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сборник статей

Белград ● 2021

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EMPTY ACTION FOR THE ANONYMOUS VIEWER

The practice of Collective Actions group, in general, can be called the practice of the empty actions.[1] The term "empty action" frames both goal in hand and employed means thus describing Collective Actions practice of experience production in the technological aspect. In the introduction for the first volume of the "Trips out of town" A. Monastyrsky provided two main definitions of empty action. It is said that empty action can be defined as:

    1) inclusion of extra-demonstrational elements into demonstrational field;

    2) time during which viewers don't understand or misunderstand what is happening in the demonstrational field.[2]

These definitions become more understandable after applying Monastyrsky`s "dumbbell scheme" («гантельная схема»), which is representing the communicative link between authors and viewers.[3] Despite its simplicity, this scheme is very helpful when analyzing any of the Collective Action aesthetic categories. When applied to the definition of the empty action it highlights different sides of the ex-

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[1] M. Gerber in her Ph.D. on "empty action" in Collective Actions performances also claims that practice of the group can be described in this manner: "The whole practice of Collective Actions can be described as an investigation of different ways in which it is possible to produce the form, which would enable the Empty action." — *Gerber M.* Empty action. Labour and free time in the art of Collective Actions. Berlin, 2016. P. 36.

[2] Поездки за город. Т. 1 / Trips out of town. Vol. I. Vologda, 2011. P. 11. Kalinsky translates these definitions like this: 1) "The introduction of the extra-demonstrational element into the demonstrational structure at various points during action, and its course at the time of the demonstration will hence on be called "empty action". — 2) — "Here we have defined "empty action" as a principle, though in each action, it expresses itself in its own way, and is regarded as the specific temporal section of the action when the audience, if it can be expressed this way, "intensely does not understand" or "incorrectly understands" what is taking place." — Collective Actions: Audience Recollections from the First Five Years, 1976–1981 / Translated and edited by Yelena Kalinsky. Chicago, USA, 2012. P. 102–103.

[3] "DUMBBELL SCHEMA [Gantelinaia shema] — is a demonstration element in the event, consisting of the event's organizers and its spectators". — Cf. *Monastyrski A.* (ed.), Dictionary of Moscow Conceptualism, trans. Octavian Esanu. — Contemporary, Chisinau, 2010. P. 26.

perience production. From the viewer's perspective, empty action is an experience of not understanding or misunderstanding the action. From the author`s perspective, it is an act of including extra-demonstrational elements into the demonstrational field (further there will be a discussion about extension of this definition). The first definition is about the experience of the viewer (which serves as a goal for the CA practice) and second is about the means to produce such an experience. This analysis makes apparent the link between these two definitions and that link is a link between author and viewer, goal and means of achieving it. Empty action then, as a crucial principle of the experience production, is connecting viewer and author in the Collective Action practice.

In the execution of empty action, authors include extra-demonstrational elements into the demonstrational field to produce a certain experience of misunderstanding for viewers. Demonstrational field is a spatial and temporal frame for the art communication, stage for the performance.[4] The Demonstrational ield contains demonstrational elements meant for art communication. Everything beyond the demonstrational field is non-art, ordinary life. Non-demonstrational elements are not meant for the demonstration in the art communication, these are objects or actions of everyday life. If borders of the demonstrational field are dividing the sphere of art and sphere of ordinary life, then the goal of the empty action is to show the uncertainty of these borderlines. The viewer of the empty action doesn't` understand or misunderstand their disposition.

Monastyrsky says that the best way to summarize most of the performances is to say that ordinary departure or appearance was made,[5] i.e. it was the actualization of ordinary actions in art. The very first performance by the Collective action — "Appearance" — is a perfect example. The appearance of two people — that is all that happened. Because of this attempt to "speak while not saying anything", performances of the group can be called non-performances, non-actions and

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[4] "DEMONSTRATIVE SEMIOTIC FIELD [Demonstratsionnoe znakovoe pole] — refers to a time-space continuum system of elements which is intentionally included by the authors in the construction of the text for concrete work. The term is part of the correlative pair DEMONSTRATIVE SEMIOTIC FIELD — EXPOSITION SEMIOTIC FIELD. In the discourse of KD [Collective Actions group] the formation of the relation between the two Fields is constructed around various elements of the event (part of the CATEGORIES KD) such as: walking, standing, lying in a pit, 'people in the distance,' moving along a straight line, 'imperceptibility,' light, sound, speech, group, listening to listening, etc". — Ibid. p. 34.

[5] "One of the main task of the performances presented here was to model and to make such art spaces («моделирование и осуществление таких художественных пространств» in the original) in which would actualize as aesthetically sufficient such events as "departure", "intermittence", "trip", "standing", "exit", "shout", "knock", "listening". All these elements in spatiotemporal types of arts are used as expedience for the creation of images and metaphors. In our performances, nothing like this happened". — Поездки за город. Т. 2–3 / Trips out of town. Vol.II–III. — Vologda, 2011. P. 9 10.

we can suggest that because of this strategy the main aesthetic category of the group is called "empty action".

Working with the frame of an art statement, i.e. art-life border is characteristic for Conceptual Art in general; "Fontaine" by Duchamp or "4.33" by J. Cage are some of the known examples. Placing an ordinary object in the demonstrational field of the art museum (or framing ordinary sounds produced during a definite interval of time as music as in Cage`s "4.33") is equivalent to putting extra-demonstrational elements into demonstrational field. This method is a base for such a genre of contemporary art as found-art/ready-made.

The main difference in the Collective Actions practice is that the Demonstrational field is not the same from the position of the viewer and from the position of the author (remember what was said about the importance of the dumbbell scheme). Reflection upon the usage of terms "demonstrational" and "extra-demonstrational" in the definition of the empty action shows that they are expressing the viewer`s position. The extra-demonstrational elements that authors put in the demonstrational field are such only for the viewers, for authors it is always known that they are included in the demonstration.[6]

So the main difference of CA performances lies in the arbitrary widening of the demonstrational field`s borders by the authors. Monastyrsky says: "Demonstrational field itself is widening and becoming an object of consideration: we are trying to find zones, which have certain properties and relations. These properties and relations, as we think, affect the formation of perception`s levels..."[7] When Duchamp and Collective Action both are working with viewers expectations, Duchamp is violating the life-art border in one transgressive act, pulling something from life into art, but the borders are still solid, something just crossed it. For the Collective Actions, the demonstrational field is not something solid or something presented to the viewers like a given entity (which is the case for the museum or theatical stage). These borders are different from the perspective of the author and the perspective of the viewer. CA violates these borders constantly in the process of the performance. There is no one transgressive act — the whole performance is a process of transgression. The strategy of Duchamp, as most of the conceptual artists, is about the content of art (what may or may not be put within art sphere) and CA strategy is about the border itself (where these borders lie).

CA practice of experience production as a practice of transgression is based on working with viewers` expectations. The viewer is always waiting for some-

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[6] As M. Gerber puts it, "from the perspective of the viewer, the Empty action comes into effect when the demonstrational and the extra-demonstrational elements start oscillating. This oscillation takes place merely in the perception of the viewer, since in reality, the demonstrational element is clearly defined by the Action plan — and thus is, negatively, the extra-demonstrational element". — **Gerber M.** Op. cit. P. 40.

[7] Поездки за город. Т. 1 / Trips out of town. V. I. — Vologda, 2011. P. 10.

thing to happen. The frame of art bounds these expectations, but more important is where viewers expect the borderlines of the art and the ordinary life to be. When M. Gerber describes the main characteristic of the empty action she also draws attention to the considered opposition of demonstrational and extra-demonstrational elements: "The Empty action begins to "work" when the demonstrational element is perceived by the viewers as the extra-demonstrational element or vice versa. In this fleeting moment the viewer cannot identify clearly what is and what is not a demonstrational element, and thus cannot start his or her interpretation of the "demonstrated". Although the viewer is expecting to see an "artistic work", he or she is not able to grasp it. The purpose of the Empty action is to delay judgment and interpretation for as long as possible."[8] The viewer is placed in an ambiguous position of the witness of the empty action. The act of demonstration (action) is performed nevertheless, but it is emptied through breaking the expectations concerning what is demonstrational and what is not. The demonstrational field becomes the field of expectations, expectations about its` borderlines.

There can be different types of viewers and all types of viewers perceive events in their own way and have different expectations. These types are:
1) authors as viewers to their actions,
2) invited viewers,
3) anonymous/accidental viewers.

Authors are the most informed ones; they know the plan of actions and all deployed means. They know where are the borderlines of the demonstrational field because they are the ones who set them. They perform an empty action through the breaking of viewers` expectations about the demonstrational field.

Invited viewers don't know anything about what is going to happen, which makes them and their expectations a playground for the empty actions. They only know that some of the witnessed actions will belong to the art sphere. Not knowing what is demonstrational and what is not, they always don't understand or misunderstand the action (note that this sentence contains implicitly both definitions of the empty action, describing means of production and the resulting experience of the Collective Actions practice). But because of that they also can extend the demonstrational field for themselves — anything can be interpreted as the part of the performance. This is called the "fisherman effect" — when viewers interpret something belonging to the context as a part of the text. This misplacing happened during "Second painting" performance: viewers saw the fisherman passing by the river and thought that this was a part of the performance.

A. Monastyrsky says that anonymous viewer is one of the main structural elements of the aesthetic space for the Collective Actions,[9] but not much is said

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Поездки за город. Т. 4–5 / Trips out of town. Vol. IV–V. — Vologda, 2016. P. 167–168.

about this type of viewer except that perception of the anonymous and accidental viewer is most in line with the empty action art purposes[10] and that empty action itself can be defined as extra-demonstrational focus on the anonymous viewer («внедемонстрационная обращенность к анонимному зрителю»).[11] There are some non-explicit relations between empty action and accidental viewer and the purpose of this text is to elucidate them.

It is never known who would see objects left by the group or would pass by during the performance, thus the name is "anonymous viewer" or "accidental viewer". The main trait of this type of viewer is non-acquaintance with the fact that they are viewers. Their experience is not defined by the frame of art performance or by art expectations. Their uninformedness, i. e. that they are perceiving situation out of context makes them most interesting for Monastyrsky. When invited viewers don't know what exactly is been demonstrated to them, anonymous viewers don't know that something is been demonstrated at all. The attention of the Collective Actions group to the anonymous viewer is making their practice of blurring the borderlines of the demonstrational field more complicated.

They are not just putting extra-demonstrational elements into demonstration and it is not thoroughgoing to define the means of the empty action in this way. They are also doing the opposite. In the case of the anonymous viewer, they are placing demonstrational element beyond the demonstrational field, beyond any art expectations. It is maybe heuristic to compare this side of empty action practice to the found-art (or ready-made). In this case, empty action is methodologically opposite to the found-art. Something is found not by the author as in found-art, but by the viewer. Found-art is something from ordinary life in the art, empty action towards the anonymous viewer is, in turn, something from the art in ordinary life.

The fact of the demonstration is not obvious for both anonymous and invited viewers: something is not shown to the ones who are waiting for the show and something is shown to the ones who are not waiting. The empty action creates uncertainty between demonstration and non-demonstration employing heterogeneity of the field and inserted elements. Something is placed in an unexpected position creating misunderstanding. This examination of the anonymous viewer definition pinpoints important technological aspects of the empty

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[10] In the introduction for the tenth volume of the "Trips out of town" Monastyrsky writes: "Performances are the organization of the "empty action". Empty action itself is starting after the performance has ended and everybody has left. At this moment pure, purposeful being of performance is starting. It starts working with its "empty action" (for the anonymous viewer). This is why the best way to visit performances is to happen to be around the place where performances are held or to visit place afterward by arrangements". — Поездки за город. Т. 6–11 / Trips out of town. Vol. VI XI. — Vologda, 2009. P. 390.

[11] *Monastyrsky A.* About 'Intercrossing-2' performance / Монастырский А. Об акции «Пересечение-2» // http://conceptualism.letov.ru/Andrei-Monastyrsky-peresechenie-2.html.

action and it must be held in mind when the functional definition of the empty action is made.

As already said empty action can also be defined as an extra-demonstrational focus on anonymous viewer. But this definition can also be translated as "non-communicative communication for the anonymous viewer". The anonymous viewer doesn't understand in a more profound way that the invited one. There is no question about the borders of art and life in happening communication for her. She confronts a deeper descriptive problem:

1) meaning and genesis of the witnessed event/object is unknown,
2) it is not apparent if there is a communicative intention,
3) if there is, then the recipient and purpose of the sender are still unknown.

There is no possibility to grasp what`s happening or place found object in a category, thus nothing is known.

Anonymous viewers witnessing the performance can define the situation and its participants in any way (eco-volunteers, film-makers, religious adherents, etc.), but most likely she could not define it at all. In a series of performances with slogan banners, if it is analyzed from the position of the author, demonstrational elements (banners) are placed beyond the demonstrational field, slogan banners are left in the field. After the performance the banner is still "working"[12] for the anonymous viewer. But from her position it is not obviously demonstrational, i.e. is not identified as art. Different things were left on the field after other performances for someone to find them (rarely the performance itself can be witnessed by the accidental passersby). All this is perceived as something random and non-demonstrational by the anonymous viewer.

The anonymous viewer is a tabula rasa, she doesn't know that what`s happening (or what`s left on the field) is art. Phenomenologically this can be described as a "negative experience" (Irving Goffman) or encounter with the saturated phenomenon (Marion). The weirdness of performances (or left objects) for the accidental viewer makes them impenetrable for the interpretations. This means that there is no answer to the question of what is it and thus no organized experience.[13] The anonymous viewer is the type of viewer that can encounter

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[12] "In our performances anonymity is presented in two types: purposeful anonymity when only members of the CA group create some kind of an object for accidental viewer (as in, for example in "Slogan" series), and "residual" anonymity when object keeps "working" after invited viewers have left the place of action (for example 'Lieblich')". — Поездки за город. Т. 4–5 / Trips out of town. Vol. IV–V. — Vologda, 2016. P. 168.

[13] "When, for whatever reason, the individual breaks frame and perceives he has done so, the nature of his engrossment and belief suddenly changes. ... Expecting to take up a position in a well-framed realm, he finds that no particular frame is immediately applicable. ... He loses command over the formulation of a viable response. He flounders. Experience — the meld of what the current scene brings to him and what he brings to it — meant to settle into a form even while it is beginning, finds no form and is therefore no experience.

this phenomenon in its fullness, experience the extreme negative experience. What is a complex mix of demonstration and non-demonstration for the invited viewer is an encounter with the unknown for the anonymous. With the application of the dumbbell scheme here we can say that the anonymous viewer is the ideal counterpart of the author's empty action. From the artist viewpoint, anonymous viewer lives in the realm of contingency, radically speaking it's not a viewer at all. It is a non-viewer for the empty (non) action.

Reality anomically flutters. He has a "negative experience" — negative in the sense that it takes character from what it is not, and what it is not is an organized and organizationally affirmed response". — *Goffman E.* Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience. — Boston, Massachusetts: Northeastern University Press, 1986. P. 378–379.

Содержание