

Kaj Johnson

Bubble baths, puppy puddles, medical intervention?

An analysis of Neo Hülcker's *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills*

Neo Hülcker's *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills* is a work of art that resists categorization at every turn, beginning with how to correctly refer to it. Various descriptions by Hülcker as an "Online Performance/Treatment", "Relaxed Performance", and the German word "Vorstellung", the work was premiered online via Zoom as part of SOPHIENS/ELE's Leisure & Pleasure festival series in 2023.¹ It was made available for further viewing as a YouTube video after the live performances concluded.

Hülcker is a Berlin-based composer and performer who starred in the work, accompanied by Athena Lange, Valerie Renay, and Armin Wieser, actors with a variety of backgrounds in drama, performance art, and musical theater. The virtual nature of the work means that, whether tuning in live via Zoom or later on YouTube, the audience is a completely remote one that hears and sees the performance in a space of their choice – be it their home, outside, or somewhere else.

In the introduction to the piece, Hülcker reminds the audience of their agency in choosing how they would like to experience the 90-minute work; Hülcker recommends using headphones to fully appreciate the ASMR qualities of the piece, but ultimately leaves the listening environment up to the audience. Split into five treatments meant to remedy ailments of our postmodern society (anger, fatigue from overworking, and lack of libido, among other malaises), I found each of the acts engaging in different ways. Below, I will give an overview of the last scene, informally dubbed the "Dinosaur Bubble Bath", as a means of offering a double-click into the materials Hülcker used to bring the concept to life.

Hülcker's "Dinosaur Bubble Bath" treatment consists of an ASMR scene in which dinosaur figures are given a bubble bath by an orchestra of human hands. The scene begins with only the sound of Hülcker speaking quietly and very close to the microphone as

they² describe the volcanic environment and narrate the gradual appearance of the dinosaurs. The background noise becomes increasingly frantic as more dinosaurs appear and jump into the pond, amplified by the sound of splashing water. Hülcker seems to illustrate the rising pleasure and excitement of the dinosaurs through increasing the pitch and volume of their narration. The romping and ruckus reaches a sonic climax before it becomes quiet and the hands disappear to fetch towels and dry the dinosaurs. As the dinosaurs are affectionately swaddled, Hülcker's voice begins to embody a traditional ASMR lecture: slow, soothing, and therapeutic. This sensual vocal effect evokes a spa-like experience and seems to strive to lull the dinosaurs – and by extension, the audience – into a deep sleep. Despite the metaphysical distance between the performance site and the audience, Hülcker succeeds in drawing the audience close through the intimacy of this treatment, primarily through their vocality and the ASMR style of capturing it.

"Dinosaur Bubble Bath" (fig. 1) clearly falls into the category of vocal performance, although it is not a traditional vocal piece, which evokes, if not necessitates, some sort of melodic or rhythmic structure. With that said, Hülcker is clearly a vocal performer who thinks deeply about oration and how to effectively capture



Fig. 1 Neo Hülcker, *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills*: Bubble Bath sequence.

their voice. Beyond their voice, Hülcker uses various physical materials as part of the staging/set design of the performance to create sounds. Animal sounds produced by humans complement the soundscape, and were likely captured through a collection of microphones placed inside or immediately around the volcanic set. The closeness of Hülcker's voice, particularly during the conclusion of the treatment, suggests that Hülcker also had their own microphone setup somewhere off-camera.

The additional four treatments in *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills* are similar to "Dinosaur Bubble Bath" in that they engage with sound and performance in a way that is theatrical and aurally intentional, but stops short of being musical. I found this border between musical and non-musical performance art interesting to ponder. Even as a far-from-traditional musicologist who vehemently rejects all strict axioms of performance and music – that performance must be done in a theater, that music must come first from a score – I struggled to group Hülcker's performance into the ones my peers presented across the Musical Performance Art course, which each had some aspect that was decidedly and inarguably musical.

Music or not, what makes the work *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills* so remarkable is that it earnestly presents to the audience a spin on medicine and treatment that is uncomfortable, comical, and sometimes so taboo that at first watch, one may want to tune out. One treatment involves underwater plants being stimulated in an all-but-overtly sexual way (and seeming to moan accordingly); another consists of humans pretending to be dogs, barking and jumping in a canine cuddle puddle. All five are unexpected and range from silly to jarring. I believe this is Hülcker's intention. By forcing the audience to sit through these kinds of visual and aural discomforts, Hülcker offers our brains a clean slate, forces us to pay attention, and transports us to an alternate reality that is rife with new possibilities of treatment and care in an anti-capitalist utopia. Through their creation of audio-visual scenes that are oftentimes sensual, sometimes angrily anti-patriarchal, and always playful, Hülcker has expanded the idea of medical treatment past the institution of hospitals and formal diagnoses, making a convincing argument that all of us, through our mere existence in a violently ex-

plorative and rigid modern world, can benefit from the whimsical experiences of playing like animals, smashing fruits and vegetables, and indulging in bubble baths as a means of escapism but also as a means of action. Childlike whimsy and creativity, as difficult as they are to nurture in our adult lives, have the opportunity to shift our entire worldview into one that is more empathetic, curious, and open. *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills*'s off-kilter content matter and elusive performance style makes it quite memorable, allowing its poignant understanding of treatment and care to stick with its audience – if they can sit through some initial discomfort and keep an open mind.

Endnotes

1. Hülcker, 2023 .
2. Hülcker uses the singular they pronoun in English and the er* pronoun with a gender star in German.

Literature

Neo Hülcker, with Athena Lange, Valerie Renay and Armin Wieser: [Online Performance] *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills* (Sophiensaele, Berlin, 3.9.2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brQ9S8FGJO> (published: 27.05.2023), (1:20:00-1:22:00).

Figures

Screenshot of Neo Hülcker, *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brQ9S8FGJO> (published: 27.05.2023).

Abstract

Neo Hülcker's *Sanatorium Rainbow Hills*, an online performance for several actors is tested on its potential as 'musical performance art', drawing on Hülcker's background as composer-performer.

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