

John E. Bowlt

Respiration, Inspiration, Initiation

All in the animal world breathe and, therefore, live until they stop breathing and die -- platitudes which, however banal, define, govern and guide our existence. But the very act of breathing or, rather, of exhaling, might also be regarded as a work of art in progress, because, in breathing out, the individual composes sounds and generates rhythms which travel through space from determinate subject to indeterminate object. In this sense, exhalation can be at once the expression of a primary exigency and the creation of an esthetic entity: for those artistically inclined, respiration becomes inspiration, and such is the case with Aleksandr Ponomarev.

For the Russian Pavilion at the 2007 Biennale in Venice, Ponomarev has created two installations and coauthored one – *Wave*, *Windshield Wipers* and, together with Arkadii Meshcheriakov, *Shower*, the most essential and minimal of which is *Wave*, consisting of a video screen, a long tank of water and an intermediary action of waves. Curated by Olga Sviblova, the Russian selection for the Biennale also includes the limbo film *Poslednee vosstanie* [The Final Uprising] created by the Les-F team, Andrei Bartenev's installation *Connection Lost/Field of Lonely Hearts* and Yuliia Milner's cyber-behavior game *Click I Hope* (the subtitle of the entire Russian representation). Ponomarev's works occupy three separate spaces in the Pavilion.

The external function of *Wave* is simple: recapitulating Ponomarev's visit to Tibet several years ago, video imagery relays the sound and movement of balcony drapes on a temple in the Forbidden City; the sequence prefigures the appearance of the artist who inhales, closes his eyes and exhales with measured breath on to the canal of water installed beneath and in front of the screen. His action triggers a ripple effect which continues until the end of the trough where it is terminated by a "wave break". This cyclical and repeated combination of air, water and movement is elementary and organic.

The "superficiality" of *Wave* is only apparent, because Ponomarev's installation carries a deeper and more permanent message, i.e. that in spite of our post-industrial world of excess, mendacity and fusion, life still depends upon the elemental interaction of air and water and that, as *Geneses* tells us, if in the beginning was the Word, then a divine breath must have emitted that Word. A cartographic metaphor for the Biblical story and for Ponomarev's aspiration is to be found in those happy cherubs who, in antique maps, blow from the clouds across outlandish oceans and foreign lands, helping some lonely vessel tack the seven seas. .

In using sophisticated technology, incorporating computer timing, hydraulic precision and reinforced glass, Ponomarev demonstrates that, when all is said and done, the elements shape and control our life and that, without air and water, we are doomed to perish. After all, 99% of the molecules in the human body are of water and two thirds of the Earth's surface is water. Ponomarev is also affirming that the artist's manipulation of air and water can transform chemical compounds into esthetic units, a process which is defined by rhythm and equilibrium and which is endemic to all of Ponomarev's endeavors, not least, *Wave* and *NEMO-VERN* (2005). He reminds us that the ocean, God's metrical masterpiece, surges and pulsates through magnetic forces, that breathing is a rhythmical exercise and that even the sequence of a video installation such as *Wave* is cyclical and calculated. In this respect, the strong

etymological and syntagmatic interconnections of the Russian words *vozdukh*, *dukh*, *dusha*, *dykhanie* and *vdokhnovenie* are brought into relief (not, unfortunately, applicable to the English *air*, *spirit*, *soul*, *breathing* and *inspiration*). It is tempting, if perverse, to extend this verbal game as far as *Dush* [Shower] (however remote *dush* may be from *dusha*), the title of Ponomarev's and Meshchariakov's critique of the TV channel which instead of the bathroom tiles of the traditional shower cabin carries countless monitors with ever changing images.

Ponomarev's second independent installation at the Biennale this year, *Windshield Wipers*, is a liberal application of erasure to the electronic and digital world of imagistic abundance. The premise seems to be that the visual information besieging us on television, in street advertising and in junk literature is not only a current of ephemeral data whose liquidation (thanks to the windshield wipers) is instant, total – and immaterial, but also a mosaic of equivalent fragments. Ultimately, therefore, the projections of politics and pornography, war and peace, consumerism and show business remain undifferentiated and indifferent; all are fluid and superficial – *voda* – leaving no lasting vestige. The conclusion of *Windshield Wipers*, therefore, is both encouraging and discouraging: on the one hand, we assume that we are learning more about reality thanks to the immediate and constant accessibility of data and yet, on the other, we also learn that the more loquacious the commentary and the more ostentatious the image, the less we remember and the less we respond.

Ponomarev's manipulation of air and water, therefore, is eminently appropriate, for here are metaphors for invisibility and transparency wherein fluidity is the only permanence, wherein space is substance and wherein absence is presence.

"Voda, voda, voda, voda.....tekla".

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