

## Introduction: Pursuing the Trivial

By Barbara Maly, Roman Horak, Eva Schörgenhuber & Monika Seidl

During a trip to the United States of America, a visit to the local supermarket can be a truly pleasurable experience. Especially from an outsider's perspective, one is delving into a completely different world of supersized products, where endless shelves are stacked with altogether new groceries and food. To the art-interest mind, however, several goods might be ever so familiar as they resonate a much larger discourse established prior to the supermarket visit. The intersection between the ordinary and the artistic, between 'low culture' and 'high culture', was explored in the 1960s with the creation of the art piece *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)*. For this, the American pop art artist Andy Warhol created a replica of the said product out of silkscreen ink on plywood box supports and put 24 pieces of it in the Stable Gallery in New York City (BBC.co.uk). The sculpture evoked manifold reactions, but first and foremost it highlighted the fact that a replica of a seemingly ordinary product deliberately placed in the space of an art gallery instantly possessed a different connotation. John Rockwell comments on Warhol's piece as follows:

A Brillo box isn't suddenly art because Warhol puts a stacked bunch of them in a museum. But by putting them there he encourages you to make your every trip to the supermarket an artistic adventure, and in so doing he has exalted your life. Everybody's an artist if they want to be. (Rockwell, as quoted in Storey 189)

Warhol, because of his status as an artist, had the opportunity to openly refuse to take the distinction between commercial and non-commercial art seriously. On this rather literal level, the separation of high and low culture vanished to a great degree and shed new light on the everyday life mirrored in the commercial good of the soap pads. The same happened with his art object of Campbell's tomato soup, a product which can still be bought in any American supermarket, and the question arises: is it art, due to the connotations it has now or is it just plain ordinary tomato soup? Whatever the answer may be, the fact that Warhol elevated insignificant items such as pads and soups from the everyday, is something noteworthy and a good example for understanding how 'the trivial' is dealt with in the present journal.

The idea of highlighting seemingly unimportant aspects of everyday life can also be found in today's world of art. In 2013, Tilda Swinton recreated a piece of performance art she first did in London in 1995. *The Maybe* shows the Scottish actress sleeping in a glass case in the middle of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the label beneath her unusual bed reads: "The Maybe 1995/2013:

Living artist, glass, steel, mattress, pillow, linen, water, and spectacles” (AnO-thermag.com). Due to her unannounced and rare performances of the piece in 2013, the museum visitor was not guaranteed a sight of Swinton. However, the mere fact that the actress brought the everyday practice of sleeping to the insides of a museum resonates Warhol’s idea to a large degree. Reactions from people all across the world were as manifold, and both negative and positive. A person on the Internet, for example, responded to the events by saying: “I might just do a Tilda and sleep as long as I want and call it art. I’ll be in my bed though.” (Tumblr.com). This rather critical comment on Swinton’s performance underlines the ordinariness of her actions: sleeping can be, and is, done by everybody and putting an emphasize on it might seem odd at first, but it also makes us aware of the fact that the seemingly trivial might be more complex after all.

This thought is also mirrored in the present collection, which has at its core the understanding that the trivial is not as insignificant as it may seem. Internalized daily routines and practices, everyday objects and products shape our daily lives and therefore our perception of the world. The baffling and bewildering effect of a supermarket far from home, mentioned at the beginning, makes the contingencies of the ordinary, the everyday and the trivial all too obvious.

The collection of articles in this journal are based on a 2012 postgraduate conference with invited speakers that emerged from a collaboration of the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna and the Department of Art and Cultural Sociology at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. Organized by Monika Seidl and Barbara Maly (University of Vienna) and Roman Horak (University of Applied Arts Vienna), the symposium aimed at exploring meanings, roots and routes of mundane practices, texts and artifacts through the ages and how they relate to gender, class or race identities, to language and communication, to genre, media and technology, to politics and power to local and global impacts and to material and economic contexts.

## **Historical Background**

The understanding that the trivial matters echoes the emergence of popular culture as a form of academic interest. Matthew Arnold an later F.R. Leavis and Q.D. Leavis vehemently argued that only the cultural products and practices of the educated minority, of cultivated and cultured people, were valuable and worth bringing into an academic context. In contrast, the popular culture of the emerging 19<sup>th</sup> century working class and imported American goods in the 1930s posed a threat, were seen as worthless and could only be fought by education and, particularly, by teaching discrimination techniques so that everyone ideally learned how to resist the temptations of popular culture.

Fast-forward a couple of decades to the 1950s, and the perception changed with the emergence of the scholarship boys and British Cultural Studies as we

know them today. Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson highlighted working class culture and considered it as a significant contribution to the cultural landscape of the time. Not being condescending towards working class culture, and popular culture in general, was a completely new thought at that time and made visible the doings of an entire class that had previously been relatively unnoticed. Shedding light on the importance of everyday practices, such as going on a seaside holiday or watching a movie in the cinema, gave the study of culture in the academic sense a completely new level of depth.

## **The Trivial**

The trivial, so aptly described in the Oxford Online Dictionary as being “of little value or importance”, deeply shapes our daily lives. Whether it is a feeling in a video game, the practice of walking or Josephine Baker’s visit to Vienna in the past, the trivial constructs our reality so importantly that it should no longer go unnoticed. What has become internalized and blends into our daily routines might shape our world more than the things that are done and encountered consciously.

It therefore seems necessary to deliberately place oneself outside of the mundane in order to gain the ability of viewing the insignificant as something worth studying. This is also mirrored in the well-known Marshall McLuhan quote “We don’t know who discovered water, but we know it wasn’t the fish”. When we are immersed in and completely surrounded by something such as the little things in life, we may come to accept them as part of the natural world and no longer question them. They become the embodiment of the phrase ‘taking something for granted’.

Taking a step outside our daily practices might enable the critic to uncover a structure that goes much deeper than the understanding of the mere existence of these things. Reflecting the idea of Raymond William’s “structures of feeling”, this present journal tries to give significance to the seemingly insignificant in the world. With the help of various disciplines, as well as products and practices, the following articles will dig deeper in order to come to a better understanding of today’s but also the past’s, structures of feeling.

Following the general outline of the conference schedule, the present book will move from the past to the present until arriving at ideas of the trivial in emerging cultures. The essays presented here cover heterogeneous approaches and theoretical frameworks. As the insignificant, the trivial and the mundane can be virtually anything that is encountered on a regular basis, the topics of the following articles are as manifold as life’s encounters.

First, a reflective view on the ordinary life of the past is taken in Steven Gerrard’s article “The Great British Music Hall: Its Importance to British Culture and ‘The Trivial’”. By shedding light on the history of the music hall, Gerrard draws attention to the prominence of this popular entertainment at its peak, enlarges on

the varied contents of the shows and sketches the manner in which they were gradually replaced by cinema, television or radio in the 1960s. In the second article, by Roman Horak, titled “‘We Have Become Niggers!’: Josephine Baker as a Threat to Viennese Culture”, the author explores various discourses that constructed Baker’s visit to the Austrian Capital in early 1928. At the center of these reports lie ideas of racism and sexism and the subsequent creation of ‘blackness’ and ‘black cultural expression’.

After uncovering some roots of the everyday life in the past, the next chapters leap into the present, focusing on Indoor/Outdoor activities at first. Yi Chen, for example, investigates how walking is experienced and how it is interrelating people and things in a temporal-spatial unfolding. “‘Walking With’: A Rhythmanalysis of London’s East End” has at its core a rhythmanalysis and looks at the film *Fergus Walking* (1978) as well as a East-West Road campaign in the early 1980s. Georg Drennig’s essay “Taking a Hike and Hucking the Stout: The Troublesome Legacy of the Sublime in Outdoor Recreation” takes the reader out into the wilderness and critiques the common conception of walking as outdoor recreation. Drennig stresses the cultural constructedness of the wilderness and sees it as the opposing pole to industrial civilization. Moving back inside the privacy of one’s home, Anna König’s article “A Stitch in Time: Changing Cultural Constructions of Craft and Mending” discusses the revival of domestic craft activities after a societal drift towards cheap, mass-produced and, above all, easily disposable fashion products. König questions the authenticity of the resurgence of these household skills and intertwines gender, class and aesthetics in doing so.

Games have always been a great source of entertainment, whether they are meant as a professional sport or for pure pleasure. Daniel Kilvington broaches the issue of the under representation of British Asians in English professional football. In his article “British Asians, Covert Racism and Exclusion in English Professional Football” the author tackles the still persistent issue of institutional racism as well as the tendency of coaches to stereotype, while underscoring his line of argumentation with the help of oral testimonies. Focusing on technological games, Sabine Harrer in her essay “From Losing to Loss: Exploring the Expressive Capacities of Videogames Beyond Death as Failure” moves away from the conception of death in video games as something to represent failure but instead highlights the possibility of a rich representation of loss that foster deeply emotional responses in the player. By discussing games such as *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), *Ico* (2001) or *Passage* (2007), Harrer uncovers the essential and powerful ingredients needed to arrive at a deeper notion of loss triggered by the construction of symbolic landscape or experiential metaphors.

The articles in the chapter on fiction offer insights into trivial, mundane and ordinary aspects of narratives. In his essay “Narrated Political Theory Relating Theory, Political Agency and Pop Culture in Dietmar Dath’s Novel *Für immer in Honig*”, Georg Spitaler explores specific literary forms of narrated political theo-

ry. By using Dietmar Dath's novel *Für immer in Honig* as an example, Spitaler investigates the interrelations of political agency and popular culture, and shows how a common cultural-theoretical narrative is thereby challenged. Katharina Andres explores the relations of fashion and gender in her article "'Fashion's Final Frontier' – The Correlation of Gender Roles and Fashion in *Star Trek*". Having the *Star Trek* franchise as the basis of her study, Andres shows the evolution of the female officers' uniforms and puts them into dialogue with gender roles in contemporary American society.

The last section of the book has emerging aspects of the trivial at its center. The two concluding essays deal with products and ideas that are up and coming, stemming from contemporary society but already peering into the future. Timo Kaerlein takes a media studies perspective in his essay "Playing with Personal Media. On an Epistemology of Ignorance" and discusses personal media devices with regards to their interface and the complexity of the underlying software. The discrepancy between these two makes the device highly functional, yet any insight into its technological roots has become virtually impossible for its user due to the trivialized and stripped down surface appearance. In the article "Becoming Trivial: The Book Trailer", Kati Voigt explores the emerging medium of the book trailer to promote new literary releases. Emphasizing her line of argument with a number of examples, Voigt traces the history of this new form of representation, highlights its components and makes assumptions about the future potential of the book trailer.

The many possibilities to explore the topic of the trivial illustrate quite well how deeply we are steeped in these mundane things in every part of our lives. The snapshot offered by the articles collected here may serve as food for thought and may shed some light on what normally stays hidden, thereby making the normally invisible things more visible and bringing them into the well-deserved limelight.

**Barbara Maly** teaches courses in Cultural and Media Studies at Vienna University and is currently working on her dissertation on Raymond Williams, digital practices and media pedagogy. She is especially interested in researching popular culture, visual culture, digital literacy and identity politics. E-mail: [barbara.maly@univie.ac.at](mailto:barbara.maly@univie.ac.at)

**Roman Horak** is professor and Head of the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. From October 1988 to March 1989 he was Honorary Visiting Fellow at the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester. He is currently on the editorial committee of 'Culture Unbound' and the 'European Journal for Cultural Studies' and a board member of the 'Association for Cultural Studies'(ACS). His research focuses on the politics of the popular. He

has published 16 books and over 100 articles in academic journals and books. His latest international publication is *About Raymond Williams* (ed. with L. Grossberg & M. Seidl), Routledge 2010. E-mail: [roman.horak@uni-ak.ac.at](mailto:roman.horak@uni-ak.ac.at)

**Eva Maria Schörgenhuber** is a student of English and American Studies at the University of Vienna where she also works as a tutor and research assistant. Specializing in cultural studies, her research interests include celebrity/star studies, the theme of fragmentation in body studies and blurred gender representations in visual culture. E-mail: [eva.maria.schoergenhuber@univie.ac.at](mailto:eva.maria.schoergenhuber@univie.ac.at)

**Monika Seidl** is Professor of Cultural Studies at the English Department of Vienna University. Her research interests are wide-ranging with a focus on visual texts, literary classics and popular culture. She is currently Deputy Head of Studies of Vienna University. E-mail: [monika.seidl@univie.ac.at](mailto:monika.seidl@univie.ac.at)

## References

AnOthermag.com (2013): "Tilda Swinton's The Maybe", 17 April 2013: [http://www.anothermag.com/current/view/2664/Tilda\\_Swintons\\_The\\_Maybe](http://www.anothermag.com/current/view/2664/Tilda_Swintons_The_Maybe) (accessed 30 October 2013).

BBC.co.uk (2013): "Modern Masters": <http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbccone/modernmasters/virtual-exhibition/warhol/10-brillo-box.shtml> (Accessed 30 October 2013).

Storey, John (2012): *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition. Essex: Pearson.

Tumblr.com: 28 March 2013: <http://fayeviolet.tumblr.com/post/46502855587> (accessed 30 October 2013).

Williams, Raymond (1961): *The Long Revolution*, Toronto: Broadview Press.