

An Orchestra Rehearsal

When Viktor Alimpiev first arrived on the Moscow art scene with his videofilms (then co-authored), always mature in spite of the artist's youth, these films were difficult to describe. Vague notions of "strangeness," "fascination" and "spell" abounded but did not explain much. His new film, "The Nightingale," which this time he did alone, reveals, at least partly, mechanisms of this fascination.

The most important fact is the very existence of these mechanisms. Alimpiev's videoprojections are invented, planned, staged and edited with attention and care more appropriate to film than video, for in film the effects of crude lack of artificiality are rather sought after. The very term "film" would fit these works more than the term "videoinstallation." Whereas the latter are usually seen "passing by" (lately, Boris Groys and others wrote a lot on this subject – Serge Daney calls it the "defile" effect), Alimpiev's films demand attention and require a static frontal view. A claim made strongly enough never remains unanswered in art, which means "The Nightingale" will definitely be seen, and in its full length, from the beginning to the end. This is what makes Alimpiev's films an outstanding phenomenon – and not just in the context of Russian art.

This wish to keep viewers' interest from the beginning to the end is something quite unusual now. From today's point of view, artwork does not require more attention than precarious mundane life itself and, like the latter, must be approached with a Deleuze&Guattary philosophy "to leave through the middle, through the center, to enter and to leave, rather than to begin and to end."

The reason for this lies in the modern person's distrust of causality: you would be interested in some minor detail only if you truly believed in its relevance, that it can make a difference. But even political cataclysms (now mostly associated with terrorism) "happen" now as natural ones, unexpectedly and with no reason, so those who have read newspapers the whole year prior to the cataclysm fail to comprehend more than those who escaped the task. There is no need to look closely (and slowly) at an installation, a videoprojection, a photograph, a news program, or an episode in a TV series, since you cannot unearth something deliberately hidden there anyway (as would be the case in good old Agatha Christie novels) – and, thus, it is quite enough to just "experience" them.

This means that art has renounced its presumed "artificial" nature, which would make every detail in it premeditated. And it implies abandoning attempts to acknowledge and articulate the artificial character of the world as such – the very fact that it was created by someone or something. Never in its history has art been as deeply unreligious as it is now.

The process started in the 1960s with early Warhol and Broodthaers films. In the 1990s, Douglas Gordon stretched Hitchcock's "Psycho" to 24 hours, making obvious the very sense of "suspence": being "suspended in the center," in the middle of life's flow. It is, indeed, very scary: the quietest life is more frightening than "Psycho," since there are no warnings of what will come in the next few minutes.

To demonstrate this sense of being lost in the middle of time, 1990's art turned to the moving image, in which visual and narrative effects of a simultaneous transmission are stressed. It is what one usually calls the "documentary approach." At an exhibition, such an image is "suspended" between immobility and movement (very slow videos). Alimpiev pays his tribute to this trend, too, when in his film "The Rock Music," he teacher, so it seems, has been playing his guitar forever and will be doing so for eternity, while his adolescent pupils forever look at

him in admiration. It is, by the way, characteristic of this film to heavily reference 1960-s and 1970s Soviet films, an art that managed to express the unreligious, or even, the transreligious feeling of the lack of any sense in mundane reality to an impressive degree.

But still, this is not the most important point about Alimpiev's films – especially his latest "Nightingale," where the artificial, the conventional, the scenic character of the spectacle is proclaimed solemnly and loudly (initially, the film had to include the sound of a herald's horn). It seems there is a tendency to return to the assumption of the "artificiality of art," of the existence of a creator in it – and, unavoidably, of the artificial character of the world, which reintroduces a religious and "sublime" component to art, even a very widely understood one.

This can express itself in a very different forms. Matthew Barney, for instance, clearly references totalitarian or shamanistic mass parades. Alimpiev in "The Nightingale" makes an unexpected switch to the practice of theatre in its most archaic version – be that old Greek (featuring the role of a chorus) or medieval mystery (with some jongleurs or the like). From his very first films, Alimpiev has worked with actors who then were friends or colleagues; starting with "The Rock Music", he has hired actors and actresses (by their function, not by their profession) and gives them precise instructions.

When art turns to the experience of film, it is not a surprise anymore. But it is mostly among professional filmmakers themselves that this "intimate" cinema remains an interesting and innovative practice; they now decline the mass crew film and "create" their films almost in solitude, like a painter or a poet does. This is how Abbas Chiarostami and Chantal Ackermann work. On the contrary, the avantgarde gesture in visual arts might now be to "stage" the work on the same scale that a theater director does.

Theater provides contemporary art with a very unusual type of convention that is quite different from already conventional media images in photography, film, and television. Theater is, in a way, not mediated art; it is based on an encounter of the viewer with the very physical presence of an actor, who may come across as shocking after one is used to seeing everything on a screen rather than live. On the other hand, the coded character of a theater performance on a stage largely exceeds that of film and videoprojection, which often plays the game of something "immediately seen".

Film and video position themselves as "a mirror of life", while theater, especially the avantgarde one, positions itself as a "rehearsal" of life, as something which takes place earlier rather than later. In "The Nightingale", like in some other Alimpiev films, the title comes at the very end, and the film itself turns retrospectively into a prologue, an overture, which echoes an emotional theme of many Alimpiev works where beginnings of love, sexuality, youth as such are continuously present.

Alimpiev is not alone in his interest in the theater; the same could be said, for instance, about languishingly depressive film projections by Aernout Mick, in which there is very little cinema and lots of Samuel Beckett and Ionesco absurdist plays. One could also compare them to Tino Sehgal, whose "talking and dancing work of art" as a museum's guard has just appeared at the first Moscow contemporary art Biennale.

Both Ionesco's theater and contemporary "videotheater" and "installation theater" can be linked to Meyerhold's "biomechanics" as the only tradition of abstract theater. The biomechanics approach turns the director into a sculptor of temporary human collectives and groups, and in Alimpiev's work the sculptural character of the human figure is a recurrent motif. In "The Deer" (with Serguej Vishnevsky) the forehead of the main character becomes an

object of a bizarre visual fixation even before the association with a deer becomes clear (is it the romantic “King Deer” – an old Soviet movie by Carlo Gozzi? or a comical magnanimous cuckold of Meyerhold’s most famous performance?). Folds, creases and wrinkles play the key role in “Ode” (with Marian Zhunin) as they do in classical sculpture.

Alimpiev’s works are close neither to the cinema (the priority of which is space, and space is reduced to a minimum in his films) nor to video (where time through movement is best expressed). He focuses on the sculptural character of the form and its solitude. What we see in “The Nightingale” is not an opera “gesamtkunstwerk”; like in “The Rock Music,” where the teacher plays guitar and its sound changes into some kind of elevator jazz, there is a gap between music and image here. The logic of movement is not subject to Mahler’s symphony being played. The asynchronic character of the music, which often suddenly stops, is only reveals that the gesture is not diluted by anything.

One of these recurrent gestures is the folding of a white handkerchief, which is present for something most authentic (tears) and most conventional (the ritual of a farewell or even surrender). Other gestures are also of dual importance. Striking the back of the head and covering the mouth with a hand are as authentic as an uncontrollable energy release might be – but in every “practical psychology” book these gestures are described as revealing the fact that your interlocutor is most probably lying. Maybe this is what Alimpiev had in mind in his term “the invention of a lyrical space”: art as a manipulative technology, as an unavoidable fiction, which balances the emotion and its imitation. Art as a “great illusion” can only be reached “through theater” now, since screen arts ceded this illusionist character to Hollywood in order to remain concentrated on “the truth”.

In the last years we have seen a lot of artwork as well as theoretical essays accusing contemporary culture of mirage, based on mass media and screen arts. But maybe we missed the moment when not just total film, but total theater as well became a fact of our lives: group therapies and psychodrama, wellness rituals, corporative coaching, and happiness training (this is what a rather frightening “Ode” reminds one of). With Alimpiev we are entering a new stage of social sculpture which will give an image to this moment.

Ekaterina Degot