

## **Voice, Vista and Vapours: music and moving image in works by Mariele Neudecker**

Singers sing. A sorceress laments her failing powers and an elusive conquest. A lover rehearses his desolation. A parent keens for lost children. Soprano, bass-baritone, contralto: voices have flooded the worlds of Mariele Neudecker.

Neudecker has chased time about the globe, miniaturised mountains and charmed three dimensions out of two. Sound is the perfect territory through which to pursue these persistent preoccupations with time and space being materially indivisible from its temporal and spatial extension.

In Neudecker's tank works, such as *Morning Fog in the Mountains* (1997) and *I Don't Know How I Resisted the Urge to Run* (1998), sculptural landscapes are viewed through fluids and suspensions that emulate romantic weather: mists, clouds and hazes. In *Stay Here or Die* (2002), *Winterreise* (2003) and *Kindertotenlieder* (2005) it is music that spills through the spaces around the image; it is music that gives us the vapours and shapes the atmosphere. We view *Port Talbot* through clouds of despair; we see sights from the sixtieth latitude north through misty heartache; alpine grandeur through a haze of grief. Of all art forms the discourse of music has maintained its faith in emotional affect and its hold upon a vocabulary of feelings. We listen to feel. The lover and the mourner sing to change the way the body feels, to breathe differently, to physically perform the sense of loss.

In song, language works on the body and the body works on language. For Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup> this is why song thrills us: the visceral and symbolic rub against one another: we hear an image of the body in the utterance of the voice, the body at play in language.

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<sup>1</sup> Barthes, Roland, 'The Grain of the Voice' in *The Responsibility of Forms*, California: University of California Press, 1991, trans. Richard Howard

Implicit in Barthes' analysis is that all song defamiliarises language, heightening the acoustic, displacing the semantic, requiring a relearning. The body forms itself about the sounds of a language and about the emotional surfaces of the song. It becomes a matter of diction, of testing the sound of each letter against palette and tongue and throat and teeth; and of the body remembering the architecture of each sound.

At the moment, in the concert of *Winterreise*, when Andrew Foster-Williams voices the first sound of the lied the huge volume of the auditorium and audience are brought to attention focussed on the shock and thrill of voice. Air shaped and expelled from the cavity of the mouth shapes the air that fills the cavity of the building. Somewhere between this tiny and this immense volume is the screen of Neudecker's images. For each of Schubert's twenty four songs there is a single image film: a long slow shot of the icy wake of a ship, a brief loop of blown snow, sleet on a window, a 360 degree pan of a snowy lakeside. The narrative of the songs suggests a poet-lover who wanders into the winter landscape to become lost, to indulge and escape his melancholy, and to sing. The landscape becomes his interlocutor, the foil for his memories, and the metaphor for his sadness. Yet there is no landscape except as it exists in his articulation, in the song.

The lover's world in the lied is a multitude of scenes and incidents, remembered and fantasised. He goes on and on: reiterating, revisiting and reinventing his anguish and his bittersweet recollections. The lied, sung in the body of the singer, resonates in the body of the listener. This is the logic of the lied and the love song in general: its sentiment is adopted as the listener's sentiment – like an emotional blood transfusion the listener's heart pumps with the song: the landscape-in-song and the fantasised scenes occupy the listener.

As a concert *Winterreise* combines the live performance of the full song cycle and a projection of the ninety-minute video work. In the installation version a new studio recording of the music and song plays with the video. Bringing images into the concert hall and music into the gallery appears uncontentious in our culture of ubiquitous audio-visual combinations: yet whilst it doubles, *Winterreise* also divides its audience. In

navigating the values and expectations of both music and contemporary art fields Winterreise courts the scepticism and mistrust of its audiences: in the gallery the music is neither found object reframed nor cultural artefact deconstructed; in the concert hall the projection exceeds its position as backdrop.

In response to the journeying through a landscape-in-song, and to devise her own winterreise, Neudecker identified a line on the map, the sixtieth degree of latitude north. Using satellite location technology she travelled from the cartographic abstraction to points on the land along that latitude, from which she could view actual unknown landscapes. Neudecker conspired to get lost by walking in a straight line. The method of generating images through selecting camera positions by the vagaries of calculation relies on the belief that by the sheer act of pointing the camera, the world will, in one way or another, compose itself into image. And apparently it does. The tour of the sixtieth latitude produced uncanny visual echoes of the wintery imagery of the song: a rag fluttering on a wire provides the weathervane; a frozen waterfall, the frozen tears; out of focus lights, the duplicitous will o' the wisp; shadows on snow, loneliness; a signpost, the signpost; three windmills on a frosty hill, the illusion of phantom suns. The few words or lines of each song, transcribed as text in English over the image, make explicit the correlation between the visual and verbal images.

To offer images that literalise the metaphor is to exteriorise the inner narrative. The particularities of time and place that subtly mark Neudecker's images remove the lied's landscape from its seemingly abstract, universal, ideal and consequently available status and cast it as material and historical. The landscape is stolen from the mind's eye of the listener, presented to the corporeal eye and made no longer their own. Neudecker's conjunction of image with song interferes with the popular fantasy propagated by musical culture that song and music speak naturally and directly to the emotions: that this is genuinely your personal emotional experience, that this is your voice, your song.

In the associated video work, *Prelude*, Neudecker films people met during her journey. At the start of the twenty first century these incidental acquaintances of various nationalities

and tongues read English translations of poems written in German by Wilhelm Müller two centuries earlier; rearranged and set to music by Schubert; reinterpreted countless times by musicians; and coupled to images by Neudecker. To words, music; to music, images. From text to score to mouth to ear to eye; from text to text, from song to speech; here are many projects of translation and transposition and here is an art work as a process of endless revision, amendment, addition and collaboration.

Gustave Mahler, who selected, rearranged and set to music five of Friedrich Rückert's four hundred odd Kindertotenlieder (Songs for Dead Children), prefaced his score thus: 'These five songs form a complete and indivisible whole, and for this reason their continuity must be preserved (by preventing interruptions, such as for applause at the end of each song).' For Mahler the integrity of the lieder relied upon their sequence in time and the stillness of their audience. Neudecker adopts the five songs and orders them as a sequence in space. She cultivates an unruly audience that wanders from one song-space to another, an audience that can hear all five songs simultaneously and observes the mores of the installation not the recital. It is an audience unlikely to applaud.

In Mahler and Neudecker's 'collaboration' past and present co-exist and are redistributed through the gallery. Mahler's composition divides the orchestra into two groups of instruments which alternate and pull to and fro between different sonorities. It sets the precedent for Neudecker's deployment of the songs. Music, the most precisely organised of acoustic forms, is drawn towards disorganisation, cacophony and noise. Five voices pass through us: one woman sings from many places at once. Five simultaneous song-loops of different lengths create endless variation, coincidence and shift in emphasis. The shortest song, which describes the delusion that the children are walking on the hills in beautiful sunshine and will soon return, is repeated more than twice as often as the last and lengthiest song in which, during a storm, the children's bodies are taken from the house. The parent who sings is terrorised by the agony of time: by the appalling light of sunrise after night, by life going on; by memory; by the denial of death as if time could be turned back; and by time's torturer, regret. Winterreise's lover roams in space; Kindertotenlieder's parent roams in time.

A maquette, a mirror on a wall, a slice of a room, barn doors and a window frame create settings for the five songs and five projections. Architectural space affects the qualities of all sound within its vicinity and these open-ended architectures, somewhere between sculptures and sets, shape the songs and our perceptions. They locate the singing voice within domestic interiority: a parent, staring at the walls, immobilised by loss. But each 'room' cannot contain the voice and its elegy emanates beyond. And beyond the walls, in the mirror, through the window, behind the doors are images of a beyond, an elsewhere, another time: a sunrise, a thunder and lightning storm, a child running through a meadow, a summer mountainside, a blown curtain. Unlike other of Neudecker's moving images these were not made by systematically establishing a camera position on the map but by roving about the Swiss mountains trying to match the visible landscape to an ideal imagined image. The perfect memory of a child, the perfect wretched tempest, the perfect day - they are the iconic images of shared social consciousness: our myths.

The translation text in the installation returns the songs to Mahler's sequence and allows an English speaking audience to appreciate the detail of the narrative and to realise its position as intimate eavesdropper. Acoustically, as performance, the Kindertotenlieder are addressed to the listening audience; syntactically two songs are directed to the lost loved children; psychologically they are all soliloquies. The lied is song for a single voice, not a cast or a lead and chorus. This lone voice is a subject formed in loss and does not exist beyond the songs for dead children – she is a subject-in-voice-in-song singing to herself. The fullness and saturation of the idyllic images, their rich colour and fine 16mm grain, and the fullness and power of the voice offer plenitude and wholeness but the subject-in-voice of Kindertotenlieder is intrinsically marked by loss. As it pours from several locations singing to and interrupting its-selves, its incompleteness and pathos eddy about the discontinuous faceted architectures. Kindertotenlieder is here undivided but manifold.

Stay Here or Die works with a fragment of music rather than a complete work, and with a single moving image. A few minutes of borrowed aria escape Handel's opera, Alcina,

and accompany an arc of the sun over a post industrial coastal landscape. The sun is the sovereign object for the camera: it is light for the lens, uninterrupted by reflection off the surfaces of the world, and to all intents and purposes it is time. Between sun and lens lie skies and land and, at the very centre of the image, the atrophied figure of a dead tree. Like a sundial it casts shadow towards us; colour here belongs to the sky; the land is almost monochrome. The disembodied voice of the sorceress, Alcina, immerses the oil refinery installation and heath side in melancholy. She despairs at her waning power, her sudden inability to seduce or, as has been her custom, to turn abandoned lovers into stones, bushes and waves. As the sun passes behind the trunk Alcina's refrain is repeated. During her silences a plume of flame at the refinery stretches into the air. It is a spectre, a phantasm, a superimposition: it sucks the oxygen from the voice, the ether from the atmosphere, the vapours from the earth. It is the will o' the wisp, the hallucination of the dead child, the lover-made-landscape. It is the uneasy co-existence of occupation and emptiness shared by these works in which vocal music and landscape images are brought together.

'On your surface I carve with a sharp stone the name of my love, and the hour and the day' sings Winterreise's lover to a frozen river. Writing on ice evokes the spatiality of text and the temporality of voice. The words will flow away, a location will melt into time. Contemporary imagination replaces the wondrousness of ether with the thrill of space-time relativity. A process spanning two centuries, a landscape-in-song, large leaky atmospheric volumes, somatic space, the instants and aeons of melancholia.

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