but there is also a part of his/her identity that is shaped by external factors such as cultural, political, religious, and environmental contexts,

and by outside events. Correspondingly, the artwork has a core, features that remain the same, but its identity is also shaped by events that it goes through over time, namely its exhibitions, distribution and preservation. It is these events that ensure the socialization of the artwork, its presence in the world. These three events are closely intertwined since, if the work has not been preserved, or if its exhibition support has degraded, for instance, then it cannot be exhibited. Also, if the work is not distributed, it cannot be acquired, and it is therefore less likely that it will be exhibited and preserved, since these are two notable functions of institutions.

The exhibition of video and film installations enables them to "happen" since it is only after a series of prescriptions has been interpreted that their physical manifestation occurs. What these works physically look like when not on display is very different than when they are on display. When in storage, they consist of different pieces of equipment and reels of films or videotapes kept on shelves. The exhibition is also a moment when the meaning of the artwork is *framed*. The framing produced for the occasion of an exhibition can offer new interpretations of the work, it can put forward elements that had not been seen or considered before. Therefore, exhibitions can contribute to the shaping of the identity of artworks.

Considering the fact that video and film installations encounter alterations and different states during their life cycles, studying their exhibition histories enables one to identify the different versions of a work and understand how it has evolved over a certain period of time. The three case studies of this dissertation have shown how the exhibition can affect the shaping of the identity of an artwork. In the case of Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time*, it was shown how the exhibition space can influence how the artist decides to display the work in addition to how it can lead him to alter the work. Moreover, each exhibition offers artists the chance to revisit their artistic production. This can either lead them to alter their work, as Gordon did with *Play Dead; Real Time* when he decided to add a second monitor to extend the walk of the visitors, or even to create entirely new works, as he did in 2006, when he manipulated the footage used in the making of *Feature Film* (1999) to make *M: Futile Fear*. The discussion of Mike Kelley's *Day Is Done* has shown that a specific exhibition – what I qualified as a landmark exhibition – can overshadow the interpretations of subsequent exhibitions of a project or of its offspring. In this particular case, even though the re-exhibition of *Day Is Done* as seen at the Gagosian Gallery in 2005 is impossible since the large-scale installation has been fragmented and the offspring spread over collections around the world, it continues to exist as the most important reference for interpreting the offspring. Finally, the last case study has shown that in some cases exhibitions can even harm the

socialization of an artwork. In fact, they can be counter-examples, since the work does not appear in them as it was intended by the artist, as was the case of the inaugural exhibition of John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*.

The distribution of an artwork is another important phase in its life cycle. If an artwork is not distributed, its socialization can be compromised. Editioning and fragmentation are the two main distribution strategies for video and film installations. Editioning is a form of distribution that has been developed in order to make these works fit into the art market, especially since institutions customarily acquire artworks that are sold in limited editions rather than unlimited artworks. Editioned artworks have a greater chance of socializing, as they can be exhibited in more than one place at the same time. Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time* is a prime example of that, having been exhibited nineteen times since 2003. Its inclusion in different exhibitions held concurrently would not have been possible if it had not been released on the market as an edition of three. More rarely, there are works that were first sold as unique artworks but, at some point in time, became editioned artworks, as if to catch up with the manner in which video and film installations are sold nowadays: in limited editions. This was the case of John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* created in 1982 and sold to the National Gallery of Canada in 1985 and which became an editioned artwork in the years 2000.

Mike Kelley's *Day Is Done* is an example of fragmentation as a distribution strategy. After its inaugural exhibition, the large-scale installation *Day Is Done* was fragmented and released on the market as 25 video/sculpture installations. Other offspring were also released on the market, some in limited editions, such as the single-channel videos (that have also been integrated into the 25 video/sculpture installations), the series of photographs, and others in the form of individual works of art, such as other props used during the making of the *EAPR* videos that have not been integrated into the video/sculpture installations. As I pointed out in Chapter Four, this strategy of distribution is also the only way to make the production of such a large-scale project financially feasible.

The third event that is crucial to the socialization of a work is its preservation. Indeed, if an artwork is not kept in a "functional" state, then it cannot be exhibited. The third case study of this dissertation has shown how crucial it is for an artwork to have a suitable presentation format. When first exhibited in 1982, John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* encountered technical difficulties and it was impossible to maintain the synchronization of the three films. Once a stable format was found and the synchronicity of the projection could be ensured, the work could finally be exhibited on a continuous basis.

The series of changes that these artworks go through over time necessitates approaching them as *continuums*. It is by studying their life cycles that one can better grasp what their identity is, what they consist of, conceptually and materially. For the purpose of my study, in which I aimed to examine the socialization of editioned video and film installations, I needed a concept that took into consideration the entire social network in which an artwork is embedded and would enable me to follow the shaping of the identity of video and film installations. Moreover, since non-human mediators, such as their material components and exhibition reviews, affect the identify of these artworks, I needed a dynamic model that would also help me consider human and non-human agency. With the notion of *script*, the field of the sociology of technique offered me such a concept. As defined by Madeleine Akrich, the script is a concept used to describe the interactions between the designer, the technical object and the user. I have adapted the concept to my object of study and have argued that the concept of script enabled me to study the interactions between the mediators evolving within the social network of an artwork. Moreover, since the identity of an editioned video and film installation is constantly shaped by the mediators involved in its life cycle, the script of an artwork is also constantly updated. To espouse this continuously evolving feature of the script, I took an active theoretical stance: *scripting* artworks. *Scripting* is the conceptualization of an artwork's socialization.

In order to retrieve the scripting process of editioned video and film installations, I adapted Madeleine Akrich's method of *de-scription*. I have done the exercise of putting into language the socialization process of a few artworks. I reconstructed the life cycles of these artworks and described how they have been exhibited, distributed and preserved. I applied the methodology of *de-scription* to three case studies. My selection of the case studies was done based on the questions they raised. Then, I proceeded to reconstruct their life cycles and consulted documentation on their exhibition, distribution and preservation histories. Over the course of four years, if the works were on display, I also travelled to the exhibition venues to document their presentation in the exhibition space and how they had been framed in the context of specific exhibitions. Finally, I analyzed the different phases of the socialization of these artworks and indentified the mediators that have shaped their identity.

When I proceeded to my reconstruction of the life cycles of these works, my point of entry was not necessarily their first public manifestation; rather, it was the moment that raised within me a series of questions, that made me wonder what the artwork actually consisted of. From that entry point into the life cycle of these works, I described all the events that preceded that event, and all the events that followed. My points of entry always made me

focus on a particular phase in the life cycle of an artwork, even though all phases were always considered.

In Chapter Three, I focused on the exhibition history of Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time*, as it is mainly this phase that has shaped the identity of the work. It is indeed the occasion of an exhibition that led the artist to alter the work, to add a second monitor and turn it into a four-channel video installation. This variation could have occurred only once, but the study of the exhibition history of the work has shown that since 2006, depending on the size of the exhibition space, the work has been shown either as a three- or a four-channel video installation. Two versions of the work co-exist nowadays.

The reconstruction of the life cycle of *Play Dead; Real Time* has enabled me to identify influential mediators in the life cycle of this artwork. Among them is the artist, who is the only one, to this day, who decides if the work is going to be displayed as a three- or a four-channel video installation, even though all editions of the work have been integrated into museum collections and are no longer part of his personal collection. The exhibition space of the Gagosian Gallery has also played an important role in the life cycle of the work as *Play Dead; Real Time* was initially a site-specific work. When initially displayed there, the viewers could identify that the videos had been shot in the very same location where the work was being displayed. The artwork entered into dialogue with the space where it was presented. Finally, the exhibition reviews have also played a crucial role in the shaping of the identity of this artwork, since they diverged from the framing done in the press release of the 2003 exhibition and interpreted *Play Dead; Real Time* as a form of institutional critique. The study of the re-exhibitions of this artwork has also shown that nowadays, this institutional critique is less discussed, as one of the elements is missing: the very site where the work was shot and exhibited. The *mise en abyme* feature is gone. The exhibition space of the Gagosian Gallery – and all the symbolism that exhibiting there carried with it – is no longer imminently tangible.

In Chapter Four, I focused on the distribution of *Day Is Done*. My point of entry into the life cycle of this work was its fragmentation after its inaugural – and landmark – exhibition of 2005. I *described* different acquisition strategies, such as the fact that some collections acquired more than one offspring. The study of the re-exhibitions of the three offspring acquired by the Goetz Collection and of two offspring acquired by the Stedelijk Museum has shown that they have proceeded differently: the Goetz Collection has tried to create a mini-version of *Day Is Done*, whereas the Stedelijk Museum presents them as two artworks by Mike Kelley. Nevertheless, in most cases, their exhibition is still overshadowed by the 2005 exhibition; in the text accompanying their exhibition, more attention is always

paid to *Day Is Done* than to the interpretation of the offspring themselves. Among the influential mediators identified in this chapter were the exhibition reviews of Mike Kelley's shows of the late 1980s and the early 1990s that triggered the making of an entire body of work that the artist had begun in the mid-1990s, and to which *Day Is Done* belong. The 2005 exhibition is constantly referred to, indicating that it is a mediator that has played a major role. To this day, it remains the core of any interpretation of *Day Is Done* and its offspring. The pre-exhibition publications in major art magazines – *Artforum* and *Flash Art* – were important, having framed the reception of *Day Is Done*. Very few interpretations of the work diverged from what the artist had stated his intentions to be with *Day Is Done*.

In Chapter Five, I focused on the preservation of John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, and more precisely, on the quest to find this work a suitable exhibition format. This case study has shown that it can take over twenty years for an artwork to reach a stable presentation format. In its life cycle, *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* has known different states, its has been through different versions: a film version, a video version, and a digital video version. The examining of this life cycle has also shown that a few attempts were made to turn the work into an editioned one. The acquisition contract turned out to be an influential mediator in the life cycle of this work, as the National Gallery of Canada used it as an argument to stipulate that the work was acquired as a unique artwork, and therefore could not become an editioned one. Another mediator finally overruled this acquisition contract: the Director of the institution, who was also the curator who had invited John Massey to exhibit *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* in Berlin in 1982.

In this study, I started with the fact that these artworks were editioned. I was wondering to what extent this feature contributed to the shaping of their identity. After having proceeded with the *de-scription* of these artworks, I can conclude that, rather than by their different *editions*, their identity is shaped by their different *versions*. Indeed, the case of Douglas Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time* has made strikingly clear that when the artist decides to alter the work and add a second monitor to extend the visitors' walk, it has nothing to do with the edition 1/3 of *Play Dead; Real Time*. The *de-scription* of the work has made evident that it is always *Play Dead; Real Time* that he modified, and not a specific edition of it. The three editions were not three different artworks, but one. What the case of John Massey's *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* has made striking is that its versioning has clearly altered its appearance: at first, three 16 mm films were projected onto freestanding screens, then the work was supported on laser disks and the three films were played on video

monitors, and now, the exhibition support is DVDs and the three films are projected onto a gallery wall.

The method of *de-scription* enabled me to reconstruct the life cycles of *Play Dead; Real Time*, *Day Is Done* and *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)* and allowed me to identify all relevant mediators in the scripting process. Studying the exhibition history of these works shed light on how they have been framed in different exhibitions, how they have been displayed in the exhibition, and also how they have been interpreted in the context of these specific exhibitions. Studying the distribution history of these works made visible how they circulated in the art world and how the different editions and offspring continued to relate to one another. Finally, studying the preservation history of these works brought to the fore that their preservation was based on a conceptual, rather than a material approach. The method of *de-scription* also helped identify their different versions, and I was able to identify if each new version was the result of an alteration made by the artist or if they were the result of a preservation process.

The foremost benefit of my method is that it yields a broader knowledge of the identity formation of artworks. For example, as demonstrated by the discussion of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, not taking into account the work's scripting process would mean that the cinematographic origin of the work, both in terms of the aesthetic appearance of the moving images and sound, and the display of the work, would be obliterated. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, it is inevitable that time-based artworks manifest themselves differently throughout the course of their lives. Yet the *de-scription* of the case studies has shown that a broad knowledge base on the socialization that occurs throughout the life cycle of an artwork is a necessity for doing justice to the works' identity. Moreover, my method made me consider dimensions that normally might be left out. In particular, the *de-scription* pointed towards details that are easily overlooked otherwise, as for instance the two acquisition numbers granted to *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*. As it turns out, these details, that seemed minor at first, have had a great impact on the socialization of these artworks; they have made the identity of these works shift in important ways. In the case of *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, taking into account its two acquisition numbers helps understand not only the position of the institution in the preservation process of this work, but also how the different versions of the work are dealt with.

The method I developed could be suitable for curators and conservators, as it helps one understand how the identity of an artwork has been shaped over time. Delving very systematically into the exhibition, distribution, and preservation history of an artwork would

bring one to an awareness of all the ways in which a specific artwork has been displayed over time. Perhaps, though, the method is impractical for people working in museums, as it requires a lot of archival research in different institutions. Also, as is often the case in archival research, some documents may be out of reach or unavailable, as when I was denied the permission to access the curatorial files at the Museum of Museum Art in New York because of their access policy or when I was confronted with the privacy policy of the Gagosian Gallery. Nevertheless, even if curators and conservators cannot apply this method for practical reasons (lack of time, restricted access to certain documents, etc.), they can benefit from the outcomes of the current research on the socialization of *Play Dead; Real Time*, *Day Is Done*, and *As the Hammer Strikes (A Partial Illustration)*, and could also, in the future, benefit from the findings of other researchers who have used this method.

Even if generalizations on the socialization of editioned video and film installations can be drawn from the case studies of this research, some aspects remain to be explored. The cases studied in this dissertation have proven that the institutions that acquired these works had, at most times, a very open and conceptual approach when dealing with the presentation, distribution and preservation of these works. It would be interesting, however, to study cases in which the institutions dealt with the works differently. Hypothetically, what if, for instance, one of the institutions that had acquired Gordon's *Play Dead; Real Time* had refused to see its edition displayed as a four-channel video installation, arguing that the work had been acquired as a three-channel video installation? How would this particular edition of the work have undergone the socialization process? The *de-scription* of other artworks could shed light on conflicting positions between different mediators present in the life cycles of editioned video and film installations.

In summary, although this dissertation started as an investigation into how the different editions of a work affected its identity, the conclusion is that it is the different versions of an artwork that shape its identity. These findings are therefore also relevant for other, non-editioned time-based artworks. Applying my theoretical standpoint, *scripting*, and my method, *de-scription*, would provide researchers with a more complete view of the shaping of the identity of time-based artworks and would broaden the knowledge base for making decisions on the exhibition, distribution and preservation of time-based artworks.