Invisible effort

As a programmer, I often put a lot of time and effort into making features of which users will think it is simple. Hard work often goes unnoticed in the art world too. Sometimes this is intentional, sometimes it is not. In this essay I would like to show you a few examples of this art strategy: invisible effort.

What is invisible effort?

First, I will explain when an artwork is an example of invisible effort.

It took a lot of effort to produce, relative to the outcome

Of course, this is subjective. Every artist has different skills and it would take a painter more time to create a sculpture than a sculptor. In this art strategy, the meaning of 'a lot of effort' lies in the result of the artwork. The actual effort that was put into the artwork should be significantly greater than what the audience expects when they see it. For example:

- If an artwork looks like it took 10 days to make, but it took the artist 2 years.
- If an artwork looks like it took 5 seconds to make, but it took the artist 1 day.

The second example, 1 day, sounds like it is not a big effort. However, since it is still significantly more effort than the audience expects (5 seconds), it counts as an example of invisible effort.

Effort is not only measured in time of creating the artwork. Perhaps the artist had to do a lot of research first to be able to create the artwork, or they had to go through great lengths to acquire the right materials or they had to do a lot of physical hard work to create the artwork.

Appearance

An artwork of invisible effort can look like anything, but it has to look simple. If you can see every 'brush stroke' a painter made, you can determine how much work it took by counting the brush strokes. Van Gogh painted 'Starry Night' over a week-end. This is quite a short time to create such a beautiful painting, but it is still two entire days: quite some effort. But is the effort invisible? No. You can see he worked two entire days on it, because you can see he put a lot of details in it, lots of different colors, lots of brush strokes, depth, he plays with lighter and darker colors, etc. In other words: he put effort into this painting and you can tell. This is not an artwork of invisible effort.

Figure 1: The Starry Night, by Vincent van Gogh

How simple does the artwork have to look, then? Just like effort, simplicity is subjective. At a certain point of complexity and details, the audience cannot really estimate anymore how much effort was put into an artwork. The artwork has to look simple in such a way that the audience thinks it was easy to make. This varies per person, so sometimes not everyone will agree whether an artwork is a piece of invisible effort or not. It is debatable.

Examples

Unknown
The Panel of Hands, ± 35.000 B.C.
Red ocher on cave wall

Figure 2: The Panel of Hands

The Panel of Hands is a painting, presumably created by Neanderthals, estimated 37.000 years ago. It is a cave painting in the Cave of El Castillo in Spain. It may be Earth's oldest cave art, but researchers are not completely sure. (Than, 2012)

These simple 'hand' stencil paintings were incredibly difficult to make. Personally, I thought the artist would just place his hand on the wall and rub some dirt on it. Apparently, the artist had to invent 'spray paint' to create this. Researchers tried to recreate these works. First, they made a liquid of a mixture of red ocher and water. It is likely that the artist either took the liquid in his mouth and he spit it on his hand, or he poured it in a tube and he blew air over it using another tube he was holding in his mouth. Researchers tried out the second technique. Using two hollow bird-bones, they created a vacuum by blowing through one pipe and holding the liquid in the other pipe. They sprayed the liquid onto their hand on the wall by blowing very short and gently. The researchers became light-headed and one of them mentioned that this experience could lead to the original artists feeling like they entered another world when they did this, because of the 'high'. These simple hand prints are not simple to make, and it is definitely more complex than I thought. (Misfitsandheroes, 2015)

It is a mystery why these paintings were made. Since we do not know much about the meaning of the artwork, it is hard to tell if it would fit in any of the art strategies discussed in class. I think it was not an attempt at painting the human body, because they only painted a hand. In fact, I think these "hands" represent something else, but we do not know what. It could be a form of representational art. The hands represent things in the real world.

Yves Klein
Blue Monochrome, 1961
Dry pigment in synthetic resin on canvas

Figure 3: Blue Monochrome, by Yves Klein

A blue canvas. It looks simple, but it is an artwork of invisible effort. You might think Yves Klein just went to a store, bought some blue paint and threw it onto the canvas, but he actually had to invent a new color to create this painting. (Sooke, 2014)

Normal paint contains a substance that causes the color to become dull. Yves Klein wanted to make artworks using a color that would stay vibrant, so he experimented with alternative substances for the paint for a while. Eventually he found something that would preserve the luminescence and the powdery texture of ultramarine pigment and he used that for a lot of artworks. He trademarked the color as International Klein Blue. Yves Klein said blue was infinite like the sky, and it represents the immaterial, the pure form and space. (Cvetković, 2020)

Ewerdt Hilgemann
Imploded Cube (KMM), 2014
Stainless steel

Figure 4: Imploded Cube (KMM), by
Ewerdt Hilgemann

This dented cube looks like the artist was not very careful with it or he kicked it. Some could even say it looks like trash. However, this artwork was certainly not an accident. Ewerdt Hilgemann has carefully imploded this cube to achieve this interesting look. He created multiple imploded cubes like this, and he would use a vacuum pump or water to "implode" it, which means he would extract al the air from it.

Earlier, Hilgemann would actually dent his cubes using natural forces. For example, he would throw it off a roof. He figured that he could introduce new forms of art by letting chance take a role in the creation of the form. Eventually he found out he could manipulate this 'chance' as well and he started to do 'planned' implosions to achieve the desired shapes of his cubes. According to Hilgemann, an implosion represents the inward spiral of energy that is needed to get to the core and mystery of matter. (Kröller Müller, n.d.)

Ewerdt Hilgemann's imploded cubes fit really well in the new art strategy because the effortless-looking damages to the cubes actually required carefully coordinated work. You can't tell. (Klerkx, 2023)

Tim Burton
Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, 2005
Movie

Figure 5: Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, by Tim Burton

Although you would expect that these squirrels were made using CGI, filmmaker Tim Burton actually used real squirrels in a scene of the movie Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. He requested 100 real squirrels, of which 40 were trained and used on the set. The squirrels had to smash nuts onto a table. They had to sit on a stool, open nuts and throw the content on the floor. Trainers have spent 19 weeks working with the squirrels to prepare them for the scene in the movie.

For me, it is hard to imagine what the audience would have thought when the movie came out in 2005. The quality of CGI graphics were not as good as they are today, so at that time the audience could have guessed that the squirrels were real. However, when 'modern' kids and teens watch this movie, they will not expect these animals to be real: because nowadays, a similar effect could be achieved using CGI.

It fits in the strategy because if a lot of people thought these squirrels were generated using CGI, then Tim Burton put a lot of effort into using real squirrels and very few people notice his effort. Of course, people can guess that the making of the CGI would also have cost a lot of effort, but not as much as training real squirrels! (King, 2005)

References

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Images

Figure 1: https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/06/09/ten-surprises-about-van-goghs-starry-night

Figure 2: https://misfitsandheroes.wordpress.com/tag/hand-stencils/

Figure 3: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80103

Figure 4: https://krollermuller.nl/ewerdt-hilgemann-cube-k-m-m

Figure 5: https://charlieandthechocolatefactoryfilm.fandom.com/wiki/Squirrels