

*Interview between Ilaria Gianni and Astrid Nippoldt*

from *Grutas*, exhibition catalogue, Fondazione Adriano Olivetti, Dec. 2006

*ILARIA GIANNI: Grutas (2006) is set in a very uncommon park in Lithuania. A park in which sculptures of the protagonists of the Soviet Regime are immersed in nature and in dialogue with contemporary life? How did you find it?*

ASTRID NIPPOLDT: I'm always looking for uncommon places and non-straightforward situations. In this case—I was in Vilnius for another project—I asked around for suggestions about what else to see in Lithuania. I was recommended to visit two parks. The first one was a desolate contemporary sculpture garden, the second one was Grutas Park. This is a place where a private Lithuanian citizen, who made his fortune selling berries and mushrooms, set up in 2001 a kind of sanctuary for abandoned Soviet sculptures in order to create a monument for the suffering of the Lithuanian people under the Soviets. Maybe I should go back and have a look at the first park again.

*I.G. Does the memory of your past, having grown up in Germany during the years of the Cold War, influence your attention towards a place that has been preserved from historical cancellation and assumed another function, or are you interested in the shadows of the past that can't be cancelled?*

A.N. It is not only about the Cold War. Being born as a German after the Second World War makes you grow up with a big question mark on national identity and public representation. The political heritage and the duty to keep memory alive is omnipresent.

*I.G. What relationship do you have towards memory and historical events?*

A.N. I confess that I have difficulty in fully imagining historical events which I have not personally witnessed. To me they remain partly abstract. Today the media has disqualified themselves as "truth-tellers" by manipulation techniques and interest-motivated information. And it was probably never different. Memory is a weak resource and I think it is impossible that history will ever lose its virtual quality.

*BARBARA MATTEI: Soviet art, like German art of the 1930s and 1940s, is full of political ideologies and meanings. Today, many affirm that we live in a society where there is a serious crisis of substance. Does art reflect this crisis? Or are we simply living in a period characterized by freedom of art expression and of culture in general?*

A.N. In history, art has always reflected crises of all imaginable kinds. It still does a good job of mirroring the reality of today's society. Thank God today there is a grand variety of expressions, and NOT exclusively about certain (political) issues. That is the most precious thing about culture: its freedom. We know in which ways art was used for propagandistic purposes in the past. But also today I observe the tendency to still expect a recognisable political commentary in art, not by the government but by art criticism. I really want to point out that artists should not be instrumentalized as a megaphone for a public moral conscience, but they should remain independent with individual aims and intentions. The more inconvenient the better.

*I.G. There is a mysterious presence in Grutas: a secret inhabitant of the park; an insider that is at the same time outsider. It is an uncanny eye that observes and apparently doesn't interfere. Who is he or she? Why is it keeping a distance from the everyday life? Or better, is it keeping a distance or is it just that the people that pass by in the park aren't able to see it, that they don't have a clear perception?*

A.N. It's the eye of the silent witness, which allows us to enter the scenario. In this case, to play the history game of victim, motivator and recipient with undetermined roles.

*I.G. Adele (2006) is also a strange presence in the park. She appears to be a nymph, a protector of the woods behind her. She is looking at us, almost trying to provoke us to follow her inside, and challenging us at the same time. The mosquitoes are a disturbing wall, commanded by a secret and imperceptible voice of the statue. This side of the park*

*is a silent, mysterious territory with a disarming and yet fascinating atmosphere. You try to break through it. What happens? Who is Adele?*

A.N. Even though I know little about the actual person Adele Siauciunaite, who was a Lithuanian poet and member of the communist party in the early 20th century, and who died young at the age of 24, I have a great sympathy for this statue. Placed in a solitary dark spot at the very edge of the park among nothing but mosquitoes and the marsh, she carries the fate of the twice-abandoned. My attempt to break through the “disturbing wall” of mosquitoes is an attempt to interrupt the claustrophobic presence of pathos.

*I.G. Grutas, and other of your works, such as Bloop (2004) and Concorde (2004-2005), have a sense of suspense, mystery and sometimes even fear, hidden in their layers or even as their main feature. What value do you give to these conditions and why are you so interested in them? All this mystery and suspense seems to be very ironic.*

A.N. Besides the fact that it is my favourite atmosphere, I appreciate suspense as a method to shake/mess up the parameters of the familiar. It makes you doubt your conditions and what you take for granted. This freshly achieved uncertainty in combination with an expectation of the everything-is-possible gives space to any intervention in the perception of reality. But you will never find constant mystery and fear in my works. There are always turning points, towards the silly and back, sometimes even to the religious. I enjoy a lot to play with the very ridiculous character of the world and the conditions of being.

*I.G. You give a strong importance to audio and soundtrack in your work, which helps the eerie and frightening atmosphere and is even more explicit than the image itself. In Grutas for example, you use the soundtrack and some edited dialogues of Es geschah am hellichten Tag (It Happened in Broad Daylight), 1958, based on the novel Das Versprechen (The Pledge) written by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, which is quite scary...*

A.N. Images become interesting when you discover hidden links behind the obvious. In this sense sound has a strong impact on ones imagination. Two opposite elements for example, each with its own context, make a very unexpected synthesis. I like surprises in the working process.

*I.G. Can you tell us more about the plot of the film? It's a very popular film in Germany...*

A.N. Almost everyone in German-speaking countries has seen this black-and-white movie some time in their life. And everyone still remembers it well, as it has gotten under their skin. It's about a man who slowly tries to seduce a little girl with chocolate truffles and other promises in order to make her come back to the nearby forest, where he intends to kill her. With this movie the German actor Gert Fröbe (the murderer) was discovered by Hollywood and became the greatest antagonist ever of James Bond, Mr. Goldfinger.

*I.G. Why did you decide to relate the film and the park? What did you think the two things had in common?*

A.N. When visiting the park I had this very spontaneous association. I thought of the film due to similarities in the character of the landscape and the weird atmosphere. At first glance the venue in both the film and the park, is an idyllic spot. Both turn out to be places of violence at the borderline between civilisation and nature. Puppets play a central role here and there, as do dreams, desires and pledges.

*I.G. So are the statues intended as violent puppets? Where did you perceive the violence in the park and in your intimacy?*

A.N. Walking through this forest you pass a receiving line of bronze “delinquents”, either known or unknown characters from Lithuania's communist past who have supported the regime in more or less violent ways. Along with writers, philosophers, partisans and Lenins, you will also face a Stalin portrait. Previously those statues were used to convince people of the magnitude of the Soviet ideals, in Grutas Park they have changed role and became voodoo dolls to blame their godfathers for the whole dark history of Eastern Europe. The birch tree forests in this area are regarded as the perfect location for the park because of its

resemblance to Siberian forests, where thousands of Lithuanian intellectuals and members of the opposition were deported in the last century. Visitors promenade on a wooden gangplank, passing numerous watchtowers from which old Russian folksongs fill the space with melancholic tunes.

*I.G. In Sitting Lenin (2006), the way in which the function of the park has changed from an historical and propagandistic venue to a space of leisure is very evident. Lenin's statue in all his strength and power becomes a mere amusement object. It is used as a medium to have fun with. A lady is climbing it and people are taking pictures of the scene. Is it the destruction of the aura of communism and history or is it a way to get nearer to it?*

A.N. This is difficult to judge. To me this scenario shows a lot about the psychological composition of a post-communist and brand-new-capitalist society, as well as about very basic human mechanisms: the abstraction of memory through distance and the eros of the evil. And it simply shows that people behave in silly and childish ways when they feel unobserved, no matter how serious history is.

*I.G. You accelerated the scene as in a slapstick movie. Is it like a joke?*

A.N. The acceleration had two basic reasons. One was to suggest a home video in an 8mm film aesthetic, shot by a member of the protagonist family. The second aim was to underline the gap between the sitting Lenin in his eternal patience and the young lady who is hysterically trying to have fun with him.

*I.G. Do you actually see these three works (Grutas, Adele and Sitting Lenin) as a trilogy or do you think that they can work separately?*

A.N. Naming it 'trilogy' and not '3-channel video' already means that I regard each of them as an independent piece with its own focus. But I definitely prefer to show the complete trilogy, as it fully shows the contradictions and ambiguity of this very particular park.

*I.G. At the end we see flowers in all their beauty. Is it a symbol of re-birth of a nation?*

A.N. Well, that's up to you. Those roses are sprinkled by a water pipe. And please take into consideration that it functions as a frame image together with the very first shot at the beginning of the video, when you see a sprinkling fountain in the middle of an artificial lake through a wire-mesh fence.

*I.G. You work a lot with editing and post-production. In which way do you decide to use these tools?*

A.N. My working process is basically divided into two steps. First there is a confrontation with reality, a situation, a place, a scenario. Sometimes in the form of a spontaneous shot, sometimes as a planned observation and sometimes things happen accidentally by circumstances and I become aware of their pertinence at the moment of doing or even afterwards. The second step is the post-production. My approach is non-linear, intuitive: with sketches, notes and a collection of related elements. The editing itself is a bit like in an experimental laboratory, where ideas get focussed and precise in a long process of evaluation.

*I.G. You also play with language. Reading the title of your work Afrika (2005), one expects to see a stereotyped kind of African landscape or atmosphere; instead the spectator is completely confused by the snow!!! At the same time though one realizes how the burden of walking in the snow transmits difficulties. Is it a metaphor on the complications of living?*

A.N. *Afrika* as the title of a work inspired by a Chaplin like, Japanese ink-drawing scenario within a snowy landscape obviously functions as a surprise. Still it's not about confusing the spectator, but rather a performed disorientation. The essential thing is that the word comes with a history. It is a dummy, a wildcard for a complex range of references, between seeking adventure and the abyss of despair.

*I.G. I'd like to go back to the concept of music. For many of your works you have used music from films from the 1920s and 1930s and in general from film history (Prologue, 2005; Davis, 2004; Concorde, 2004/05; Bloop, 2004; Afrika, 2005; wy o ming, 2002), providing a narrative role to sound that the spectator recognizes. How much import-*

*ance do you give to association?*

A.N. Association is a basic element in my work. The use of sound elements from films—among other sources—pushes the narrative and leads to the meaning. The orchestral beats of the *Chicken Run* soundtrack inserted at the peak of the military parade in *Concorde* aesthetically intensify and at the same time underline the inconsistencies of the sensational and pathetic power demonstration. Immediately after, the silly sound of a crashing airplane, taken from a Disney cartoon, just as the sun's rays refract in the camera lens, forming the red, white and blue of the French tricolor, cause the squadron to take a deep plunge.

*I.G. In Bloop, Davis, Wyoming and Concorde, you announce the arrival of another life, an alien life that we don't know about, or even the devastation of human life, of the earth, an eerie condition that seems to trouble you—or does it fascinate you?*

A.N. I would not call it devastation. It's more about the construction of parallel existences than about destruction. Alien life is probably one of my favourite alter egos as an artist, because it has—in the good sense—an ignorant approach to reality, a partly inside partly outside point of view with unpredictable intentions.

*I.G. The conditions in which the protagonists of your works are represented are often very difficult. We were talking about Afrika before, with the young lady collapsing in the snow, but also the horses in The Serendip Stadium (2003/04) walk in the snow in stressful conditions, and you in Heroic Turn (2001), playing with your body and a camera, tiring yourself out. Are you interested in the idea of stress and exhaustion? Are physical exhaustion and stress also ways of dealing with human limits?*

A.N. Definitely yes. The other model character I reflect on in my works is the struggling, inefficient creature, the lone tramp, who stumbles with great ambition into failure. During the production, physical limits are precious means to maintain genuineness and authenticity within artificial setups.

*I.G. Do difficult weather conditions interest you? They are present in many of your works and actually become protagonist of Fog on Nov 2 (2004)...*

A.N. I love extreme weather conditions for their disturbing impact. On the one hand they make you aware of the fact that you are a small crappy creature, which is a very healthy experience. On the other hand I appreciate natural phenomena for their metaphorical potentials, ultimately with even a political quality. In this sense the alternating weather conditions around a live volcano, recorded from a webcam in *Fog on Nov 2* symbolize—though not explicitly!—the political and emotional situation in the period of the presidential elections in the US. (On a serious note, we are probably no longer able to comfortably perceive dramatic displays of nature in times of global climate changes.)

*I.G. Since we mentioned Heroic Turn, I wanted to know to what extent your works work with you? You are often the main character of your videos.*

A.N. I am often the protagonist of my videos, because I offer myself the possibility of responding directly to the situation. I rarely arrive with elaborated scripts but instead I develop a constant, ongoing dialogue with the camera and the conditions.

*I.G. I would like to end the interview with Prologue. After almost one minute a fogged over lens, accompanied by a cinematic soundtrack, opens to a huge sign with the word WORLD, an almost Hollywood like billboard. Is that your card towards the art world? A way of presenting your artwork and your discourse?*

A.N. It would have been the perfect LAST piece in my life. Like a last breath. That's why I like *Epilogue* as a title as well. But it's still a bit early for me to retire, so it had to be a prologue.

*I.G. Future projects?*

A.N. Darwin.