“The Performative Moment of Your Own Disappearance”

Marek van de Watering, 10th of May 2010

Uttered during a Guattari inspired lecture, this sentence fascinates me. Three things came to mind: the disappearance of Bas Jan Ader during his In Search of the Miraculous, Taxidermia’s Lajoska performing his own taxidermy and in line with the latter, Ilya Kabakov’s The Man who Flew into Space from His Apartment.

I do not know what “the performative moment of your own disappearance” means, to me (“…my own…?”), but I want to find out. Or at least, see were it takes me. This essay, alongside practical research, is meant to help me do so.

A formal starting point

Performative does not give an easy start, within the sentence as a whole, as it is mostly used to describe an act that is performed purely by mentioning it ¹. An example could be “I apologize”.

A moment, in turn, can be related to either time or force (coming from the Latin word momentum, movement), being either a brief period of time, and exact moment in time or (from physics) the turning effect produced by a force on an object². In our inquiry, we should investigate time, and possibly force.

Your own talks to you or me, individually, or to us in general. It talks to (and about) the person, whatever a person might be. This gives us the possibility (or the problem) of switching perspectives throughout this research, and thus to cross-examine, and thereby hopefully to isolate points of interest.

Then the crux of the sentence: disappearance. This fires my imagination. Is it through Kant’s idea of the sublime? Before getting into this, what does disappearance mean? Again, the dictionary gives us a starting point.

To disappear, quoting the Oxford English Dictionary stands for:

1. (to) cease to be visible
2. (to) cease to exist or be in use
3. (of a person to) go missing or be killed

Sequentially, this adds to our search the notions of vision, existence, usage and that of being findable (implying a context!) or dead (death).

¹ http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/performative

² http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/moment?view=uk
A false start

The dictionary might be a false start, as it seems to raise more questions than it gives answers. Still these questions might aid us in finding out what disappearance means, why it fascinates me but not only me, and how it can serve in practice.

*Can something disappear suddenly, in the metaphorical blink of an eye?*

From a physics point of view, yes, it can from vision, but something needs to replace what has just disappeared. Even in the precarious topic of matter and anti-matter, where a particle and an anti-particle (or a me and an anti-me) null each other out, energy gets emitted.

*Does every disappearance lead to an appearance (within another system)?* (Or: *what can a something disappear into?*)

Maybe this paradox is what fascinates us, as we, in some cases, can only guess what happens after the disappearance, as it is out of our sensory reach. We get the introduction to the story, we know the end, but we can fill in the rest.

Still, this imaginary filling in can be aided or disrupted by a number of factors, not in the least part that of the disappearance leaving marks within its context. A trace directly linked to the something that disappeared and its disappearance. This introduces a new interest:

*How do we know that something has disappeared?*

Traces within a (physical) context hint us, for now as spectators, (either correctly or falsely) on the how, and thereby possibly the why of the disappearance.

If a door has no handle, and no hints of were the handle should (have) be(en), will we accept the door as being a door without a handle, or do we miss the handle? What if we would place an image of the same door with a handle next to it?

If we know that a disappearance has taken place, we wonder about the why, and vice-versa.

Consider Kabakov’s *The Man who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1968) (image 1). We get presented a situation in which an action has suggestively taken place. We get presented a narrative, in the installation itself as in the accompanying text. The latter tells us, through the eyes of his neighbors (none of which “knew him well”), how a man catapulted himself from his room into space, shortly after which authorities boarded up the room.
The impossibility of that which is suggested (the how of the disappearance), add an element of slapstick to the whole.

**Irony and the romantic**

Note however how lighting, point of view (among other features of photography and film) and the temporal or physical path to the place of disappearance (suspense) can affect how it is interpreted. Low lightning, high contrast and the climax of a storyline help Romantics, while standard exposure (image 1) and human (height) point-of-view seem to add to slapstick.

The element of slapstick is exactly what is less there in the disappearance of Bas Jan Ader, which can be more so placed in the Romantic tradition of disappearing into a landscape, into nature. Paradoxically, Ader’s other work partly contributes to the de-Romantification of art, such as seen in his *Broken Fall* (1971) performances, which due to their openness, their “showing what there is”, contain a hint of slapstick. Ader was looking for “the balance between irony and romantic quest”\(^3\).

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\(^3\) In *Legend of the Fall* by Bruce Hainley (ArtForum, 1999)
Representation, a stand-in for the replacement

Notice however how we have ventured from disappearance itself into the (re)presentation of disappearance. Rethinking our introductory step in physics: if something cannot disappear in a split-second from our physical world, than, is not everything we have discussed so far, and possibly every attempt at disappearing an illustration of or reference to disappearance?

Only Ader’s missing at sea might undermine this hypothesis, as he disappeared from our registration systems (sight, radar, etc.) and only his boat has returned. If we accept this hypothesis, we should continue looking into which illustrations of disappearance have what outcome in terms of meaning.

Or, abusing the acceptance of illustration, we could choose for going for not being ashamed of illustrating (or even embrace it), but attributing meaning to the act of illustrating, as one could say Roman Signer does in some of his works (see for example image 2).

Still, one might argue, Bas Jan Ader is here, as is the man who flew into space from his room. They have gone, but as soon as we get confronted with “their” disappearance or the traces of it, they emerge as the object of disappearance. Accordingly, one might ask:

Is a disappearance complete when that which has disappeared has been replaced?
Film, or music (both temporal!) can be examined for this replacement. In film, we expect the next frame after the one which we are viewing: that which will change will do so visually or by referring to another (possibly external) frame. We expect it, we even demand it in film. It is the passing of time, within the film image. In music, Yves Klein provides an example with his *Monotone-Silence Symphony* (1949), being “a single 20-minute sustained chord followed by a 20-minute silence”⁴, with the aim of creating an “after-silence”⁵. The silence needs the sound in order to be silent, and vice-versa.

The relation between the trace of what has disappeared and the new (“the replacement”) provide a topic of study, for example for William Kentridge, who in his animations uses the partly erased content of a frame as the basis for the next frame. Here, we could speak of metamorphosis.

We get into mind-bending when we consider the traces left by the disappearance to be the replacement of the disappeared. The term for this would be the *relic* or memento.

To make us understand the role of a relic, Roman Signer, disagreeing with that he makes “relics” says the following: “The splinter from a true cross is a relic. Instead I make sculptures. And I there is a process, a change in my sculpture, than that is what I want.” Instead of seeing an object used in one of his “events” as a relic, Signer sees the object as the outcome of a process.

An example would be Signer’s film *Kayak* (2000), in which Signer, sitting in a kayak (referring to a friend who died in a kayak accident), gets pulled across an asphalted road. Some shots show the event itself, others show the kayak before and after the event (as is often the case in Signer’s films). As in other of his kayak works, the kayak is both displayed as an object in itself and as the subject of an action that has taken place.

This contrasts with the work of Christian Boltanski, such as *The Work People of Halifax 1877–1982* (1994) in which objects are praised for their quality as mementos. That which has disappeared, or should be missed, is represented through an object, giving it a historical “charging”, but still remaining open to subjective interpretation or even allowing for the re-interpretation of that historical context.

What is interesting, also within my practical research, is whether, as a maker, one shows either the relic, (a registration of) the action, or both. In the work “Tree Walker” (shown at the KunstVlaai 2010 in Amsterdam), Christoff Both-Asmus chose the latter: in a video playing on a monitor we see and hear Both-Asmus preparing for and standing amongst the treetops. Next to the monitor, the relics, or in this case *tools* are shown: two old sturdy boots strapped to a metal construction that can be placed on two long wooden poles, which are also shown. As viewers, we get physically confronted by these objects; by the sheer possibility of performing the action (of walking among the treetops) ourselves. The video, in turn, shows us Both-Asmus’ own, personal “victory” over his imagination. If we want to, we can get in.

### Disappearing versus disappearance

Of the above, mostly Signer and Bas Jan Ader make us think of the showing of process. Due to their manner of registration, we know that (and when) Signer will go up in smoke and that Ader will fall. Is suspense gone? Possibly. It certainly should make us think of the importance of process and our expectations of the related outcome.

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⁵ In *Truth Becomes Reality* by Yves Klein (1980)
The combination of time and expectation, or that of awareness of time has a long tradition, thinking for example of vanitas works (or the film variations by Sam Taylor-Wood). The fruit will rot, we will all die and it will probably be a long and filthy road. However, time gives us the possibility to attribute meaning to the very fact that everything, in the end, will disappear.

Surely, to disappear does not necessarily imply being dead or “not there”. We can disappear into larger wholes, into nature, the city, a group, a system etcetera. For outsiders, this larger whole might even provide a hint of why we would want to do so, what it represents (thinking of Caspar David Friedrich). It could also suggest our failure to disappear in another setting (or system), as Knowbotic Research is exploring in their “Mac Ghillie” project⁶ (a ghillie suit being a camouflage suit that is used by the military).

Image 3 Mac Ghillie in urban space (Knowbotic Research, 2008)

Concluding

What one should be aware of is that, quoting one or more of my fellow students “everything has to do with appearance and disappearance”. It is tempting to agree. However, what is more interesting is in what cases the notion of disappearance manifests itself more so than in other cases, to me personally. And, not to forget, why I, or we, make a distinction (within this “everything”).

Having examined our starting sentence “the performative moment of your own disappearance”, and going from formal analysis to (amongst others) works by Bas Jan Ader and Roman Signer, I realize that I have gone from one entrance into the world of disappearance to the other. Now, it is time to dive in.

⁶ http://macghillie.krcf.org/