

Sabine Hänsgen – Andrei Monastyrski

ABROADNESS

Sabine Hänsgen: The action *Link* can serve as an example of how technology from abroad has influenced the aesthetic development of Moscow conceptualism. We first need to turn our attention to the place of action, which was the botanical garden of the Ruhr-Universität. It is not a “hot” place like the border zone in Berlin, which attracts artists. In other words, the botanical garden is not a part of the local artistic infrastructure. There is no illusion of culture in this place, but neither is there any illusion of pure nature either, since the garden is artificial. Thus the place that we chose was a place that simulated a primitive biotope: horsetails, fiddlehead ferns, etc. And all of this was replete with scientific labels and plant classifications. The action took place on the little bridge over the pond. In essence, the action came about exclusively due to the spatial separation of the representations of sound and image in the computer game. It was within this gap that Anufriev ran back and forth. How can this action be related to minimalist aesthetics? Anufriev performed movements analogous to those of the computer game character, simply walking back and forth like Link in the game’s transitional periods, which were for the most part what was presented in the video recording.

Andrei Monastyrski: Minimalism is always relative. In this case, the “margins” of this minimalism were heaped with two huge piles of complicated combinations of different forms and meanings. I am talking about the video camera and the structure with the tape recorder, vase, hammer, pictures, and instructions. Each of these “piles” contains hundreds of details. In this way, minimalism in this action is organized by the most maximalist means. It is hard to say whether Anufriev was more submerged into the visual or auditory information, or into his own walking back and forth.

Sabine Hänsgen: We could take a closer look at the game. In a certain sense, we discover here a continuation of the action for Peppershtein. Peppershtein read a Russian fairy tale aloud. Here we also have a fairy tale. And also, the purse that Anufriev carried while he walked had attached to it a picture of the place where Peppershtein's action had taken place. In the plot of the game, Link's task is to save the kingdom of Hyrule. Along the way, he battles with the forces of evil – in the forest, in the field, in a desert, etc. This game contains not only dramatic episodes related to the plot, but also purely meditative, rhythmic ones that are related to earning points. The more points earned, the more successfully you submerge yourself into the rhythmic program embedded into the game. In the action, we placed an accent precisely not on the old fashioned fairy tale episodes of battle and drama, but rather on these transitional periods of rhythmic time-passing.

Andrei Monastyrski: Yes, this is exactly right. The start of the game was magnificent, it always contained two levels, which smoothly transitioned one into the other: the meditative earning of points and then, with new powers, a battle on a new level. These meditations in the course of a lighter battle were a kind of analgesic and did not permit excessive jolts or dramatics during the task. Now, at the concluding step of the game, it seems, when I have encountered Link's double in the form of a shadow, I experience this game with much discomfort due to the absence of the meditative level – the analgesic – and it seems to me that the game's authors have somehow miscalculated at this concluding step. The simplification of the game's structure, the bringing together of two levels into one, exclusively to battle, has a jolting and extremely dispiriting effect. Yet another, new level of archaism seems to arise, not at the level of the image, but on a structural level: the convergence of all of this in the dull dramatism of confrontation without the gentle intermezzo of meditative

practice, which normally makes possible a greater degree of resistance to new dramatic conflict. The meditative phases contained a kind of game with oneself. The last, dramatic step, on the other hand, is no longer a game with oneself, but with the game's authors, who have hidden themselves behind the figure of the player, in his own image: Link's shadow. Here, the authors seem to have had some kind of mix-up. It is possible that they got overly carried away by the successful image of the "double" and forgot with this tactical find the strategic structure of the entire game, i.e. the necessary presence of two levels of action, the meditative and the dramatic.

Sabine Hänsgen: Let's put aside the discussion of the game for now. If we look at the video recording of the action as a whole, we can see that around the video game that Anufriev has watched like a film through the camera's viewfinder, there has materialized a frame of live action. The first frame shows the vase standing atop the tape recorder – where Anufriev was collecting the graphic sheets. The last frame shows the shattering of this vase and Anufriev's recollection of the action, which was produced right there as an immediate impression on the garden bridge. The weather is important in this part of the recording, its abrupt changes from sun to hail and back again. These changes were unpredictable. And inside this unpredictable, unmediated frame was the contrasting computer game. This contrast and collision reveals that the screen is not all. That the game is finite. In other words, the contrast reveals the boundaries of simulation and focuses attention on the bodily articulations which are outside the frame of the game.

Andrei Monastyrski: Nevertheless, the jolts of bodily articulations, much like the jolts of the dramatic obstructions in games, cause me, personally, a great deal of discomfort. The hail for me was entirely unpleasant, as was the strong rain. For me, this is the same as the poor planning in the game, a disturbance in

the balance of comfort and discomfort in the direction of the latter. I cannot value this as an image for imitation. And anyhow, the psychic bleakness that I began to experience starting around 1988 was very rarely positively filled. One of the positive experiences was going out skiing along the Zvezdnyi (Star) Boulevard after 11 at night when the streets were nearly empty. I would first improvise for forty-five minutes on the piano and then get dressed, take the skis, and go to the boulevard. I would go out on the skis there, counting the circles, for probably around an hour. Then I would climb the staircase by the hardware store and walk along the courtyards past that strange tower on Tsander Street. Arrive home. It is nice after this kind of exertion to take a cool shower. This is a kind of glance off to the side, where there is nothing but snow, trees, stars.

Sabine Hänsgen: Perhaps it is with these kinds of curative aims that Anufriev suggested the action's title, "Link." After all, Link is not just the name of the main protagonist in a computer game, but "link" in English means "connection." Perhaps Anufriev meant to imply the schizoanalytic method by which different systems of thought are randomly associated, blurring the boundary between different systems of movement "there and back," a unique kind of feedback (when the microphone is held up to the loudspeaker). Here begins a game on academic territory. And just as there were unexpected changes in the weather, there may be unexpected results.

Andrei Monastyrski: Personally for me, unexpected results are only tolerable within the confines of tradition. They can be tolerated only to a certain degree. The principle at the heart of the idea cannot be limitless tolerance. In my beloved *Magic Mountain (Der Zauberberg)* by Thomas Mann, Castorp also undertakes an important outing on skis. We all also loved *Journey to the West* and certain episodes of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*. For example, the stroll of Bao Yu in the garden with his father and entourage, and the dragging of Bao

Yu along the snowy field by two monks. It is these snowy fields that are somehow unusually effective. There is in them some kind of not-yet-startedness, a constant newness and possibility. It seems to be from here that we get Ilya Kabakov's love for empty white surfaces and Heidegger with his "possibilities." All of this is rooted in my childhood impressions of living in the North.

Sabine Hänsgen: Now we should make a postscript relating to the end of the Zelda-2 game. The end of the game produced a kind of unexpected turn from fairy tale to film, a real Hollywood happy ending. Link saves Zelda. Zelda comes alive and rises from the sheets. The curtain falls and from behind the curtain – a kiss. And just then the words 'The End' appear.

Andrei Monastyrski: Exactly right. I also found it interesting to suddenly discover the names of the team that made the game, to feel the disclosure of anonymity as the most erotic event of the entire structure of the game.

Sabine Hänsgen: I would prefer not to speak right now about the game, but rather about the perspective of computer games in general. For you, it was important to discover the names of the authors at the end. But if we take into account the more complex possibilities of computer games, the text-generating capacities of the computer keyboard, and the capacity of the viewer to participate in the composition, then in these interactive computer games, the player becomes the author and will already experience authorship as an erotic event. He can, for example, take pieces from different existing situations and use them to arrange new episodes or entire sequences. For example, he can construct a scene of the romantic meeting from "Gone with the Wind" and the farewell from "Doctor Zhivago." Moreover, the viewer can become not only the author of his own composition, but a character as well, if we take into account the possibilities of new technical means for creating virtual reality – gloves,

headphones, headsets with two small screens.

Andrei Monastyrski: I view this with less psychologizing and more detachment, as in the realm of literature, video, film, etc. Everything takes place somewhere in the distance, including everything inside the computer game irrespective of its degree of virtuality. This has nothing to do with me.

Sabine Hänsgen: Why are you so interested specifically in the names of the authors?

Andrei Monastyrski: Naming is an important discursive figure. That's why I perceive it as part of a series of traditional points of contact with worked out situations, already recorded in history. Neither the booklet, nor the game's opening titles make any mention of the authors. It is possible that they consider themselves a kind of gift on par with the player's other achievements, the receiving of various magical items in the course of the game, as a result of the battles, and finally, the magic of their names, the names of the creators of the entire game as the concluding and most significant gift at the end when the player is victorious. Only then, most likely, does he partake in authorship, what you spoke of earlier. In other words, the discursive partaking comes before the technological. In any case, it is precisely in this way that we can interpret the appearance of the authors' names only after the game's conclusion.

(Translated from Russian by Yelena Kalinsky)