

# Psychophysical Spiritual Realism

*By Maxine Kopsa in METROPOLIS M magazine (No.2 April/may 2008)*

Adam Avikainen creates elaborate stories which are variously expressed: as written chapters of possibly longer, pondering narratives and as screenplays, but also as paintings or storyboards, objects and audio fragments. The order in which these parts are produced – merging in Avikainen's mind to form a whole – is in constant flux. When we met for the first time he pulled out a tiny zip-lock baggie from his wallet and said it contained miniscule diamonds. I could see small gem-like stones, almost grains of sand, through the plastic. He said: 'These were made from my girlfriend's ashes.' I was in his studio, peering at the baggie, wondering whether I should debate the veracity of the story he was telling me, or if I should step back and allow it to unfold without worrying about if it was real or made-up.

Roughly speaking, dramatic theatre can be separated into two schools, or 'modes', that deal with the bond between audience and actor. You could say that one is close and the other far away. The closer liaison, between the action on stage and the audience, occurs when the audience member, regardless of their awareness of their immediate surroundings, consents to being swept away by the story portrayed. The stage as it were melts away as the actor engages in what is known as the 'representational' method. The Russian actor and theatre director Constantin Stanislavski (1863 – 1938) was possibly the father of this form of theatre – he was also the founder of the first acting 'system'. His 'system', which encouraged actors to live their parts (from inside and out) ensured a more naturalistic approach and increased the possibility of the audience's belief in the narrative being told. Supposedly, Stanislavski's avid interest in the circus, puppetry, and ballet fuelled his holistic, psychophysical method, often referred to as 'spiritual realism'.

The other mode of theatre is at the opposite end of what the early twentieth century British philosopher Edward Bullough called the spectrum of 'psychical distance'. 'Presentational' acting creates a bond between actor and audience but instead of denying each other's presence, underlines the artificiality of the situation both consenting parties are in, the circumstances of the theatre itself, the building, the stage, the curtain, the script itself. The actor will acknowledge his or her audience, even going so far as to speak to them directly. Bertolt Brecht (1898 – 1956) developed this mode of non-organic or 'epic theatre' in the mid twentieth century. Epic theatre, or as he preferred, 'dialectical theatre', isn't concerned with overlooking the shortcomings of the medium but with seeing its limitations clearly and accepting the presence of the audience, even as co-operators. The audience never 'loses itself' in the effect of the show, instead it becomes an active, judging spectator and participant.

## A Parallel World

At the time of our first meeting in 2005, Avikainen was working on a piece called *WARDIAN CASES* (2006) which comprises nineteen paintings (or storyboards) as well as written acts or chapters. These physical components were only the beginning, I soon learned. Each painting represented approximately five minutes of cinematic time and

could be read individually or as a series of scenes. The ultimate intent was for someone to interpret the paintings and the accompanying narrative as the basis for a film, then for another person to reinterpret this work of cinema into a television series, and after that for yet another person to develop a sporting event based on the TV episode and finally to, in his own words, 'have someone name their firstborn daughter after the world champion of that sport'.

One of the painted storyboards, scene six, is still my favourite. Almost entirely orange as if on fire, broad strokes of paint cover the surface in elegant waves overlapping in tones varying from deep red to light ochre, with golden streaks peeking through the lavish ginger surface here and there. In the top left corner there is a dark greenish intrusion – whether safely kept at bay or dangerously making its way to contaminate everything else is impossible to tell. The text that accompanies scene six, called Ext. The Poop Deck of a Large Ship. Midnight – 1870, but explains how a 'stellar flare is reflected in a golden barrette clasped to a red-headed janitrix named Janis Hankey Davey T.' She's asleep on the Wardians' ship, knocked out from hard work as 'massive hydrogen-fuelled storms' form on the 'surface of the stars' and pump out 'ultraviolet radiation'. Unbeknownst to her, the liquid drops down and melts her barrette that in turn drips through her skull and 'kisses her brain'.

Described in a manner reminiscent of Thomas Pynchon's opaque tone, the fair Janis in this short excerpt reminds me of the heroine in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). Pynchon's dense prose and the dangerous and slightly surreal exploits of his strong-minded characters are distant cousins of Avikainen's personages. They share a willingness to obliterate level ground but still work safely within the rules of human social conventions. Both operate away from the genre structures of science fiction but are equally embedded in parallel worlds.

## **The Gardener**

Little in terms of clarity has been gained since that first studio visit, though I am now better primed for woolly missives. And I've learned as well that total comprehension is a relative matter and that that's a good thing. Preparing for this essay, I asked Avikainen about his plans for his upcoming solo exhibition at Galerie Martin van Zomeren (GMVZ). He wrote me the following: 'I walk up a mountain twice a week. Call it church. Found a piece of concrete with three turquoise tiles affixed to it. In my studio is a pile of mandarin orange peels in a turquoise bowl. On Monday mornings I take a bus with a dozen or so senior citizens to a natural hot springs. Prunes we are. Nocturnal walkabouts, photographing shrubs and berries. Recording chatterboxes in noodle shops in alleys. Half-bows to shadows. Bouts of extreme poverty (ramen) [a Japanese noodle soup, staple diet of the poor, ed.] speckled with mystery deposits (sashimi). Smelled a volcano for the first time last month. I enjoyed envisioning the trajectory of boulders many meters from their source. Messages from molten oracles...for me just eel eggs. Large watercolours on paper nailed to the walls...these depict three seasons: autumn, spring, winter...summer is over the cliff. Light captured on audio and in a spherical, paper lantern covered in eel essence. Yeah, I'll exhibit this, because eels guide their migrational routes following electrical currents generated by the friction of moving water in the sea.'

I gathered from this that he would be creating the first chapters of a story via works on paper and was considering the inclusion of audio. We had discussed this before, the

possible methods of presenting the textual in an exhibition without making it a mere tag to the objects. It's a complicated issue, and a problem quite a few artists today seem to be facing; perhaps the number of those whose practice includes not just language but actual storytelling, written narrative, is greater than it has been for some time. Fiction. I asked him again how he would like to deal with text when showing on this occasion. He responded: 'I am still deliberating on how to bring the words into an equal playing plane as the polychromatic placards. At the moment, I am planning on presenting three variations of the same movement involving two sets of headphones. One book.'

It is interesting to note that instead of using the word 'painting' he used 'polychromatic placards'. This shouldn't come as too much of a surprise considering his inspirations, but because the painted surface is often prevalent in his installations, it might still seem to many as though painting is his supreme endpoint. Avoiding the term could deflect that impression initially but how long can he fend off the insistent categorising of, as Avikainen calls them, those 'semanticists', despite his having told them 'a dozen times' that 'gardener' best defines his practice? In order to by-pass the branding of 'painter' and increase the feasibility of 'gardener' I wondered if he would consider speaking live in an installation, telling the 'story' behind the mise-en-scene? Dipping just slightly into the realm of epic theatre. A resolute 'no' was his answer: 'I will never perform live. My work is extremely personal and would be ruined if my body and voice were not temporally dislocated. It would be like making the viewer eat a slice of chocolate cheesecake and then forcing them to eat the whole cake and then after they pass out, dragging them to the bakery to show them how it was made and then flying them to the cocoa farm to meet the farmers. I don't know if that analogy really fits...let me put it this way...I see my work as an anti-crime scene and we are all unemployed detectives at the welfare agency...the clues are all there in front of our smouldering pipes...some child was conceived here.'

## **'Avikainen'**

The American literary critic and Marxist political theorist, Fredric Jameson, once said 'Brecht is also "Brecht"'. What he meant was that Brecht's ideas on theatre incorporated notions of the collaborative. Epic theatre is meant to teach its public, and in order to achieve this it must collaborate with it, making it clear that, for example, the actors in the play are stand-ins for positions in an argument. Emotional distance – psychical distance – or, as Brecht termed it, the 'Verfremdungseffekt' (an effect of alienation) was the preferred state for the observer.

A year after hearing about the girlfriend reduced to gemstones, I asked Avikainen how he felt about Bertolt Brecht. He answered: 'I can see a tinge of an influence on my work...in terms of how I use cinema.' He continued: 'The language of cinema has become trite and invades the actual actions of secretaries and waiters daily, infecting even their subconscious thought. "I went to the park and I saw a lady kissing a balloon...it was just like a movie." Suspension of our disbelief in the peculiar is required before entering a cinema, and I don't want to do this. I believe in the peculiar. I agree with Brecht that the dramatic arts possess a potential to poke society and not simply function as an escape. I also attempt, if I may be so bold, to deconstruct and analyze this contemporary form of myth knitting.' 'Remember the girlfriend's ashes you had transformed into small gems. You carried them round in your wallet in a small zip-lock baggie. What had happened to

her?’ I asked. ‘Miss Mary Mannerheim of Minneapolis, Minnesota and our unborn daughter, Aurora, are still there. FOREVER.’

A few days later this came by email: ‘A mountain walks into a saloon...it’s one of those peaks that rises from some mythical Far Eastern minimalism and on the other side is a steep, depressing plunge into a blank Nordic austerity complex. It gets a drink and sits by the pool table just to look at the green...it thinks it might have a case of that seasonal affective disorder that’s going around the casinos. Voice over the intercom: “There is no conspiracy. There ain’t even anything to conspire against. There is just emptiness.” Mountain: “Oh for crying out loud! Could you put some tunes on already! It’s bad enough that I’m in some stale room with my head in the clouds.”’

Confused by what seemed to me like some very intentional myth-knitting, I wrote back asking Avikainen where the mountain story came from and if he was the mountain. ‘The mountain story snippet that I sent you from my immediate environs at the moment is the husband of my Japanese paintings. Directly behind/in front of the studio that I currently work in is a mountain that I climb weekly, usually on Sundays. However, I am not the mountain in the story. The mountain is one of the antagonists, the others being the sea and a trench at the bottom of the pacific. The protagonists are the seasons. The movement of fauna acts as measures of time.’

I often used to wonder – and still do – when speaking with Avikainen or seeing his work, whether I am participating in a collaboration or whether I am meant to suspend disbelief. Whether I’m meant to understand every detail or if I can pick and choose, stop the recording and land back on level ground. But it doesn’t stop: rarely – if ever – have I witnessed a practice where the total package, the emails, discussions, drawings, sketches, objects, words and sounds, fold into such a singular tone. The quality, the pitch, of one element leads directly to its figurative or literal neighbour without losing a single step on that certain red thread of ‘Avikainen’ that connects it all.

If I were to qualify Avikainen in terms of my proposed schools of theatrical thought, would he be a Brechtian fan or a Stanislavski follower? My rational mind would choose the former but my instinct tells me otherwise. Where Brecht claims that Stanislavski attempts to immerse his spectator in the world of the play is mere escapism, I must pick sides and take Avikainen with me. I wouldn’t know where Avikainen was escaping to – there’s no simple entrance or easy exit to escape from. It’s not that anything goes, absurd or metaphorical details thrown into a pot and left to simmer: Avikainen’s stories are scripted; the polychromatic placards, the objects and sounds are actors. The spectator is immersed. Today’s world is much more home to Stanislavski’s psychophysical spiritual realism than it is to Epic’s dialectic judgement. And there’s Avikainen at the circus, puffing on a cigar talking to Stanislavski about puppets and the ballet.

‘Is fiction better than lies though?’ ‘Fiction is a string of lies about people and places we know; just the names have been altered.’

