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FRAMING THE PERFORMANCE AND ITS DOCUMENTATION

This paper is based on an attempt to generalize, or rather to put my experience of performance and its documentation into a broader context. For this reason, I will illustrate it with my own work and inevitably commit a subjectivisation that is rather unacceptable for academic research. May I be forgiven for this in this friendly circle.

When we talk about performance, we naturally touch on the psychophysical experience of the relationship to place and time. The performer appropriates the selected space, fills it with his energy, movement and gestures. In the words of Maurice Merleau-Ponty the performer "roots in the space."¹ I remember the contradictory experience of the *Attempt to Sleep* event (Fig. 1). In the middle of the meadow I made a bed (a pillow and blanket of grass sod) in which I intended to sleep. While the body was trapped under the weight of the earth, the mind expanded in all directions. I was both inside the action and its outside observer. Jan Patočka says: "In order to see relationships, we must first create a kind of scene on which they can appear, a scene of the relationships of things to our own

experience."² By installing my body in a defined space, in other words by 'framing' the experienced situation, I created a temporary place worthy of attention. A work that addresses the viewer, better said, a work that seduces the viewer.

It is not important whether the viewers are physically present. They exist in the performer's mind at that moment and his or her performance relates to them. The medium of transmission between the performer and the absent (secondary) spectator is documentation. In this case, a photographic record. The images frame the action, images created primarily by the performer, but of course also by the photographer. The close-up shot of the face draws into the psychological state of the performer while the distance shot (Fig. 2) frames the spatial relations of the performance. The performer is concerned with making the photographs civil and convincing the viewer of the truth of the executed action. I always instructed the photographer in this way and hoped that he would respect my wishes. Occasionally, however, the photographs' photo-ness came out in full force.

Three years before *The Attempt to Sleep*, I made *The Sleep* (Fig. 3) action and its documentation is unbearably aesthetic. But I am also to blame for this, because I stayed on too symbolic a level. So the content and formal framework of the performance itself remains fundamental. However, its documentation also has its regularities. The composition, the angle of view, the focus, the distance, the sequence, the number of frames all play an important role. But the most important one is the final choice of the performer. He/she is the one who releases the representation of his/her performance into the world. The second author's act comes after the execution of performance. But what we see in the photograph is only a snapshot, a fragment of the action. Everything else we have to imagine. The photograph is an impulse to our idea of the course of the performance itself. Even though sometimes the author helps us by selecting more photographs that indicate the temporal course of the performance in individual sequences, there are pauses, gaps, empty spaces between the photographs that we have to fill with our imagination. The linear time of the performance thus turns into a non-linear composition of ideas about its course. Sequentiality both dynamizes and relativizes time. Photography gives us clues to investigate how it was in the past.

We are all familiar with birthday photos of children with cake. Two candles, three candles, four candles, the scene identical, clear traces of the passage of time and its irreversibility (Fig. 4). But where is the mystery of the photography itself, that well-known atmosphere of the manipulation of the child by the parents to keep still and, above all, to smile, just to 'perform' properly for the camera. Unfortunately, we cannot see what was going on outside the frame at that moment. Although at one of my early events, my sister accidentally managed to catch what was going on behind the frame (Fig. 5). I am performing and my mother is watching from the window (Fig. 6), amused, but afterwards she has no choice but to exercise her parental authority and advise me not to fool

around and go and study instead. While it took a few seconds between shots for the Samurai event, it's always a whole year for the *Birthday Pieces* cycle (Fig. 7). So time passes differently, but the location (and therefore the framing) is always the same. A different kind of sequence is represented by a pair of 'before' and 'after' photographs. I was interested in making natural processes visible and experiencing them literally on my own skin. During the *Print in the Rain* event (Fig. 8), I lay down on the sun-warmed pavement before the summer rain and waited until the surroundings of my body were wet. The photo is taken from a bird's eye view, so unfortunately it looks like I'm climbing somewhere rather than lying on the ground. The angle of view caused inaccurate reading of the documentation and set unclear interpretative frameworks. This error can also occur in post-production processing of photos. The graphic designer considered the flying LP record as a smudge and retouched it. I didn't notice it during proofreading and so I have a photo of *Playing J. S. Bach for the Wind* (Fig. 9) without the LP in my monograph. Sometimes it is difficult to choose the number of photographs to represent a performance. For the *Controlled Fall* (Fig. 10) event, I always exhibited only two sequences of the fall from the snow-covered rock. However, I subconsciously feel that the third one, capturing the expression on my face just after the fall, is also important.

In sequential photography of natural processes we also determine the images, but chance comes into play to a greater extent. The sound of a match striking, the pain, the smell of burning hair, all of these are absent from the photographs, but we can imagine it through the photographs (Fig. 11). The loss of control over the shot was even more evident when the participant of the happening *The Orchard* took pictures with his eyes covered (Fig. 12). What to do with the documentation of the *Great Frottage*, which was accidentally shot twice on the same film and the double exposure created an unreal space (Fig. 13)? Is it valid as a testimony of the action that took place?

Sometimes the action has a natural frame, as in the case of *White Christmas*, where it was the gallery window. The image worked reversibly, with the audience watching the performers and the performers watching the audience, who thus also became performers (Fig. 14).

I would also like to mention a situation where something important is happening off-screen. I was detained and investigated by the police during the *Exchange* event (Fig. 15). That didn't show up in the original documentation at all. Subsequently, I wrote up this and other stories accompanying my performances and published them in a book called *Yesterday* (Fig. 16). I found that without the text it was impossible to convey additional layers of meaning. So I began to combine text with photography, although I had avoided text in my earlier work. How else to convey, for example, the anarchistic act of a Chinese participant in my performance in Beijing who, instead of throwing a paintbrush dipped in paint at me like the others, painted his chest, ran and jumped on my back (Fig. 17).

In the last 20 years I have returned to the original documentation and reinterpreted it in collaboration with artists of the younger generation (Barbora Klímová and later Petra Feriancová). For example, I printed and exhibited all the frames of scanned negatives (Fig. 18). Or I had a new edition of the documentation enlarged and framed and exhibited it in a kind of information cloud (Fig. 19). I realized that with all the manipulation of contexts and reframing of documentation, it was still impossible to avoid a linear return to the past (Fig. 20). In this sense only the internet and its Google 'shaker' is a perfectly non-linear master of temporal cocktails (Fig. 21).

In this context, I would like to mention Henri Bergson's notion of 'duration' and his theory of the changing (non-linear) relationship between the past and the present, where memory materializes into an image, opening up a new idea, reviving a past action and transforming its content into the present.³ The complexity of the existential and at the same time conceptual act can also be

evidenced in Bergson's words: "The presence of perception places us at once in matter, and the presence of memory places us at once in spirit."⁴ This applies both to the actions themselves and to their documentation. What interests me about documentation is its impermanence and openness to the viewer. Petr Rezek comments on this: "The meaning of documentary is not the dead document, but precisely the happening of meaning, which is newly constituted by the transformations of understanding."⁵ Similarly, Boris Groys argues that it is only through documentation that our lives become meaningful.⁶ This is primarily related to art, which is temporal, unrepeatable, and can approach a secondary audience through documentation. Groys finds this mechanism in the creation of art installations based on documents, which thus acquire their place and context. Documentation is thus significantly transformed by the concept of new disclosure. The dynamics of the relationship between rational and intuitive approaches is important. In this context, Vilem Flusser's observation is accurate: "Conception is becoming more and more imaginative and imagination more and more conceptual."⁷

The existential, risk-taking, self-sacrificing commitment of performers in the seventies and eighties has been largely revised by conceptual distance. Analytical strategies relying on a post-conceptual approach prevail, where the performative act itself may be only one part of (post)production structure. As Adrian Heathfield, a prominent theorist of the performative arts, says: "Phenomenological aspects can no longer be seen in isolation from their linguistic and discursive constructions. Understanding performance is accomplished through the temporal paradox between specific experience in live performance and its equally specific revision in other instances of knowledge. Experience cannot be separated from thought."⁸

The relationship between action and documentation is becoming central in contemporary artistic practice and needs to be analyzed with the utmost criticality. While live

action attempts to dematerialize the artistic act through ephemeral, time-limited live action, performance documentation objectifies it and transforms it into a fixed artefact. There is a similar danger in the repetition (reenactment) of performances, which are generally shielded by institutional authority and easily commodified through maximized documentation. The institutionalization of performative activities significantly shortens the process between the live action and the report (documentation) of its progress. The ontological gap filled with a certain degree of indeterminacy and mystery disappears along with the elusive dimension of temporality (the passing of 'unmeasured' time). Performance retreats from process and becomes more of a 'sculptural or object artefact,' a methodically processed spatio-temporal structure made visible by photographic, filmic or verbal recording. In order to escape this trap of immobilization and transformation of performance into a product, it is necessary to unframe it again, to open it up, to accept ambiguity and mystery, to respect accidental twists and unexpected reactions. In my opinion, sharing situational precariousness and uncertainty is still one of the most important sources of freshness, renewal, recharging the energy field of the mind-body-space-time network structure.

Finally, let us return to the documentation and comparison of its photographic and video form. Photography is a poetic medium, offering a symbolic image that paradoxically refers more to the present interpretation than to the original performance (Figs 22, 23). Video is seemingly more factual, at least that's how we perceived it in the past. Nevertheless, it captures and frames reality selectively, incompletely and therefore semi-realistically. Both media (photography more, video less) create space for our imagination. So, in conclusion, I dare say that performance and its documentation are more poetry than reality.

- 1 *The Attempt to Sleep*, 1982
- 2 *The Attempt to Sleep*, 1982
- 3 *The Sleep*, 1978
- 4 *The Birthday photos*, 1961, 1962
- 5 *The Samurai*, 1978
- 6 *Mother watching a Samurai*





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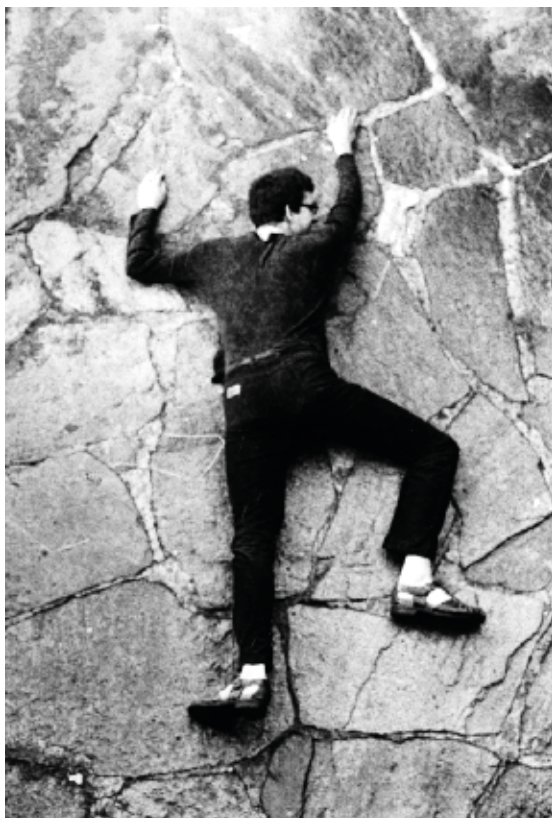


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7 *The Birthday Pieces*, 2013–2022



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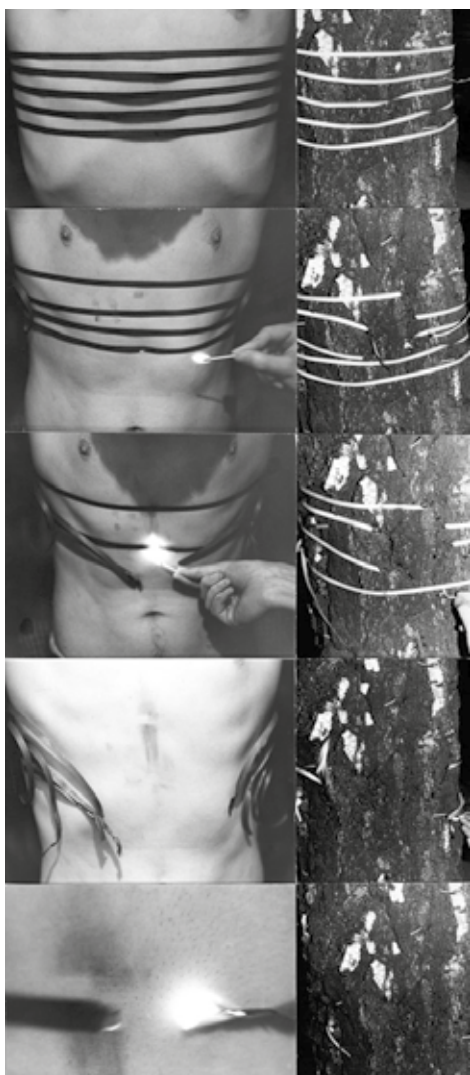
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8 *The Print in the Rain*, 1980

9 *Playing J. S. Bach for the Wind*, 1980
Accidentally retouched LP record in
the monograph



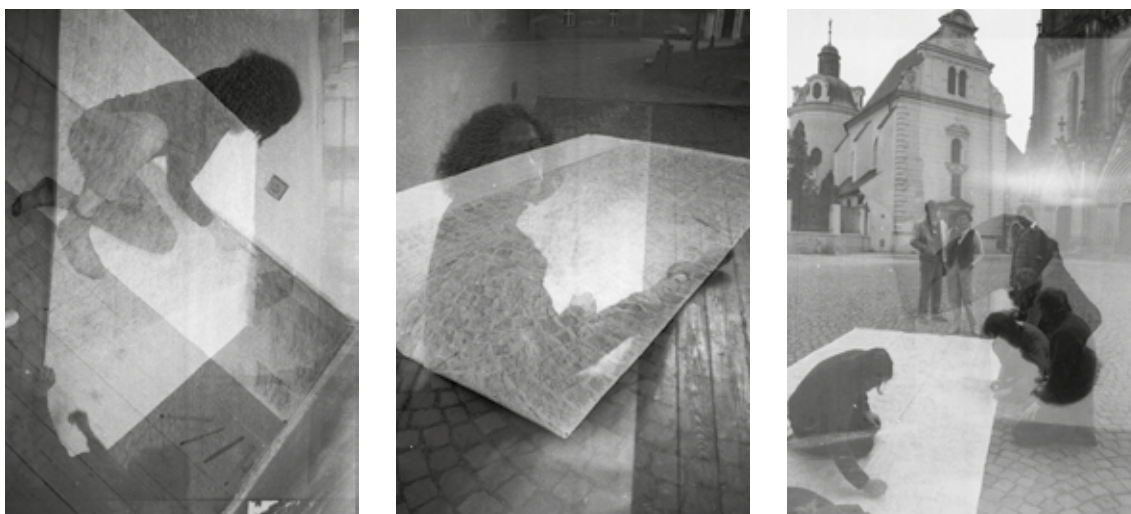
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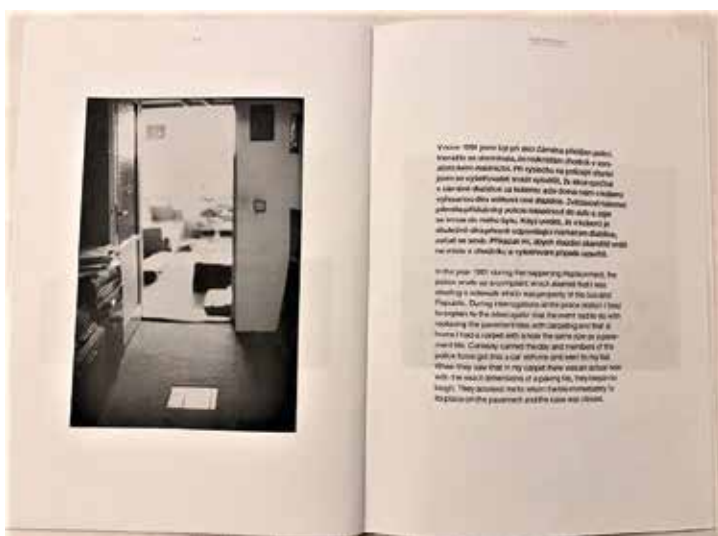
- 10 *The Controlled Fall*, 1980
- 11 *The Confrontation (Pain of the Tree and Pain of the Man)*, 1981
- 12 *The Orchard (Welcoming Spring)*, 1980
- 13 *The Great Frottage*, 1984
- 14 *The White Christmas*, 1990
- 15 *Exchange story in the book „Yesterday“*, 2009
- 16 *The Exchange*, 1980



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17 *The Calligraphic Brush Throw at a Living Target*, Peking, 2013

18 *Documentary Relicts*, amt-project, Bratislava, 2016

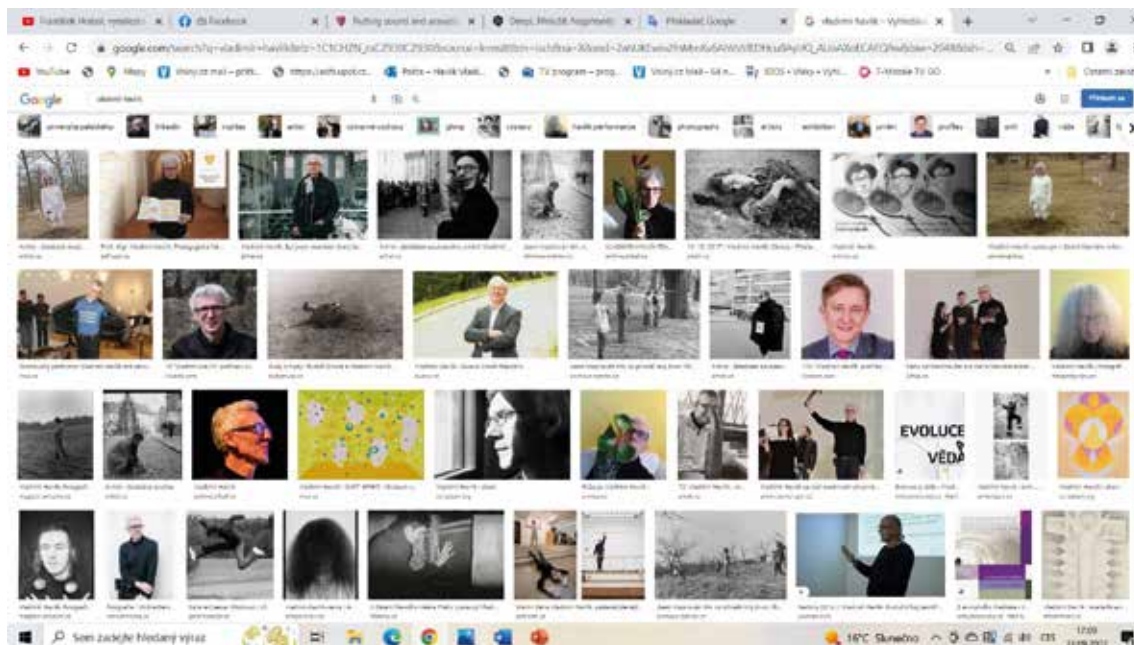
19 *Reframed Records*, Fondazione Zimmei, 2020

20 *Performer's Biography, 1959–2019* (Gallery Caesar, 2019)

21 *Google search for name Vladimír Havlík*



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22 *The Geysir*, 2018, Festival of Naked Forms

23 *The rEVOLUTION*, 2022, Festival of Naked Forms

Notes

- ¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologie vnímání* (Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2013).
- ² Jan Patočka, *Umění a čas I, II. Soubor statí, přednášek a poznámek k problémům umění* (Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2004).
- ³ Henri Bergson, *Hmota a paměť: esej o vztahu těla k duchu* (Praha: OIKOYMENH, 2003).
- ⁴ *Ibidem*.
- ⁵ Petr Rezek, *Tělo, věc a skutečnost v současném umění* (Praha: Jazzová sekce, 1982).
- ⁶ Boris Groys, “Umění ve věku biopolitiky: Od uměleckého díla k dokumentaci umění,” translated by Vladimír Malý, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, Prague: VVP AVU, 4-5 (2008): 114-128.
- ⁷ Vilém Flusser, *Postděljiný* (Mělník: Přestupní stanice, 2018).
- ⁸ Adrian Heathfield, *Live: Art and Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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