

Objects that Choreograph Us

Notes on Movement Research at an old Soviet Summerhouse

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The Dacha Project

Last year, I inherited the old summerhouse of my grandparents near Moscow and turned it into an artistic research about objects – my Dacha Project. The summerhouse (in Russian дача or *dacha* – the word comes from a verb – *dat'* – to give and the noun *dar* – gift, 600 square meters of land were “given” to my grandfather by the state at the end of the 1960s) was full of things which were collected by my family during the last 50 years. Opening the house became an opportunity to observe thousands of objects preserved since Soviet times and to get in touch with the cultural memory. Most of those things were bought (accumulated) during the time of the socialistic regime which had a centralized planned economy and distribution system. This created a different value of the things in comparison with the capitalistic regime. The availability of products and things was unpredictable. Sometimes things were available in vast amounts in one place, but in the next town they were completely unavailable. This caused a purchasing or hoarding strategy of buying things as long as they are available, even when they were not needed at the time, or of buying multiple items when only one was actually needed. On occasion, these items could be used as presents, too.

There was no “call of things” like attuned hoarders “hear” it in the nonmaterialist sense, as Jane Bennett suggests in her fascinating lecture (Bennett 2012) exploring a compulsive-obsessional passion. The purchasing was more like “hunting,” and the commodities were like “trophy.” Owning was an achievement and it was better to store surplus goods than waiting a long time for them to be available again.

Apartment space was rather limited (the typical apartment size for a family of four people was around 46 sqm) and summer houses (without heating or running water during winter) were common and had more space than the average apartment. Hence it was natural to store things of all kinds in the summer house.

Mostly the better objects would remain in the apartments while older, worn out or slightly damaged objects were stored in the summer houses. Also, non-practical things like souvenirs which were usually hand-made, as no mass-production of souvenirs existed, were often brought to the summer house.

Socialism has gone, but the things which it created are still there. As an artist, researcher of post-Soviet body and new owner of the dacha, I met the problem of identifying the value of the objects. Some of them were multiple: the desire to get more than a few objects as long as they were available was a survival strategy in the socialistic realm. There are no shortages of goods anymore and much bigger choices on the market. However, many of the things stored in the summer house are not produced anymore which does not automatically make them valuable. It brings us to the difficult task of how to estimate the value of objects and in the end to decide which of them to keep and which to throw away, if it is not possible to somehow sell them.

Moving in the Dacha (Site)

The Dacha Project started with the open call inviting a group of artists to inhabit the house for a week-long experiment and to find out which objects would be used during that time. Artists, performers and researchers who replied to the open-call were: Anna Simakina, Eugenia Fomina, Marina Ragozina, Elena Drozdova and Polina Bulba. The house is not comfortable for more than six people. There was no intention to invite female artists only, but in the end the group turned out to be completely female.

The house participants entered was full with overwhelming information, making it difficult to focus in the beginning. Diana Taylor offers a dichotomy between the “*archive* of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. texts, documents, buildings, bones) and the so-called ephemeral *repertoire* of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” (Taylor 2007: 19). Our research concerned both, archive and repertoire: while exploring and archiving the objects participants embodied them and the movements they effected. The research questioned which kind of movements we would make while living in the house and using the objects within. How do the things that surround us choreograph our movements?

The space of the house was too crowded to create a laboratory condition; thus a temporary white garden tent was constructed next to the house. The tent and the lawn around it became “the lab” where the movements could be transported to and reviewed, the space for reflection, and the space for rehearsals where chosen gestures were organized into the movement phrases and sequences.

For facilitating the movement research different tools were used. *Guided improvisation* was often used as warm up, to raise body awareness and body control

as well as attunement to the space. The main part of the research was the *body-object relational choreography*, partly functional, partly abstract, but always analyzing the object as the source of the movement. This approach was fruitful for thorough research of the influence of the objects and their role as non-anthropocentric actors; in Latour's terminology, we recognize them as "not anthropomorphic" but they "give form to humans" (Latour 2004: 87). To raise common material on both linguistic and movement level, the following tools were applied:

Automatic group storytelling, when together with the movement each member of the group adds one word and the sentences are being constructed circle after circle, sometimes senseless, dadaistic, sometimes suddenly with the deeper meaning in emerging phrases.

Body-telling technique (moving stories) was used to combine for personal movement history with dance composition.

Body mapping technique (translation of the movement from one space to another) to explore body-space relation and initiate site-specific research.

The summer houses had standard size (6 m x 6 m), and were limited to two floors, and although not standard in layout of the floors, they were all at least pretty similar to each other. Just like in standardized Soviet apartments, the regular summer houses generated similar movement strategies in their inhabitants. The participants had not been in this particular summer house nor met each other before. Still, after only one day, they started to have similar movement patterns inside and around the house. Created in the communist regime the space triggered the communal behavior strategy in the bodies of the participants and arranged them in the certain – often unplanned – way.

In order to control the choices and decisions participants developed basic rituals (times for meals, routine for cooking and cleaning) to structure themselves in the space and time. Still they depended from uncontrollable "forces of dacha" such as fixed times of water supply or suddenly broken electricity (old electric panel got rusty and had to be replaced). Dacha was the space with its own habits, the body of objects – another participant, who interacted with us, gave us ideas and made a big part of work, although it demanded attention and presence, dacha was obviously ready to collaborate.

It was clear that the house determined the movements of the participants. Among these patterns were the following:

Movement in circles or loops. The participants always found themselves stuck at the same corners gazing at the same things.

Repetitive movements. Interacting with objects and space triggered repetitive moments (always turn on this place, always bend here, always stop there); this pattern was very damaging for the concentration and in the end tended to provoke interruptions.

Spontaneous actions. Multiple unfamiliar objects arranged by other people at different times demanded a certain attitude and distracted from the intentions which the participants had. On the way to bring water for the kitchen one sees that the tap is leaking and fetches the tools to fix the tap, but the tools are not really arranged and one starts to sort them; half an hour later the partner, who was waiting at the kitchen finds the first one sorting the tools: "So, where is the water?" This case describes how the body was manipulated and organized by the things almost in the esoteric sense: following not one's own will, but the impulses of objects.

Efforts to maintain non-valuable objects. We were unable to identify the value of the objects one could spend time on repairing them, or washing and cleaning them, which cost less than the market value of such labor. Nowadays, it would be easier to get a new object instead, but the whole structure of the space motivated participants for preservation actions.

Secret functions of objects. Some strange objects had a secret function which only became clear once we removed them; for example, the small sponge between two glasses at the bookshelf looked strange, but protected the glass from clatter, as we noticed when making a few steps on the wooden floor after removing it.

Collections of objects. Many objects were organized together, for example eight hats put on one another, all scissors in one drawer, all types of clothespins on one rope. Most of the items were multiple.

Transgressive look. Old clothes stored in the summer house might be dusty and not clean, but created a second-hand effect, when participants started to wear and combine different items from different times and styles, which they would never do in their everyday urban lives. Summerhouse is the kind of removed place, neither city, nor forest, neither resort, nor storage, if we follow Foucault, it is "outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality" (Foucault 1984: 3), a heterotopia where rules function differently and create different aesthetic orientations.

According to sociologist Robert Gugutzer, the body as a societal phenomenon can be regarded in two ways: as a product of the society and as a producer of society (2004). This interdependence is reflected in the relation between bodies and ob-

jects which we experienced at the summerhouse as a loop: created (formed) by the human, they influence (formed) the human, who still could influence them.

Constructing the Archive (Non-site)



Fig. 1: Participants Anna Simakina and Eugenia Fomina during research in the dacha. Bronnitsy, Moscow region, 2018. Photo: Anna Semenova-Ganz.

The idea of the whole project was to translate this experience to a gallery far from the house. The summer house was left absolutely empty, the whole content of the building (approx. 25 cbm of objects in two full minivans), was completely de-territorialized into the gallery space, where the performative installation was built.

It was open for visitors all day long and activated once a day by a performance of choreographed movements that had been raised during the research in the summerhouse. The performance was arranged by a 2-hour long sound score and included the archived *choreographic material* (moving in circles, repetitive movements, maintaining unnecessary objects and other); *interaction with visitors* who could freely move inside of the installation and were invited into the chain of *spontaneous actions*; *auction of things* (though everyone liked the kind of things my grandmother owned, no one really wanted to buy any); and *one-to-one storytelling interventions* (performers talked about certain objects and their value).

The installation was constructed like a labyrinth in order to trigger tactile and somatic response. One of the discoveries at the non-site¹ was the smell, which traveled with the things. The dacha stays closed from October till April, so all the objects get frozen (it is not rare that in winter nights the temperature drops to minus 35 C) and then defrosted. Together with the typical construction materials (wood and paint), the house and all things inside achieve a typical summerhouse smell, which is pretty neutral by itself, but very noticeable, when taken out of its environment.

For the purpose of arranging the installation as a labyrinth, first of all the furniture was considered, additionally the curtains, carpets and mattresses were also used to create some obstacles. Visitors could walk around the whole installation and observe what is happening inside or enter the labyrinth. The obstacles often were not high, but still there were some “blind corners” where visitors could get lost. After the furniture was settled down all objects were used to fill it, which mostly was predictable (clothes in the wardrobe, kitchen utensils in the drawer), but sometimes “questioned the reality” (electric heater on the dresser, doll in the fridge).

The installation would re-create not the exact layout of the house, but the feeling and atmosphere of the crowded and dusty old space. The paths in the labyrinth were narrow, and tactile contact with some textures was unavoidable. The visitors of the performative installation discovered themselves in the strange defamiliarized place with familiar objects.

One of the intentions was to trigger the feeling of disgust parallel to the feeling of nostalgia. This failed: the spectators loved the space, they touched all sticky, dusty things, inhaled the smell from the carpets and even fell asleep lying on the bed with ancient feather pillows. After a while it became clear: if the childhood of all these people took place in similar conditions, why should they find it disgusting, unfamiliar or strange – millions of dachas are in the same condition, and memories of childhood often have a pleasant emotional flair, so no wonder the visitors enjoyed this nostalgic environment. All they had to do, was “to set” themselves “on the threshold of a day-dream” in which they could “find response in the past” (Bachelard 1994: 15). As a result, the visitors felt much more comfortable than we had planned, and the performance was perceived as more “friendly” than expected.

1 Intended as a metacritical commentary, my allusion to the dacha as the site and the gallery exhibition as the non-site draws, with a certain irony, on earth artist Robert Smithson's proposal to regard the exhibition of a real site or location as an abstract dimensional metaphor for something it is not – the thing it stands for – and thus a construct or, in this case, a choreographic re-invention of the things of/in the dacha. See *A Provisional Theory of Non-Sites* (available at: <https://www.robertsmithson.com/essays/provisional.htm>).

At the end of the project, most objects were brought back to the dacha – now differently arranged than before. The summer house itself will continue to be a space for artistic research as there are currently plans to open it for short-time summer residencies.



Fig. 2: Performer Elena Drozdova interacts with the objects in the sequence of the repetitive movements during the activation of performative installation. Moscow, CCI Fabrika, 2018. Photo: Peter Chumakov.

Among others, the following objects were found, transferred to the non-site, and returned:

At the terrace: window frame white with glass, clothespins, cupboard, glass carafes (3 pcs.), ceramic horse statue with gilding, green glass vase in the shape of a boot, glasses (5 pcs.), crystal glass “Armouda,” crystal glass straps (6 pcs.), metal spiral egg holders (3 pcs.), boiler with cover, English-Russian pocket dictionary, electric radiator “Tropical,” plastic egg holders (per 15 and 10 eggs), black tea, dark glass tea set (23 pcs.), wooden Indian glass holders, polymeric statuette “Goat Fisherman,” polymeric statuette “Skiing Dog,” a statuette of a cat with a bottle of vodka (Gzhel), mugs with berry and flower pattern (3 pcs.), “Faberge Egg” tin box with shells and a button, bag of bags, crucifix with bottles of Holy Water and Holy Land (sand), red candle “Bull,” glass saucers with gold edge (3 pcs.), candlesticks (3 pcs.), ceramic dark blue jug, pieces of sponge to reduce glass shaking in the cupboard, handmade ceramic cups (2 pcs. – one with a candle and one with hair for the hairpiece), pencil for cleaning the surface of irons, anti-mosquitoes spirals (2 packs), paper clips in a box (250 pcs.), plastic dishes (6 pcs.), lamp on

wire, liturgical candles (10 pcs.) and ordinary candles (4 pcs.), raspberry hairband, bathroom brushes (2 pcs.), green hairdryer RPZ (price 23 rubles), plastic curlers (16 pcs.), toothbrush with traces of tooth powder (33 kopeks), razor machine with “Voskhod” blade, surgical gloves (7 packs), hair brushes plastic (2 pcs.), stainless steel thermos “TNITI” (1.7 liters), white fridge “Pole” with cutlery stickers, ceramic mug with the zodiac sign cancer, marble slabs (2 pcs.), form for vareniki (piroggi) molding, hand-made knitted sweaters (5 pcs.), yellow acrylic braid, hand-made knitted hats (4 pcs.), Indian knitted scarf, shoe cabinet, rubber boots (2 pairs), galoshes (13 pairs), other shoes (11 pairs), stools (4 pcs.), wooden table, shoe spoons (2 pcs.), iron “Philips,” can opener set “Warriors” (6 items) on a wooden base, boxing gloves.

At the kitchen: electric heater, ceramic cheese rack, metal hanging bracket with hooks, strainer, scissors, ladle, trowels (2 pcs.), slotted spoon, soup ladles (2 pcs.), pincers, sink, pink bowl, washbasin plastic, soapbox “Synchron,” red tin cans in dots (3 pcs.), gas stove “Electa,” drying rack, mortar with a pestle, copper pot, a hook with three mitts, stands for hot (3 pcs.), tin dish, glasses (8 pcs.), mugs (20 pcs.), metal saucepan, empty can of marinated salmon for used matches, salad bowl, pot of salt, a jar of muscat, pasta cans (2 pcs.), tanks, the salt and pepper are ceramic, salt shaker “Chef,” pepper shaker “Mushroom,” cutting board suspension, hexagonal grater, wooden pistil, wooden breadbasket, bread racks (2 pcs.), box for cookies, cutting board, aluminum trays, aluminum bowl, tanks for bulk goods (6 pcs.), electric plate, aluminum pot for water, metal sieve, electric kettle, enameled pots (7 pcs.), enameled buckets (3 pcs.), glass candlestick holder.

At small bedroom (Grandpa’s room): secretary desk, bed, cupboard, closet, sewing kit in a plastic box, tickets and press card for the Tampere Film Festival, ceramic pincushion “Hedgehog,” tin can “Air of St. Petersburg,” postcards “Swallow’s Nest” and “Mermaid in Miskhor,” photo album, tailor’s scissors, spokes for knitting, box with nail polish (20 pcs.), liquid for removal of a varnish, suspended mirror, “Red October” boxes with Iris threads and sewing accessories, knitting woman’s notebook, tablecloth in flower, cut out parts of the blouse in the rose, shoelace pencil case, candy box with reels, shoe box with knitting needle packs (15 packs, 1991), spokes, strings, hooks, hoops, hair pad without a wire, a purse of muliné threads, bag with the sealed red T-shirt, dog hair with a brush, Tatiana’s passport photo, photo of Vladimir, knitted fingertip, basket with handkerchiefs (7 pcs.), blouse trimmings, plastic box, cloth and sock clippings, heart shaped hooks, ear sticks, folder with clippings from magazines, clippings and knitting magazines, folder with documents, postcards, drawing notebook (1984), school diaries of Anna Semenova for 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 8th grades, books *Animal Life* (6 volumes), book *The Panorama of England*, folders for papers (2 pcs.), folder with embroidery patterns,

souvenir medals for 60 years anniversary (2 pcs.), photo of Anna, copy paper, folder with technical instructions, tonometer, powder and talcum powder, thermos glass flask, sewing machine, red wallet, book *War and Peace* (2 volumes), box of talcum powder, broken earphones, antenna, wires, *Playboy* magazine (2013), neck decoration, icon of an unknown saint, brochure *Practical Magic for You*, curtains in transparent cover, blanket, vase, bed linen in a white bag, underwear, books (48 pcs.), hot-water bottle, curlers, baby wool blanket, tapestry blanket, grey cloth for coats (1973), plastic box with sewing accessories, hoops, cosmetic bag with rings for carpet, artificial fur collar, hats (5 pcs.), wool scarfs, hand-knit bezels, scarves (3 pcs.), black leather circle, set of flaps, book *Guns and Guns*, self-published (samizdat) *ABC health*, ceramic statue of a horse, plastic candy box “Planet” with silk thread reels (63 pcs.), spindle, slippers knitted with a hook, lurex scarf, panama hat “St. Petersburg”, mohair scarf, hats (3 pcs.), shawl, flaps of fabric (cotton), tin can, curtains (4 pcs.), tulle, box of tin with threads (60 pcs.), metal container with dressing material, red wool cut, woolen skirts (2 pcs.), men’s wool pants, pants (2 pairs), skirts (2 pcs.), briefcase with photos, men’s clothes, sports suit, summer pants, female jacket, female shirt, male shirt, raincoat, winter female coat, male wool coat, female demi-season jacket, winter jacket “Camel,” female leopard blouse, male pants, female leatherette jacket, female pink jacket, male black jacket, grey jacket with hood, male wool striped suit, wooden fruit stand, metal fruit stand, hairbrushes, code rope, ashtrays (2 pcs.), metal bowl, wooden table clock, aluminum jar, woven duck, coins, wooden spoon, flashlight, charger, picture reproduction in frame, boxes of books, crystal, statuette of a bull (Gzhel), Chizhevsky’s ion-lamp, icon of St. Mary of Egypt, ceramic statuette of a mouse, windbreaker, ceramic vase, insect killer, poster of Marshal Zhukov, Indian Calendar, geographical maps.

Practical Magic

Nostalgic, old, kitschy, unfinished, analogue, filigree, broken, personal, high quality, low cost, anonymous, sacral, disgusting, antique, practical, funny and ridiculous objects: they all were over time assembled together, and time turned out to be layered inside the summerhouse, creating a mystifying heterochrony in the space. Myths from and about the past, preserved in the things, surrounded performers and got entangled, mixed up with family histories and bodily experiences.

Creating such vibrant atmospheres is enchanting and a continuation of magical practices, argues Gernot Böhme (2006), when through certain material arrangements the mental power is consciously used to influence other people without their awareness and even against their will. The atmosphere of the summerhouse had no definite author and assembled itself over time. Dealing with all

the things was an overwhelming experience for all six performers, who literally had to withstand the sensory overload. Repetitive movements combined with the struggle to stay focused caused a trance-like state, which appeared to be unintentionally practiced in the group. We ourselves became obsessed by the magic of the place.

The abandoned house was perceived – at the first sight – as dead. When the participants entered the house, all the clocks there were not working. But unexpectedly, perhaps activated by some vibration from the floor or some ghosts in the closet, one clock started to tick: so the house was like that clock – the whole inner mechanism of it, once activated by performers, started to move. And the things moved everybody and everything around.

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