

The Alchemy of Valentin Simankov

By Alexander Sedelnikov



Plan

1. Introduction to the research question: importance, problem, organic forms.
2. Alchemy. History and influence of alchemy on art and contemporary artists.
3. The Alchemy of Valentin Simankov.
 - a. Realism and privacy.
 - b. Act and surface.
 - c. The portrait of magician and scientist.
4. Conclusion.
5. List of literature.

Introduction

I believe that transformation and materialization are the essence of creativity. To approach my research question, I am going to investigate the works of the Saint-Petersburg based artist Valentin Simankov. His work represents a rich amount of meanings and radical experiments, including various mistakes and physical interventions. In this essay I am going to dwell on several Valentin's works. It will allow me to reveal Simankov as an artist with encyclopedic interests, from the trivial to the esoteric, from the everyday to the paranormal, responding to daily life in Saint-Petersburg as well as to the Russian culture and history.

To approach the figure of Simankov, it is important to mention his lifestyle and the context of his life and work. Being alienated from the art world and having the reputation of a stranger or a town fool, Valentin manages to use and explore the theme of marginalization in his works. Such interests were quite common among Russian artists because of their punk behavior and expressiveness. Historically society pushed those kinds of people to the margins, where they faced the arts on their own. Indeed, the absence of demand and social isolation were one of the main causes of the crisis.

I met Valentin in the souvenir market in the center of Saint-Petersburg where he used to sell his works. The stall of Simankov was a big storage full of the images that were hanging and lying all around the place. Most of the time it was surrounded by different strangers, artists, poets, writers, hippies and others.

Everything indicated that Simankov used humour, parody, and an apparent casualness of style in order to mask his deeply serious concerns. What I know about Valentin's practice is that he started working with photography during his military service in a submarine. Afterwards he improved his artistic practice while collaborating with different Saint-Petersburg based artist.

Simankov was particularly sceptical about an authoritarian approach to producing, looking at and interpreting images. As a protest against mechanical reproduction of the image, he was interested in corruption, layering, errors, poison and transformation. He was fond of complicating how we see and understand things. What is more, he believed that the art practice had to be related to the cosmic state of mind, and one of the methods to achieve the truth is to experience the Divine (to practice spiritualism). "Why does everybody love these photographs? Because they are not mine, they were made not by me, but only through me."

Valentin's pursuit of freedom and his concern with contamination can be regarded as a contrast with the unstable situation in Russia. In a way Simankov challenged both the struggle with Russian reality and mysteriousness of the Russian soul.

Valentin's language can be traced in many art schools: from canonical painters such as Andrei Rublev or Michelangelo da Caravaggio to an enormous amount of avant-garde artists. I can also compare his methods of working with such contemporary artists as Daisuke Yokota, Sergey Bykov, Femke Dekkers, Lisa Oppenheim and others. Furthermore his art practice began in the late '70s - early '80s, the years when Leningrad was full of underground movements producing different kinds of art. For instance, *The New Academy of Fine Arts*, founded by Timur Novikov in 1989, became a recognized meeting point for the art scene and symbolized the spirit of freedom and new beginnings in post-soviet Russia. It can be traced in Simankov's attraction to equally banal and domestic situations, Russian classical literature and neoclassicism.

Always looking for hidden spirits, courageous experiments and unexpected results, Valentin Simankov reminds me of the contemporary alchemist. He provides a model for many inventions and discoveries. Appealing to that particular point, I'd like to connect alchemy and Simankov's work in order to investigate his core concepts and ideas. In some way his works have a connection to the methods of the alchemy practice, but on the other hand Simankov went further. This very connection and abruption of two practices are my main research focuses.

The essence of alchemy

Alchemy is an influential philosophical tradition whose practitioners have, from antiquity, claimed it to be the precursor to profound powers. The objectives of alchemy have varied but historically have typically included one or more of the following: the creation of the fabled philosopher's stone; the ability to transmute base metals into noble metals (gold or silver); and the development of an elixir of life, which would confer youth and longevity.

Alchemy played a significant role in the development of early modern science. The main difference with modern science is that alchemy included Hermetic principles and related to mythology, magic, religion and spirituality. Through experiments with liquids and metals people achieved important inventions by mistake or confusion. For instance, the German merchant and alchemist Hennig Brand, while experimenting with substances and searching for the “philosopher’s stone”, discovered the chemical element phosphorus. Alchemists also developed a structure of basic laboratory techniques, theory, terminology and experimental methods, some of which are still in use today. Consequently, we can regard alchemy as protoscience that contributed to the development of modern chemistry and medicine.

It is important to mention that alchemy has had a long relationship with all sorts of art. Alchemy appears throughout literature from Shakespeare to modern authors. Some works in this category use the motif of alchemy, others are structured alchemically. Many authors freely use the structure of the text while combining and mixing sentences and sometimes different genres of literature in one piece. For me one of the striking examples is the Russian avant-garde movement OBERIU (Union Of Real Art) which was founded in 1928 by Daniil Kharmis and Alexander Vvedensky. It was an extremely provocative group of artists and writers known for their notorious performances, nonsensical poetry and theatrical presentation. For instance, the novel *Puppets* by the artist Pavel Zaltsman represents the astonishing and terrifying panorama of Russian Civil War and includes lines of literary phantasmagoria, mysticism, avant-garde experiment and realistic expression. Moreover this trend was noted in novels and poems like those of William Goldwin, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Vladimir Nabokov, and others.

The visual artists had a similar relationship to alchemy. The first alchemical inventions, such as the discovery of phosphorus and the big role in the evolution of paint, had a strong impact to growth of art. Alchemists invented their own symbolic language that was influenced by many artists in their works and practice. In the early fifteenth century, significant pictorial elements began to appear in alchemical works such as the Ripley Scroll and the Mutus Liber. This trend developed further in the sixteenth century emblems. Inspired by the work of Horapollus, this allegorical art form was adopted by alchemists and used in the engravings of Matthäus Merian, Lucas Jennis, Johann Theodor de Bry, Aegidius Sadeler, and others.

Some contemporary artists use alchemy as inspiring subject matter, or use alchemical symbolism in their work. On one hand, alchemy is a radical and subjective practice, but on the other hand, it has a strong philosophy and structure in its base. The idea of that knowledge influenced such artists as Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Sigmar Polke, Anselm Kiefer and others. For example, the German artist Sigmar Polke was always interested in visual changes occurring to pigments, creating the illusions by using different materials, liquids and chemicals. “Poison just crept into my pictures,” he said.

Valentin Simankov was also following the basic principles and ideas of alchemy. To discuss this further, I am going to divide his works into several categories in order to show that his practice goes beyond the basic principles of photography.

The “Alchemy” of Valentin Simankov

a. Realism and privacy

Fascinated by Saint-Petersburg and its permanently changing atmosphere, Simankov investigated the city in his early photographs. It was symptomatic of underground photographers of the 60’s-80’s to explore different meanings and sides of Saint-Petersburg. For instance, Boris Smelov and Boris Kudryakov focused on portraying the unsightly and dark side of the city following Fyodor Dostoevsky’s depressing texts. Valentin also took it as one of the starting points in his work, but shifted it towards his own experience of freedom and absurdity.

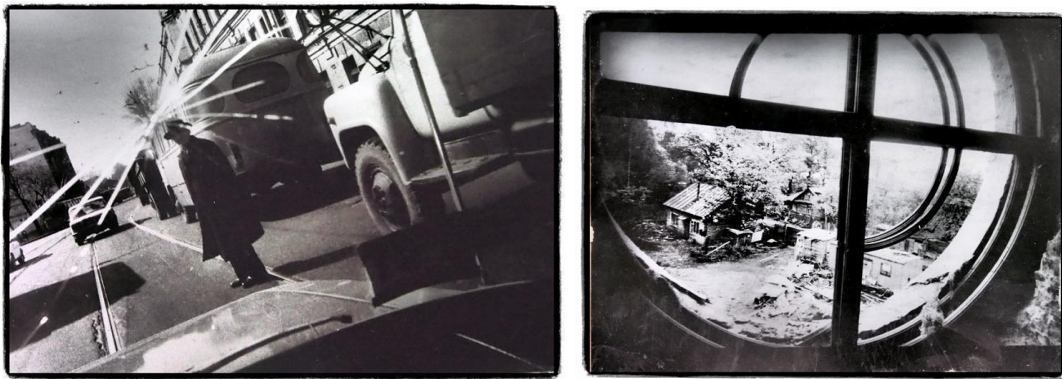


Fig.1. *Mood* by Valentin Simankov

In using a sense of humour and snapshot-like photographs, Simankov is close to the Kharkov photographers Boris Mikhailov and Roman Pyatkovka. They started working in the same period by exploring themes related to social documentary photography and developing a critique of the “mask of beauty” of the emerging post-soviet capitalist way of life. However Valentin was trying to hide the political chaos and negative side in his works. For him it was crucial to be an observer and to look around with a virgin childish gaze. By letting himself go

without any intentions of photographing any particular thing, Simankov seems to not care about the subject. But at that moment he succeeds in speaking out clearly and loudly (see fig.2).

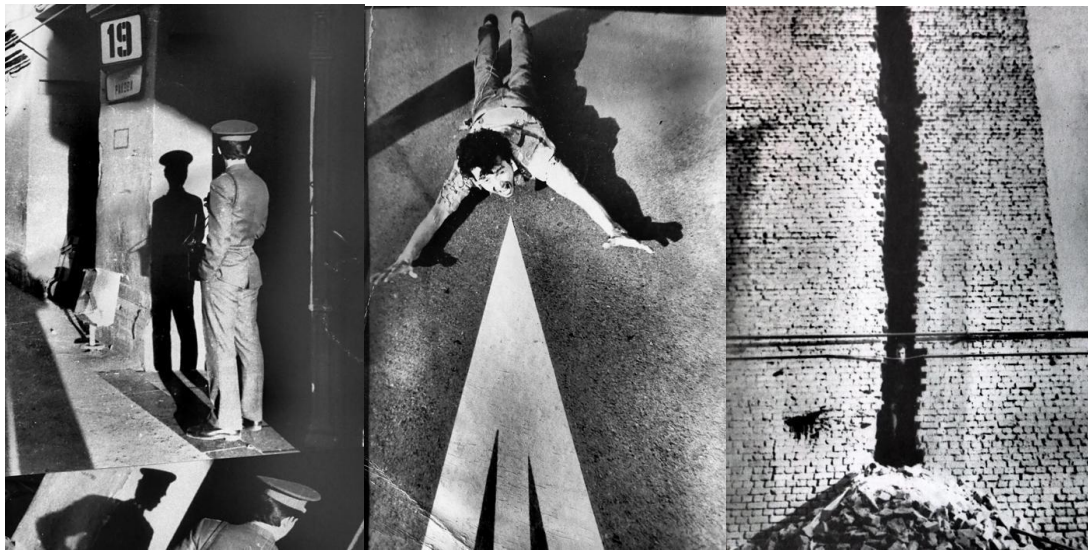


Fig.2. Environment by Valentin Simankov

Valentin was probably married and probably has kids. But he always refused to talk about it. Once he mentioned: “I am childless and by the way everybody is the kid.” Interestingly, his archive contains a lot of pictures with the same woman and kid (see fig.3). When I had collected these images, Valentin Simankov’s way got another direction. And what is more, the delicateness of these photos demonstrates happiness and joy.



Fig.3. Kid and woman by Valentin Simankov

I remember once Valentin asked me if he could borrow my camera. He started to move around the flat like a shaman performing a healing dance and photographing from random angles and any distances he could reach, but being absolutely aware of what he was doing. This event says a lot about his approach to the subject (see fig. 4).

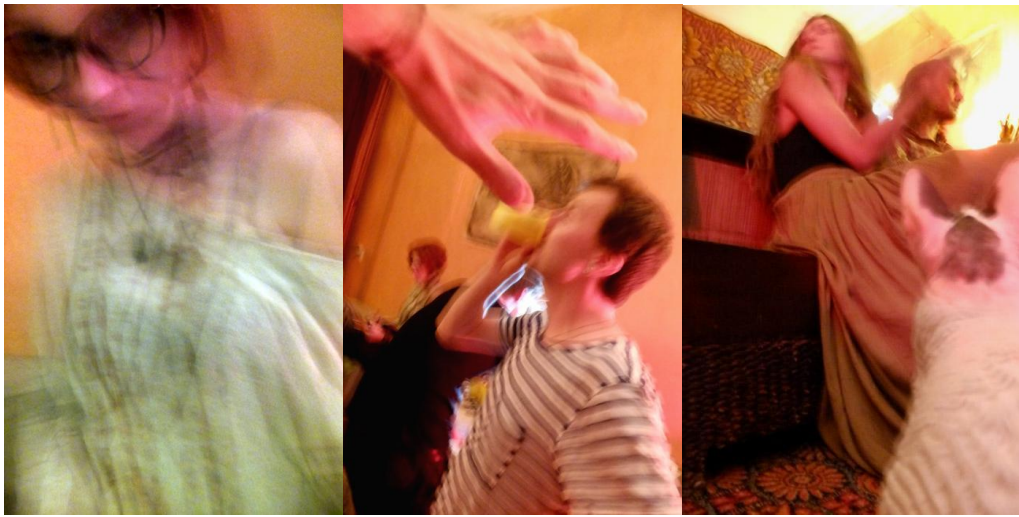


Fig.4. Dance by Valentin Simankov

One can see it on the photographs below, especially in the woman stepping across a field (see fig. 5). Probably Valentin was trying to catch the sun which had just appeared between two legs of the person. And in this funny and naïve moment these photographs turn into metaphors. The angle and the roughness of the quality drive you from the actual meaning of the naivety. It is the moment where Valentin clashes two different sensations and questions the basic possibility of looking at and perceiving the image.



Fig.5. Woman stepping across a field by Valentin Simankov

John Berger wrote the following while comparing ‘the photographic moment’ of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Paul Strand :

The photographic moment for Cartier-Bresson is an instant, a fraction of a second, and he stalks that instant as though it were a wild animal. The photographic moment for Strand is a biographical or historic moment, whose duration is ideally measured not by a second but by its relation to a lifetime.

Simankov seems to take the opposite direction. Two other examples demonstrate how he is precisely mixing both principles like a juggler (see fig.6). The right composition satisfies the rules of classical composition, but the angle and the cheap and dirty materials represent Simankov's wild side and his obsessions with the subject. Here we can already notice Simankov's tendency to mix the image's layers to construct a new reality.

That inherent characteristic of mixing is also visible in alchemical practice. Alchemists were always searching for new ways to reach an unreal and mystical result out of cheap materials, and similarly Simankov's mixture of realities helped him to find another way to speak about his time and environment. For instance, from the images below we can hardly distinguish what time they were made. The examples are abstract without knowing the context or idea behind them. It seems that in the process of producing the pictures, Simankov consciously aspires to the method that will turn the photographic moment into a nervous system.

Probably Simankov's obsession depends on pain. But it seems that the content of his photographs has little to do with pain. As John Berger wrote: "As often, the obsession is a distraction and the real content lies elsewhere." For me Simankov is always trying to define a certain distance between him and the subject. That's why when looking at Simankov's works, the viewer should penetrate through a certain barrier just to reach the subject and the content.



Fig.6. Moment by Valentin Simankov

b. Act and surface

Somebody once said that Simankov used to work with Andrey Chegin, another Saint-Petersburg based artist. I have no clues to this and I don't know if they are still in contact. Andrey Chegin has also been experimenting a lot with the disturbing the image, using different techniques. I can suppose that since then Simankov's working process became more experimental and he started working a lot on several surfaces, testing different liquids, colors and researching classical techniques. The subject matter of the Valentin's works became entangled in the form and the materials that the artist used to make the photo works.

As my research concerns the photographic surface and how it acts as interface between substance and spaces, it is important to mention the various elements involved in the photographic process. In order to create a photographic image, it is the porous surface and texture of the light-sensitive emulsion that permits the chemical reaction and interaction between the immaterial light photons and the silver salts. Photography's relation to the physical world arises from chemical and mechanical processes that bring an image to life. Light acts as the transmitting and translating matter between the physicality of the photographed objects and the photograph. The confrontation between objects and light-sensitive material during the photographic act guides our attention to their different reciprocal relationships.

The surface is the physical place where the photographic act is played out. The photons leave their traces on the surface of the photosensitive material, coming either from outside into the camera onto the film or in a darkroom through the negative onto the image carrier, or leaving out the photographic processes without any optical devices, for instance the photogram. In that analog processes, the medium was determined by chemical reactions at the moment of taking the photograph and during the process of developing the print in the darkroom. The photons left a physical change on the light-sensitive film and materialised from immateriality.



Fig.7. Surface and self portraits by Valentin Simankov

There are many photographs in which Simankov depicted himself (see fig.7). I suppose that he was focused on the status and identity of the artist. The idea of the self portrait is crucial in the art practice. It was used by many artists from different practices and periods to question narcissism, identity, body etc.

Simankov pushes the process of creating the image to the extreme. As viewers, we become lost when trying to distinguish the various stages he passed through while creating a

work. He stretches the process in time and technique, starting for instance with a camera, printing an image on an image, manipulating with chemical reactions, keeping the prints in a bucket with liquid and sometimes rubbing them with onion or whatever he had in mind. The first picture demonstrates a visible chemical reaction and the photogram of a dragonfly. The second image was definitely painted by hand. Finally, in the last self-portrait Simankov superimposed image over image and colored it again. Freely manipulating with the surfaces, Simankov destroys the idea of the flatness of the photographic image. Moreover, after certain interventions, the image relates more to the physical object and closer to the painting. What we see in the final photowork, is an enormous amount of material layers that are hidden physically.

It seems important to dwell on another example of Simankov's work to show the different way of using the surface and framing the images (see fig.8).



Fig.8. Surface and frame by Valentin Simankov

Once Valentin started to glue his photographs to the book covers, writing his poems or religious texts or using paint. I regard the book cover as a frame which is edge and rim, frontier and limit. And here again Simankov is playing with our gaze by framing the image and using the frame as a surface itself. Louis Marin in his book *On Representation* describes different possibilities and limits of frames in relation to painting. For him every representation, every representational sign, every signifying process includes two dimensions: reflexive — to represent oneself — and, transitive — to represent something. He wrote about the painting by Frank Stella, *Gran Cairo*:

If the frame is one of the means through which representation presents itself representing something, this painting by Stella represents its own presentation. The painting is entirely reflexive and its transitive dimension consists in representing its reflexive dimension.

In this particular moment photographs of Simankov can be regarded as complex objects and they can demonstrate playfulness. The eye cannot predict the right connotation and reading of transformed image in which the play of the frame and medium seems to be concentrated. It reminds me of looking through a dirty window, when the sun light is blinding you through it.

When taking a step aside, new insights about the material condition of photography, as well as our perception, come to the fore.

c. The portrait of magician and scientist

For me Valentin's stall at the market is associated with the site of material investigation or a laboratory (see fig.9). Being aware of his spiritual background, I might say that the place was filled with his magic. It was clear not only in a way Valentin explained his ideas and methods, but also in a way he was careful with ordering photographs, symbols and things. As alchemists invented the symbolic language, Simankov surrounded himself by the vocabulary which only he knew how to use correctly. It was funny enough, but I faced the representation of the magician and scientist in real life. Both sides of Valentin represent the intention to comprehend the world and the rules of its functioning in order to achieve the power.

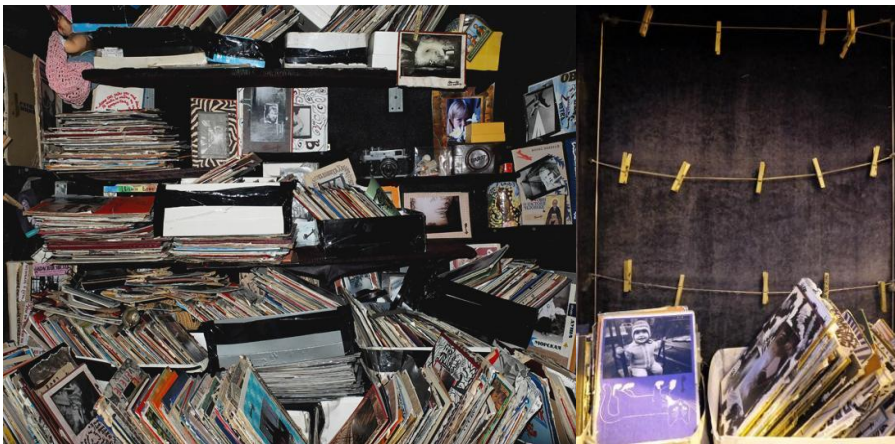


Fig.9. Simankov's stall at the market

George Frazer opposes magic and science to religion in a similar way in his book *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*:

The principles of association are excellent in themselves, and indeed absolutely essential to the working of the human mind. Legitimately applied they yield science; illegitimately applied they yield magic, the bastard sister of science. It is therefore a truism, almost a tautology, to say that all magic is necessarily false and barren; for were it ever to become true and fruitful, it would no longer be magic but science.

Questioning the relation between magic and science, I'd like to dwell on another example of Valentin's works.



Fig. 10. The combination of the symbols by Valentin Simankov

Simankov mentioned that for him it is very important to see the combination of the symbols within the picture in order to create a place for a viewer to read and understand it. In the example above, Valentin displayed the system of the symbols and described their meanings. The cross is destiny, the feather is corresponding to the softness of the destiny, the star is showing that everybody is a star and the leaf is a symbol of transmission (see fig.10). After investigating through his archive, I realised that Valentin has been repeating the combination of objects and symbols in his works. In most cases the objects came from his daily life. Simankov has constructed his routine and universe in the photographs. But the strong belief in the power of the spirit and God is placing him to the position of a magician. As we know, producing gold was one of the main goals of all alchemists and was never achieved in real life. While combining the symbols, Simankov persuades you that he managed to reach it as a result of his practice. Once Francis Bacon said about his principle of clashing the figures, distorting the objects and destroying the canvasses: "What I want to do is to distort the thing far beyond appearance, but in the distortion to bring back to a recording of the appearance." I close with the observation that art can extend our view beyond the real life's reach.

Conclusion

For me the figure of Simankov has already become legendary. While discovering his works, life and different methods, I understood that he can be easily put in the context of contemporary art. The whole archive of Valentin's works consists of enormous amount of experiments with the medium of photography. I really hope that the knowledge will be shown to the public one day and will find other travellers that will wish to dive into Simankov's works.

In my essay I've compared Simankov's work with the alchemical practice and described several methods according to the media theory that include the medium of photography, surface and language. In many ways the decision to write through alchemical practice was chosen because of Simankov's obsession with chemistry, questions of transformation and spiritualism. Simankov is a religious person and his spiritualism probably came from the religious books. Furthermore he invented his own symbolic language that can be understood only by him and read in different directions. If I collect all the sides of Simankov, I can conclude that he is an actual alchemist. Though the contradiction is that Simankov invented "the gold" that we can touch and look at, while alchemy didn't succeed.

A similar "gold effect" can be traced in the painting of Francis Bacon where he coupled two figures together. According to his practice, the painter could not give up the idea of putting several figures in the painting at the same time, although there was always a danger of reintroducing a "story" or falling back into narrative painting. Gilles Deleuze in the book *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* considered that the question thus concerns the possibility of relations between simultaneous figures that are nonillustrative and nonnarrative (and not even logical), and which could be called, precisely, "matters of fact." Coming back to Simankov, his mindlessness may turn alienation to its own absolute form. I believe that truth was demonstrated rather than just expressed in his works.

List of literature

1. Friedrich Kittler *Optische Medien*. Merve: Berlin. (English edition: *Optical Media*, with an introduction by John Durham Peters. Polity Press 2010)
2. Dictionary of critical theory. Penguin books. London, 2001
3. John Berger *Selected Essays*. First vintage international edition. USA, 2003
4. Viktor Agamov-Tupicyn *Krug Obshenia*. Ad marginem press. Moscow, 2013
5. James George Frazer *The Golden Bough: a Study in Magic and Religion*
6. Louis Marin *On Representation*. Stanford University Press, California, 2001
7. Gilles Deleuze *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Continuum, London, 2003