

Sabine Hänsgen – Andrei Monastyrski

VIDEO AND PERFORMANCE

Sabine Hänsgen: The performance *Polaroid: For Pavel Peppershtein* was designed for one viewer and created using elements that took into account his – this viewer’s – aesthetic tendencies and interests.

Taking this performance as a model, it would be interesting to trace how the plot unfolds at various stages, and what relationships emerge between these stages. Specifically, there is the conception stage, which is sort of like an “ideal” plan, then comes the action, and finally, the documentation, which could also be considered a stage of the performance in some cases. It is mainly between these stages that a coherent picture of the aesthetic phenomenon emerges. In my view, the interpreter, in order to obtain this coherent picture, needs to know how to read “between” the stages of the action, since the phenomenon of performance is not depleted solely by its occurring in the field of vision. It is in these intervals, after all, that we find hidden the thing that has not yet become text in its informational completeness: the live impression of the event as a whole.

Andrei Monastyrski: Yes, these intervals exist. They have a cascading character, and gradually, step-by-step, they are filled with interpretation. In the case we are discussing, one final such “cascade” is the video recording, which is processed in a certain way and which is open to outside interpretation. It is this ultimate aesthetic outcome that the external viewer faces. But still, we must consider the different stages of the work.

Sabine Hänsgen: The first stage is the conception. We devised it together. I saw in a bookstore window a volume of Russian fairy tales under the title *Kolobok*.¹ The cover contained an illustration of a scene from this fairy tale: *kolobok* running away from home. On the one hand, I was attracted by this book simply as a collection of Russian fairy tales that I wanted to read, while on the other, I knew that the term *kolobok* is frequently invoked in the Moscow conceptualist school’s discourse as a metaphorical term signifying a particular image of the author-character, i.e. the author distancing himself from his position by taking the perspective of a character. But I had not actually read the fairy tale itself before. It was

¹ Kolobok “refers to a baked dough ball, a character in many Russian fairy tales. Kolobok rolls constantly on the road running away from everyone who tries to eat it: the fox, the wolf, the bear, etc. Kolobok is a good image for someone who does not want to be identified, named, or regarded as attached to a particular role or to a particular place, of someone who is slipping away from all of this”. From *Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism*: <https://www.ubu.com/historical/moscow/>.

probably then, in that moment, that I had the impulse for the idea; I purchased several copies of the book immediately. That same day, I stopped by the bakery and bought two or three small round buns. I placed them in the bag where I had the books. And when I came home and took the books and buns out of the bag, I saw that the buns resembled the *kolobok* that was illustrated on the cover of the book of fairy tales.

A connection formed between these objects as elements of the performance. And notably, the addressee of the intended performance was immediately imagined to be Peppershtein, probably because the theme of children's books and their characters, including *kolobok*, as well as Inspection Medical Hermeneutics' operations with bread, are all characteristic of his creative work. A plot quickly developed from these elements in your arrangement: to lay Pasha² down on the ground on his back, to arrange six *kolobok*-buns into a nimbus imperceptibly around his head (the book had exactly six images of *kolobok*), to photograph him in this position using a Polaroid camera, and to ask him to read the action score in this same prone position using a wireless microphone so that the reading could be recorded by a video camera some distance away. The score consisted of a two-sided object sewn together from the two books of Russian fairy tales: each side allowed you to turn the pages of only one fairy tale, "The Terrible Goat." The start of the next fairy tale, located further down on the same page, was covered over with pages from a book on Fichte. Pasha was invited to read the entire tale of "The Terrible Goat" out loud, but not to read the text related to Fichte, and instead to just add any additional improvised commentary after the fairy tale. Then, with the help of a string tied to his finger, he had to pull the Polaroid image toward himself and take a look at it. That's where he would discover in what kind of "nimbus" he had been reading this fairy tale while laying on the hill. In other words, on the event-level of the performance, the most significant thing for Pasha should have been the discovery of his own image in this rather strange arrangement. And all of this is what took place by the Yauza river in the vicinity of the Rostokino Aqueduct.

Andrei Monastyrski: When you watch the video recording of Pasha's preparations for the action – where we are wrapping him in a blanket, surrounding him with bread buns, photographing him using the polaroid, tying the string to his finger, etc. – an image emerges of some kind of ritual activity around a dead body, a very folkloristic image, archaic in its vividness and specificity. This archaic vividness is easily visible in the Polaroid, where Pasha assumes the form of some kind of Bread God. Then, after a pause in the action (in the video

²Nickname for Pavel Peppershtein.

recording, this takes the form of Pasha lying motionless on the hill for fifteen to twenty minutes), the scene changes abruptly. Pasha lifts himself up, holding the umbrella, and there suddenly emerges the figure of a person seated on a hill under an umbrella clothed in some sort of ancient Chinese dress – that’s how the blanket that initially resembled a funeral shroud now appears. We then approach this figure, carrying our own umbrellas, sit down beside him, and converse about something. In any case, the video recording of this scene is very reminiscent of the meditative spaces of strolling in old Japanese engravings with tiny figures beneath umbrellas, stripped of the vividness and serious event-ness of archaic, folkloristic subjects. In other words, I discovered the stylistic transgression from a folkloristic space to a meditative-cultural one within the documentary stage, beyond the borders of the action itself, at its margins. And that is when the meaning of the score, already present at the moment of conception, became clear. A not entirely comprehensible juxtaposition of two contrasting texts – one folkloristic and vividly emotional, the other philosophical-cultural and distanced – was aesthetically articulated through the stylistic transgression using the documentary material of the video recording. However, the meaning that revealed itself in the video recording, though it did become apparent, given in such a direct documentary form did not yet consolidate itself into a genre. This stylistic transgression, as a live aesthetic impression, needed to be fixed on a new level of documentary elaboration. We had to introduce the element of freeze-frames into the documentary recording, making the recording aesthetically open and self-sufficient, and to introduce the still pictures at the preparation and post-action stages, already completely generic in their character. In this way, some parts of the video recording are transformed from documentation into a work of art. And it is only in this state that the work can be considered open to outside interpretation and going beyond the frame of those three stages of performance about which you spoke.

Sabine Hänsgen: It turns out that the end result, or the aesthetic resolution, takes place simultaneously through the performance of the idea laid out in the score and through the unpredictable “marginal” effects that appear in both the action and the documentation. Specifically, I have in mind the circumstance that it was raining during the action and so umbrellas had to be used. In some sense, the umbrellas turned out to be the main protagonists of this stylistic transgression from archaic-folkloristic imagery to the freely meditative non-necessity of pictures in the Japanese style. And another unpredictable detail that influenced the documentation turned out to be the presence at the place of action of a high voltage electric power line. It blocked the transmission of Pasha’s reading into the radio microphone

for the video camera, which was located on another hill. And since the audio series didn't work, the treatment of the video material focused completely on the visual documentation and, in my opinion, your idea of introducing freeze-frames was to some degree determined by the wish to correct the failed audio series, to transform it into a rhythmic noise background. In using the device of the freeze-frame, there is a significant change in the temporal regime of the documentary event. By itself, the documentation reflects the real time spent at the place of action. The freeze-frame permits pieces of "arrested time" to emerge relative to the event. And in the rhythmic series of "arrested" time and real time, in their interplay, we discover the effect of free aesthetic time, that very *Luft* of live impression, directed toward the external viewer who does not take part in the action. In other words, this free time is one of the genre-forming factors that transform documentation into artistic material. And besides, on the one hand, the freeze-frame produce a framing effect and a kind of falling out of the constant flow of video into the static tableau, while on the other hand, they take away the framing of the action event itself, refocusing the viewer's attention on incidents that were completely foreign to the plot. In other words, they take away the frame provided by the action's plot, discovering the aesthetic self-sufficiency of the event before the start of the performance and after its conclusion.

(Translated from Russian by Yelena Kalinsky)