

Skafta Kuhn

hervor aus Gebirgen des Nichtmehr  
(out of the Mountain of No More)  
13.03. – 30.04.2008

Galerie Iris Kadel

Viktoriastraße 3-5  
D – 76133 Karlsruhe  
Telephone +497219091672  
Telephone +497214672801  
Fax +497214672800  
info@iris-kadel.de  
www.iris-kadel.de

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Text by Bettina Steinbrügge

Several years ago, the first DVD of the *Rilke Project* appeared, which featured Nina Hagen reciting the poem “Wie das Gestirn, der Mond, erhaben, voll Anlass (Like the stars, the moon, sublime, purposeful)” to music. I came upon it when asking myself why Skafta Kuhn repeatedly takes up classics from literature and theatre, combines them with popular culture and today’s artistic modes of expression and thus updates them. He is not the only one pursuing this idea, although Kuhn does succeed in realising it in a unique poetic way in the fashion of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. For his current exhibition “hervor aus Gebirgen des Nichtmehr (out of the Mountain of No More)” for example, it is realised in the form of an artist’s book in which songs by, among others, Anne Clark, the Rolling Stones, Johnny Cash, and ACDC are translated into the lyrical language of Schlegel, Tieck or also Shakespeare and placed next to pictures of the musicians that are equally held in a Romantic or Gothic style.

The starting point of this artist’s book with its poems, song lyrics and drawings, as well as that of the other works of this series, the engravings and the sculpture, are Rilke’s poems to the night, which are in turn an homage to Novalis and his “Hymn to the Night”. Here, Romanticism is combined with the Bohemian aspirations of the turn of the century. What characterises both movements is the longing for darkness and the flight from everyday social conventions. In the history of literature, we encounter Novalis, the early German Romantic, as a young revolutionary seeking a novel type of aesthetics for his new approach to life. Along with Tieck and Schlegel, and following Shakespeare’s freedom of creating sceneries of words, Novalis polemicizes against conventions and rationalist philosophy. While at first manifested only in the literature of early Romanticism, the fine arts soon take up the striving for freedom, which is oriented to the depiction of the individual distinguished by inwardness and humanity. This classical theme is still to be found in the arts today and is strongly imbued by the subject of night. Night has always been a space for intensified inner and outer perception, an open space for reflecting upon human existence – its longings, fears and hopes.

The most accessible expression of this attitude can currently be found in popular music. The *Rilke Project* mentioned at the beginning collaborates with artists such as Nina Hagen or Xavier Naidoo and combines music and texts. As early as 1998, Anne Clark also released a CD with Rilke recordings. Skafta Kuhn went through the recent history of music and selected lyrics dealing with darkness, gloominess and the colour black. He then translated fragments of the original lyrics into the language of the above-mentioned authors and thus placed them in the proximity of their freedom-loving predecessors dedicated to Enlightenment. And this family of choice makes sense, since the themes are by no means outdated. It is instead surprising how little historical and contemporary thought differ, how strongly emotionality and individualism appear as constants, and to what extent the basic notion of individualism is still linked to the idea of liberation.

Skafta Kuhn’s entire creative work until now has been characterised by his dealing with theatre, music and literary models. The titles of his works are quotes from songs or Shakespeare’s literature, and in the current exhibition in Karlsruhe, poems by Rilke. Kuhn is concerned with the emotionality and the visual quality of his models. Moreover, the manifestation in space plays a role that repeatedly makes distinct reference to theatre. Skafta Kuhn’s installations deal with descriptions, situations and

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psychological states; the realisation often vacillates between Romantic illusion and austere construction, creating suspense curves that in the end make up the genuine quality of these spaces. At this point, one could again call Novalis to mind, the poet of a magical dream-reality, who grasped dream as reality and reality as dream, filled with premonitions and allusions.

The sculpture takes up the theme of the artist's book. In formal terms, it appears modernistic; a crystalline sculpture that is as black as night and seems to branch out into the room. Curved almost like Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, 13 cubes, or "planets", rise aloft. They are made of a semitransparent fabric with occasional threads hanging from them. Their material poetics is expanded in that each individual cube is embroidered with fragments of song lyrics. The amorphous structure, the transitory morbidity, is combined with crystallinity that stands for what grows and newly evolves. This unresolvable contradiction may indeed come much closer to life than many other commentaries made on the present day.

Skaft Kuhn's installation that in addition to the sculpture shows drawings and engravings on the same theme, gives rise to the notion of capturing the moment between a before and after in time. His works develop the image of a "frozen" moment in which the course of time appears interrupted. Figurative allusions and abstract forms alternate, again reminding one of Rilke, who tread new paths of the sayable in poetry. In a dreamlike way and using a virtuoso language rich in images, he realises the possibility of poetically affirming reality – despite all its catastrophes inherent to the theme of night. In a similar way as Rilke, Kuhn condenses his means of expression to vivid ciphers full of meaning that connect the inside with the outside. In the process, the concept of space and the aspect of time must be redefined analogously to the approach taken in music. Installation as a theme simply cannot be grasped in a more exciting way.

"Like the stars, the moon, sublime, purposeful, suddenly cross over the heights, calmly completing the night as planned: look: that is how my voice rises purely out of the mountains of no longer. And the places, surprised, where you were and which you left, miss you in pain more clearly."

Skaft Kuhn's artist book „hervor aus Gebirgen des Nichtmehr (out of the Mountain of No More)" is published at argobooks, Berlin ([www.argobooks.de](http://www.argobooks.de))

Skaft Kuhn (1969\*) has studied at Academy of Fine Arts in Karlsruhe. He recently has received the awards: Kunstfonds Bonn, Künstlerhäuser Worpswede and Deutsche Akademie Rom, Casa Baldi. In 2007 he participated at the exhibitions: Art Premiere/ArtBasel 38; „Blind Date“, Kunsthalle Bremerhaven, „Ghost Notes“, Künstlerhäuser Worpswede. In 2008 he will participate at: „Legend“, Departmental Domain Charmande (FR), curated by Alexis Vaillant; „Lustwarande 08 Wanderland“, Fundament Foundation, Tilburg (NL), Kunstverein Schwerte (DE).