

VIKTOR ALIMPIEV – TWO SONGS. *BETWEEN SPEECH, SONG AND BODY.*

By Regine Rapp

Viktor Alimpiev (*1973, Moscow) combines different artistic fields in his cinematic work: visual arts, music, theater and dance. In his films he has worked with the human body and more recently with song and speech. During the 2005 Venice Theatre Biennale he directed the play *We're Talking about Music* in Italian language together with Marian Zhunin. In Linz in 2006 he created the video *Wie heisst dieser Platz?* in German as a *sprechgesang*.

As part of the exhibition series "Art and Music" Art Laboratory Berlin is pleased to show two recent works during June and July 2007, where the medium of film visualises a full framework of references about speech, song and bodily movement, within which the concept of *sculpture* plays a vital role.

In his video work *Wie heisst dieser Platz?*, 2006, Alimpiev uses language in the form of singing and speaking as artistic plastic material. A group of eleven women and men stand close to one another in the middle of an empty room. One person, though, is standing with her face to the crowd. "So, what is the purpose of this speaking? What really is the value of this play?" are the first phrases of the woman's *sprechgesang*, with a close-up of her face. Her question remains unanswered, a dialogue does not take place. "And the distance between the speaker and the listener. [...] A reason to speak", she sings later, after having already been silently rejected by the crowd several times. During the whole speech the protagonist's wish to be well placed "at the square" – in the space, at the place becomes visible: "This really is an entertainment, I am speaking on the square... [...] A person speaking from a distance." Meaningful and enigmatic gestures accompany her monologue: downcast gazes of rejection, the pushing back of the counterpart, the rebellious reaction of the group, hands forming fists, the covering of the ears, hands touching the back of the head; and the constant tense posture.

"In my work I want to refer to the 'talking on the square'", said Alimpiev about this work. "Here it is German speech about space, about the place of one person. About the possibility, to name the earth under one's foot."¹ The square/place as a social space provides a basis for the opposition of the crowd and the individual; it also locates the individual within the crowd. The German word "Platz" derives from the Greek "plateia" ("street", "official field") and nowadays means a vast field, which is used as an entertaining, recreation or meeting place. The antonym to it is "Enge" (in English: "narrowness") and "Gedrängtheit der Masse" (in English: "fullness of the crowd"). Alimpiev consciously makes use of void and fullness: The vastness of the place, which is expressed in the *sprechgesang*, stands in opposition to the over-fullness of the crowd.

The theatrical staging is fundamentally characterised by the *sprechgesang*, which is the speaker's "appended singing" and dates from Schönberg. Here, the *sprechgesang* is a consciously used speech-melody, similar to a *recitative*, which in its turn focuses on a clear pronunciation and a the musical awareness of the meaning, rhythm and sound of the word. The use of the *sprechgesang* can be considered here as a conscious break of narrative structures.

Furthermore, the video work *Wie heisst dieser Platz?* can be interpreted as a classical model of the speech act. As if Alimpiev staged several situations of Searle's speech act theory; the act of speech is analysed to its communicative form. The question "Do you hear me?" with the following phrase "I want to speak to you!" is only one of these questioning, asserting or commanding moments in this work, where language turns out to be speech as a means of communication.

Next to the performative speech act, however, *sculpture* also plays another vital role in this work. The crowd, standing close to one another, reflect a sculptural effect, especially due to their predominant immobility. Alimpiev, attaching great importance to the sculptural in his video and film works, once emphasised the "immobility" and the "eternal

moment" of a sculpture in opposition to moving images and montage, which he wants to use to abolish the value of the single image as well as to "replace eternity with seconds and minutes."² So the artists acts here like a media sculptor, tracing back the "eternity" of a static group of people back to its temporal level. This annihilation of simultaneity is due to the consciously chosen montage cuts, which at some points are even jump-cuts, and break in turn the cinematic continuity.

The most recent work *My Breath* from 2007, which Alimpiev has dedicated to the well-known Moscow conceptualist Andrey Monastyrsky, is a study about the conditions of speech and song. We see a close-up of two female faces, who, standing cheek-to-cheek, look past one another. They sing a duet in a calm and concentrated manner. At first glance it seems like a classical singing exercise. In the course of the performance, however, it develops into an idiosyncratic presentation about breath, breathing and speech.

"Listen! Correct your breath!" sings one singer in Russian, "I breathe in a little, I breathe out a little. It's with me. It's with me! My breath." In a faster tempo she sings about the process of breathing: "Wait until the tone disappears... wait... [...] and then breathe out..." The gestures of singing – the open mouth, the wide open eyes, slight swaying of the upper body – are followed over the whole five and a half minutes by the camera, which revolves around the heads of the singing women. The close-ups onto the sound producing and sound reciting parts, mouth and ear, emphasise this, as does the conscious blur of the background room. The sung text resembles an actor's breathing exercise: "Now try to remember? What it's called, this breathing out?" The "song" ends with its refrain nearly pleading: "All right! Let it wait. It's with you! It's with you. Don't be afraid. It doesn't go anywhere. It's with you."

The singing, in different tempos, sometimes louder and sometimes lower, recalls a liturgical song, whose solemn presentation and the emphasis on the quint and quart intervals come across as idiosyncratic. This is reflected in the etymological meaning of the title: The Russian word "dykhanye" means "breath", "breathing", "respiration" and also "breeze". It is associated with the Russian word "dukh", which stands for "spirit", "mood" but also "breath". This corresponds with the antique connection between "breath" and "pneuma" (Greek), which can be translated both as "spirit", "aspiration", "breeze" and also as "swirl", "breath of wind" or "pressure". This etymological connection is significant. Roland Barthes once described the connection between "breath" and "spirit" in the following words: "The breath is the pneuma, the soul swelling or breaking, and any exclusive art of breathing is likely to be a secretly mystical art."³

A possible interpretative version of this work as a liturgy, also establishes the double meaning of the work's title. An essential aesthetic aspect in *My Breath* is the self-referentiality, which is reflected in both the singers' text on breathing and in the physical act of breathing during song.

¹ Interview: Viktor Alimpiev and Christiane Büchner, in: International Short Film Festival Oberhausen 2006, p. 146.

² Ibid., p. 144.

³ Roland Barthes: *Image, Music, Text*. New York, Hill and Wang 1997, p. 183-84.