

Pillow Talk – Begüm Erciyas

Review by Rudi Laermans

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The title of Begüm Erciyas' latest performative installation gives away a big part of the clue from the start. 'Pillow talk', that's the sort of equally intimate and trivial conversation you have before going to sleep, which gently nudges you towards dreamland. You talk about this and that but it remains personal, the chitchat isn't socially non-binding. The interlocutor can be a child, a loved-one or even a one-night stand. In principle, however, it does matter who or what: the situation is too near for this in all respects. In addition, the cultural rule plays a part, which states that the voice, more than the genus, might be the most intimate part of every body: the gender is generic, the voice singular. Therefore, the confidentiality of 'pillow talk' has everything to do with the crosslink between medium and message. The particularity of the voice heightens the personal character of the whispered words or sentences, however inconsequential their content. The other way around, little confessions and the often whispering way they are uttered, emphasise the individual timbre of a voice.

But hasn't digitalisation seriously hollowed out this 'spoken' humanism by now? Nowadays, you can mimic the individuality of a voice so accurately that the technical simulacrum is only barely distinguishable from an embodied voice. Moreover, it has become easier to generate the impression of talking to a human personality in conversations with a computer for a while now: a couple of sophisticated algorithms and a bunch of data suffice. The movie *Her* (2013) mixed these ingredients into a romantic SF-drama to great public approval: a man who has just gone through a break-up, falls in love with a self-learning, reflexive operating system that introduces herself as Samantha (however, the movie does cheat rather considerably: Scarlett Johansson lent her sensual voice to Samantha). *Pillow Talk* poses the question as well to what extent a digital dispositive could not only evoke feelings, but could also capture these feelings continually, to the point where the connection between human and artefact implodes into a complete intersubjective relationship. Because of the fact that Erciyas' installation creates a participative as well as a theatrical situation, *Pillow Talk* raises other issues that are directly connected to the crosslink between humanity, technicality and intimacy.

Kunstenfestivaldesarts showed *Pillow Talk* in the emptied central theatre hall of the KVS (because of its form, also known as 'the globe'). Upon entering the partly dimmed hall, you see a couple of lit spaces and the vast floor, covered with black fabric, which has little hills that form within and are especially striking. These 'bumps' involuntarily remind you of graves: you think you're at a churchyard in the dead of night. The setting has a *gothic* sense about it, an impression that is enhanced even more by the soft buzzing of the scattered,

resounding and interfering voices of the participants who are already taking part. Furthermore, there is the height of the room: when you look up, it seems as if the nightly firmament embraces your infinitesimal body.

You follow previously given instructions that a light signal will determine the spot where you will lay down. You have to curl up against one of the bulges on the floor, which will feel unexpectedly soft; only when you do this, you notice the small curve in the embracing little hill. That is why it seems like you curl up against a body that is in front of you with its legs pulled up. Then, a female voice requests in English that you huddle even closer. This strengthens the ambiguity we identify with theatre. Even though you are not a spectator but a performer, the situation encourages you to act as if you are caught up in an intimate situation right before going to bed. This 'what if'-clause, without which literary fiction and theatricality can't exist, does of course require the familiar *suspension of disbelief*. You're not lying in bed or on the sofa with your head on a pillow against a loved-one – but you make an abstraction of an actual situation in a way that it could in fact be real. If you refuse to conceive this (imagine this), the performance (the installation) simply doesn't work. The operating system continually takes the lead by asking simple questions. 'How is the weather today?' is a socially predictable opening question. You mumble something about the drizzle you just experienced while walking there, after which the equally predictable question follows about the weather the next couple of days. These are trivial warm-up questions that, as it soon turns out, define the road as well-thought-out programmed stepping stones to a more intimate dialogue. The fictional pillow talk takes a first personal turn when the mechanical voice asks you to describe the room around you 'to me'. Your attempt to be as accurate as possible is answered by the compliment that 'they' can see the surroundings in front of them completely. A little while later, the remark follows that 'they' are becoming a little dizzy from the speed with which your eyes scan the room.

'Ask me seven questions, which I will answer with yes or no', 'Tell me how you feel today' ...: without realising, you're caught up in a slightly *unheimlich* feeling of intimacy. Exposing oneself personally to a stranger who you only have fleeting contact with, happens regularly (it's not without its logic: because the other person exists outside your direct social network, he can't share any secrets either). But accepting the invitation of a machine that asks you to sing *Killing me softly* together or to take a nap together? At first sight, the 'suspension of disbelief', crucial to the theatre, is seriously tested in this situation. Even the digital voice you hear tests your faith: it sounds far from human. The tiny speaker next to your ear broadcasts a consistent, sometimes cracking metallic sound that emphasises the simili-character of the mimicked female timbre. When 'she' suddenly says 'I like your voice', this remark rather confuses you: you can hardly answer with a variation on 'I like your voice too'?

The used algorithms aren't very sophisticated either. You quickly realise that the operating system abruptly changes the subject or tries to get out of it with a 'uhu' or 'funny' when asked a somewhat difficult question. Still, the installation works. Firstly, this has to do with the specific performativity of intimate communication. It doesn't merely represent feelings, but construes them as well: without this mechanism, there would be no melodrama or other sentimental genres. Tender words usually evoke ditto emotions, and someone who is treated lovingly, generally develops warm feelings for the speaker ('usually', 'generally': cold fish are of course no curiosity amongst the human race). This effect is the same with non-human artefacts that talk using a personal or intimate register. That is why *Pillow Talk*, in the first place, demonstrates the autonomous power of words, the act-uality of *speech acts*, separate from the statute of the speaking entity. More importantly than this general eloquence, is the effect of denial that the *suspension of disbelief* produces without fail. Precisely because you know that you find yourself in an unreal situation, emotional projections and phantasms get free rein. The fact that the female voice in your ear sounds very fake and the given answers seem prefabricated, doesn't really matter just because of that. You find yourself in the safe zone of fiction, a zone that allows fantasising, no, requires it. And so you project your personal feelings onto the metallic female voice and say, against every probability, that you do find the voice endearing. This emotional engagement receives an extra dimension because you are directly involved yourself. Different from a regular *black box*-performance, you're not watching on from a distance. On the contrary, your words are crucial to the success of the performance. Because of this personal involvement, you will start to believe even more in the space that is opened by your own 'suspension of disbelief' – in the reality of a digital voice that sounds audibly fake and in the feigned intimacy. 'I know, but still...' plays a part in every fictional context, but this act of belief gains intensity when the involved 'I' literally becomes the subject – '*subiectum*' means base – of the involved fiction (this is indeed also true for every actor: without the belief in the character one plays, one can only create a lifeless puppet show).

Pillow Talk is participatory theatre in which you yourself are the main character, and this because you participate and because of the slightly perfidious game of provoked projections onto the mechanical female voice that talks to you in a situation you immediately recognise as intimate. This in design straightforward performance makes a simple yet enriching point: within a non-theatrical set-up it demonstrates how much the basic convention of the theatre influences our personal interaction with the digital world (that is why it made sense that *Pillow Talk* is set within a theatre hall during Kunstenfestivaldesarts). Of course, all of the vocal technology amounts to the creation of a simulation. However, the factual functioning of this simulacrum

really requires that *suspension of disbelief*, which we have known in the theatre for centuries, from the side of the user. The new digital anthropomorphism simply varies the belief in an 'agent', well-known from the performance arts, who pretends and is able to play a character in a plausible way thanks to this confidence.

Pillow Talk is an entertaining performance that uses a playful way to enlighten us about our seemingly unbridled ability to believe in the fiction that a stupid idiotic apparatus pretends to be, even though the created pretence is easily seen through ('heard-through' would be the more suitable verb here). It's certainly not *science fiction*, I have come to know too many people who can't go a day without hearing Siri's voice over the years. *Pillow Talk's* real sting lies in the combination of collectivity and individuality. Spread out over the KVS-hall, I saw at least ten people who'd rather share their intimacy with a machine than with each other – those who chose that metallic sound of a digital voice over the physical warmth of a human voice. Nobody thought of the idea to break through the fiction and do the most obvious thing: ask another participant how he or she was doing. Therefore, the built-up fiction reflected the social reality as it is known by now. Because of the success of the smartphone we are all the more shared instead of being collectively together: welcome to the post-political era of the generalised 'pillow talk'.