

**Liis Kibuspuu**

Estonian Academy of Arts, Institute of Art History and Visual Culture

**Trace History of a Performance. The Transition by Siim-Tanel Annus 1987**

(Diss.: Performance and *Perestroika*: Critical Studies in Historical Performance-Art and its Representation. The Case of Siim-Tanel Annus' Work)

In my thesis, I reflect critically on the object of research of historical performance-art, drawing from the work of an Estonian artist Siim-Tanel Annus from 1980s. The central problem in the analysis is: What can we know about performance-art events from the traces they have left behind, and what is our present relationship to past artworks based upon? The analysis of the performances by Annus will reveal the afterlife and highlight the returnings and transformations of (art-)historical events.

In my paper for the forum in East European art history, I will concentrate on a particular canonical artwork to underline the aforementioned problem: *The Transition* by Siim-Tanel Annus from the year 1987. This work is an exemplary case because of its rich trace history. The afterlife of *The Transition* consists of a documentary film footage and its international feedback, manuscript of a description of first-hand experience by a local art critic, fully preserved original soundtrack, re-enactment by the author in 2007, as well as photos, published texts, interviews, etc. Also, the present case permits analyse the role of accidental factors in the survival of the art-event in the collective memory—*The Transition* is largely known for the intervention of the militia at the end of the performance. The unexpected disruption thus functions as a peculiar trigger of collective memory. The performance starts to accumulate diverse layers of meanings which were not intended by the author, and appears to us already thus laden, hence both enriching our experience of the artwork and blinding us to alternative forms of seeing it. The relationship between the self-contained work of art and the charged political reality of *perestroika* is revealing in this case. In the experience of the contemporaries, the transcendent art is distinctly separated from the lame Soviet existence, but in the light of the later historical events, Annus' work has been heavily politicised, transforming it into one of the symbols of resistance of the *perestroika*-era.

In my research, the theory of history and the studies in performance art are positioned to reach toward one another, demonstrating their field of overlapping. With his concept of viral ontology of performance, Christopher Bedford argues that a performance artwork is essentially a long diverse history of traces: It starts with the initial action, but its manifestations and returnings extend over time to infinity.<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricoeur distinguishes between three types of traces of memory: the material documentation, the cognitive affection-impression and the corporeal imprint in the brain cortex.<sup>2</sup> The first one being the traditional object of historian's research and the third one presumably surpassing his competence, it is the second category of mnemonic traces that could use more conscious attention. In doing so, on the one hand, the documental evidence is appreciated as objects with presence and suggestive capability of their own, that cannot be held secondary to the past events that created them. On the other hand, I seek to draw attention to the limits of the material evidence and to the necessity for the recognition of other types of information. Performance theorist Rebecca Schneider asks, if by adopting the ephemerality of performance, we are ratifying the totalitarian power of the archive, thus ignoring other ways of knowledge which could show us how performance remains, but differently?<sup>3</sup> In my study, I will reflect upon these immaterial traces of memory, rejected by the archive—oral heritage, recollections and images of memory, emotional responses, re-enactments as the means of body memory, etc.—adopting mainly narrative research methods.

---

1 Christopher Bedford, *The Viral Ontology of Performance*. – *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*. Edited by Amelia Jones and Hadrian Heathfield. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012, p. 78.

2 Paul Ricoeur. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p. 15.

3 R. Schneider, *Performance Remains*. – *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*. Edited by Amelia Jones and Hadrian Heathfield. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012, p. 139.