

Cornelia Lund
Holger Lund

Live Event to Object

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Cornelia Lund, Holger Lund.

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Live Event to Object: The Study of a Transformation as Put to Practice by the Artist Collective Transforma

— Cornelia Lund, Holger Lund

1. Introduction

At least since the 1960s, artists and audiences have engaged with the question how temporary events, such as concerts and performances, could be transformed into permanent objects, into products that might be transported and distributed. At least, for example, since flamboyant audiovisual presentations of the time started accompanying rock concerts, while performance art usually focused on (social) process and eschewed the work as a (capitalist) product in favor of the passing event. Still, even in performance art there is a constant need to convert the ephemeral moment of the live event into something more durable.¹ Only then can the event become part of a common discourse. Within non-oral cultures, a live event, which takes place during a limited time in front of a limited audience, will quickly fade and vanish if there is no recording or other form of coverage. The event's possible contribution to that same discourse from which it has arisen is lost forever.

2. Loss and compensation

Each live event contains its own loss—except if measures are taken to limit the amount of loss. One classic measure is documentation; another the conservation of traces, for example leftovers from a performance that refer to the event as indexical signs; a third is transformation, in which the process of the live event itself constructively leads to a durable product, as for example in Tony Conrad's *Pickled Films* (1974). In this performance the films are processed by cooking and marinating them before they are filled into glass jars.

Additionally, one must differentiate for whom the measures are taken. Do they help us remember a live event in which we have participated, or do they evoke an event we have not been to?

3. Oppositions

Problematically, each of the three measures against loss—documentation, conservation of traces, transformation—is still recognizable as merely a crutch. This is because the main dimension in which the live event takes place is time. The possible transition from the here and now of a performative event to an object, whatever its characteristics, leads us to the following pairs of oppositions, in which the second term contains a form of reduction compared to the first one: temporary vs. permanent

¹ See Ana Carvalho. "Momentary Gathering, Performative Moment and Creative Process: The documentation of realtime AV performance," in: Eva Fischer (ed.). *Sound:Frame 2011. Festival for Audio:Visual Expressions: Performance*. Vienna: Sound:Frame, 2011, pp. 39–41.

event vs. object

dynamic process vs. static preservation²

communication between artists and between artist and audience vs. one-way communication (without a back channel)

When they are transferred into objects, live events gain in permanence, transportability, and distributability, while the dynamic process of a communicative exchange between artists and audiences has been lost. This loss concerns the key elements of a performative event, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte: the shared bodily presence of artists and audience,³ as well as the resulting “self-referential and ever-changing feedback loop” of mutual reactions, which is what “performances are generated and determined by.”⁴ Once the event has become an object, the “relationship between co-subjects,”⁵ which connects artists and audiences, is changed into the work of art’s traditional relationship: the artist-subject produces a distinct artifact that exists independently of its creator, which may then become an object to the perception of another subject.⁶

The sense of loss described above becomes perceptible in every documentation, in every trace or transformation of a live event. A stale feeling of a lifelessness depletes the primary vitality of the live event into second-hand mustiness. The emotional and intellectual components of audience and actors in a live event cannot be reproduced.⁷ Conversely, one feels excluded from the live event and its communicative processes, since they took place in the past. One simply cannot enter, cannot share a space with what one sees and hears.

4. New methodologies of documentation

Considering this situation, we might ask ourselves why these hopeless endeavors of documentation, preservation of traces, or transformation are still being attempted. It may be due to the demands of the audience, of those who were present at the event and those who were not. Then there is the desire of the artists to become part of the discourse through their work, since “such documentations rather create the conditions of possibility to speak about past performances at all.”⁸ Ana Carvalho explains that “a need for visibility arises ... as a consequence of the ephemeral,” which is at the core of performances.⁹ For her, documentation is “a way to take further the practice and investigation,” yet always remaining “grounded on evidence.” While the value of documentations, traces, and transformations lies in their ability to bear witness to certain live events, we should also keep in mind that as objects they operate on a different level from the live event itself, which enables us to take a more constructive ap-

² Even if multi-angle DVDs to some extent break this stasis open, they do so only within a limited framework. Angles and positions are always pre-defined and cannot be changed by the viewer. This is a form of stasis expanded through diverse optional viewpoints.

³ See Erika Fischer-Lichte. *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2004; transl. Saskya Iris Jain). New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ See Carvalho 2011, pp. 39f.

⁸ Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 75.

⁹ Carvalho 2011, p. 40.

proach. One can postulate, as Carvalho does, new methodologies of documentation particular to ephemeral practices, a kind of score or a play that could be reinterpreted again.¹⁰ Or one might take a close look at the works and the work processes of the audiovisual collective Transforma from Berlin.

5. The case of Transforma

5.1. Post-digitality

When Transforma came together in 2001, they were three students of visual arts, design, and experimental media design. Their name was chosen because they understood the collaborative visual remix as a transformative process. Indeed, everything produced by individual members Luke Bennett, Baris Hasselbach, and Simon Krahl fuses into a thoroughly collective authorship. Their approach can be summarized as “handmade-digital”: manual performance work and digital processing combine to explore the event space as an audiovisual instrument. The results of this process can appear like a mystery and an act of science at the same time, mixing ritual and electric impulses, masquerade and precision cuts.

Along with many VJs and artists at the beginning of the 2000s, Transforma started out exploring the possibilities of digital animation. They were among the first to use real-life footage in their audiovisual practice, filming on stage and laying open the production process itself. Soon the immediate work with the video camera appeared more promising than fiddling around with digital image software for weeks. The camera also offered filmic and performative options of working with lighting and objects, with costumes and masks. This new direction could be described through terms such as haptization or manual animation: a hands-on approach, manually controlling and structuring objects and processes. While Transforma’s aesthetic approach to film and stage events can literally be seen as manipulation, their process includes the use of digital tools—from camera through editing to presentation. Such an approach today falls under the term post-digitality, where digital technology is used, but only for a closer focus on reality and its obviously hand-made processing. Transforma are among the pioneers of this post-digital approach, which by now has become ubiquitous in art and design.

5.2. From the live mix to the making-of

Since their early days, Transforma have used videos they shoot especially for their concert visuals, a format they have stayed with, as proven by more recent concert visuals for the electronic musician Chloé in 2010 and the duo Shrubbn!! in 2012. Such preproduced footage is mixed and transformed live in their performances. A further development in their approach could first be seen in *Synken* (2007). While this project was also based on their own preproduced videos, it was realized in two different formats: presented live as an AV concert with music by O.S.T., and on DVD as an audiovisual film. The music and the images were created synchronously in close correlation. Compared to the high share of improvisation that characterized the concert visuals, the DVD focused on a conceptualized structure and

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, pp. 40f.

on fine-tuning the performativity of the medium. Thus *Synken* forms the base both for the group's following AV concert, *Operators* (2009), music videos such as *Bang Out* (2009), or concert visuals, among them for the musician Apparat (2007–2009).

In *Operators*, even the music came under Transforma's direction, often processed from sounds made by the objects they handled on stage. The group's mise-en-scène also extended to the stage itself. The camera took a step back to not merely show an aesthetic end product, instead it included the process of creation of lights and sounds on stage as well as the handling of objects by the performers. The audiovisual end product was complemented with a documentary approach, which took the shape of a making-of—though actually the action on stage had been filmed beforehand, and only the editing, processing, and presentation of the preproduced sequences were done live.

5.3. Postproduction in real time

With the AV performance *Asynthome* (2010), created to the music of French audiovisual artist Yro, Transforma further refined this process. They no longer used preproduced footage of their actions on stage, but started acting live on stage themselves in performance, film, and music. And the camera took another step back: since none of the materials had been preproduced, everything that could be seen on stage and on the screens was absolutely live. Transforma followed a planned structure, a sort of technical script, which delineated when and where each camera, each light, each sound source would be switched on and off again, where and when each performer took which action. Then everything was realized live, even the editing and montage of video footage, which is usually done in postproduction—a central element of film, here no longer “post” but taking place live on stage, in a process we might call “real-time postproduction.”

In *Asynthome*, Transforma developed a kind of real-time cinema, where everything from the actual performance in front of the camera, through the recording, to postproduction was executed live on stage. The work and its making-of were blended into each other and became the subject. In thematizing the making-of, they also referred to a subgenre which usually appears on physical objects, such as DVDs, traditionally as bonus material. Thus the making-of evokes both the live situation and a performance becoming an object. Here we enter a different level—as described above in our discussion of Ana Carvalho's ideas—where the documentation, in form of a making-of, becomes part of the live event. And since they have moved postproduction forward from post to part of the live event, Transforma are in a position to condense live event and documentation in a new manner. To what extent this approach can be translated to a permanent medium, that is a different question. Yet Transforma have carried this set of problems onto the stage, and have already found a working solution for this setting. Their in-show solution is not necessarily applicable to the after-show, but it still offers a promising first step.

Over the years, Transforma have become more and more conceptual in their development of different formats. And yet these concepts allow for more surprise, spontaneity, unpredictability. Their aim is to bring experimental film to a live stage and to transform the stage itself—space, light, music, body, action, objects, cameras—into a filmic instrument that enables them to develop new resonances in image and sound. We could describe their approach as staking out new medial play spaces. Play spaces that the artists also use for their central work on a transition from live event to something durable, on audiovisual performances becoming objects, as the example of *Asynthome* has shown. Play spaces that conversely can also be used to lend permanent products, such as music videos, more of a live appeal.

Transforma's *Bang Out* (2009) or their trailer for the AV concert *Operators* (2009) both draw their strength from this live appeal. This is supported by the many pointedly hand-made actions that stress the moment of execution. More importantly: what we see in the music video does not differ significantly from the video that is presented live on stage. Of course the performers and their actions on stage are missing in the final product, or, more precisely: they are present but only as part of the video, not in a live stage situation. Since their actions make up the materials processed in the videos, though, the distance between temporary live event and permanent video object is minimized, if never negated. The integration of documentary elements into the live event as well as the expansion of the documentation through live elements—both these approaches show how today, not least due to digital real-time technology, live event, postproduction, and documentation can be interwoven. Thus the problematics of loss can be dealt with on a different level, and the gap between the pairs of oppositions outlined earlier finally grows smaller.



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