

From the particular to the universal

by Maria Rosa Sossai, in *Grutas*, Nero Produzioni, Roma 12/2006

Prologue

After seeing Astrid Nippoldt's videos and talking with her, I recalled a consideration by George Steiner on the nature of art, which, the French writer wrote, unlike the theoretical and applied sciences that explain the individual, tangible instance in light of universal theories, tends to give universals and theories a spatial position and a name. Thus it always comes back to the detail of humanity, and it is in the light of this particular that it symbolizes the universe. The association between how Nippoldt's works and Steiner's reflection was later confirmed in a passage of the artist's conversation with Susanne Pfeffer¹, in which she states that her videos are always born of a specific event that has happened to her and that has directly stimulated or struck her imagination. Her work is therefore always the precipitate of individual personal experiences, given human relationships, specific states of mind, landscapes traversed, the result of the constant search for a possible meaning that saves the icon from the undifferentiated chaos of the media, and restores its potential and incommensurable uniqueness as an unrepeatable experience. Further confirmation of the fact that, in art, the universal is manifest in the individual work, as an act of irreducible complexity and ambiguity.

Beyond appearance

Does the woman in the video *Afrika* (2005) who struggles forth in the snowy landscape allude perhaps to the path that we all follow towards the unknown? And does the turbine of snowflakes that shrouds in darkness the horsemen and horses in *The Serendip Stadium* (2003-04) actually reveal the current silence of images, whose identity is increasingly temporary and essentially unable to define reality? If the adverse weather conditions in both videos obscure or reduce visibility, at the same time they free the moving shapes from the linear constraint of time and space, transmitting to the onlooker a tactile perception of night or the flurry of snow in the air. *Fog on Nov 2* (2004): the spaces conquer absolute freedom only after proving their identity and being observed by the artist's attentive, sensitive gaze.

Theme parks, Astrid found for herself during a recent trip to Lithuania, certainly do not preserve history, but they simply turn it into spectacle under the urgent need to entertain the visiting public. In the 2006 trilogy, *Grutas*, *Sitting Lenin*, and *Adele*, the objects scattered throughout the historic park founded by the Lithuanian entrepreneur Viliumas Malinauskas and salvaged from a damnatio memoriae—statues of important men and heads of state from the past Soviet regime, watchtowers, megaphones that broadcast old popular songs—cohabit with swings and slides, pathways and explanatory signs, according to an organic design that creates a new cosmology in which the past is canceled out by an eternal present, that of the tourist's consumption, who becomes its temporary owner. The woman who in *Sitting Lenin* climbs onto the pedestal of a gigantic statue of Lenin, sits smiling on his knee, posing for the photo that her family members will take. Her narcissistic and slightly childish temptation becomes the object of a second eye, that of the artist, which projects the image backward in a form of contemplation that evokes what is no longer visible, the now obsolete world of the Soviet Union, relived through some of its simulacra. But even statues have a soul: that of the Lithuanian poet Adele Siauciunaite, whose statue is located in a remote corner of the park, comes to life through a swarm of mosquitoes that break the silence of the immovable air during the video *Adele*.

The series of imposing sculptures aligned along a boulevard in the park, the underlying soundtrack of a few scenes from the film *Es geschah am bellichten Tag* (*It Happened in Broad Daylight*, D/CH, 1958), taken from the novel *Das Versprechen* (*The Pledge*) by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, which draws on the primary dynamics of dream and mysteries, the chants of the regime, in *Grutas* cast the threatening shadows of history onto the unknowing present of a holiday afternoon.

Epilogue

In another passage of the conversation with Susanne Pfeffer, Astrid Nippoldt states she sees no difference among the different media. It is no accident that her research, after an initial stage in the field of static images of painting, shifted to the moving images of video. I am certain that the fascination with the filmic form that nourished the imagination of the recently ended century is partly responsible for this shift. But what inheritance has cinema given the new millennium, dominated by the videosphere and the erasure of analogical chronology? Perhaps the need to reconstruct a new narrativity, around which an ethic of shared values and intent may grow, even in the multiple and infinite interpretations of the world that make up the task of art. The video work of Astrid Nippoldt seems to rise to this call.

¹ Before I Know I am I must get there, interview between Astrid Nippoldt and Susanne Pfeffer, in *Tryingtoland*, Revolver Books, Frankfurt, 2006.