

BERLIN

Deimantas Narkevičius

GALERIE BARBARA WEISS

In his first film, *Europa 54°54'–25°19'*, 1997, Deimantas Narkevičius sets out for the center of Europe—which, after a reestimation of the borders of the continent by geographers at the Parisian Institut Géographique National in 1989, is located at a spot in a village called Purnuškės, north of Vilnius (“One Friday morning I got the urge to go and see the center of Europe”). The artist can be heard offscreen explaining that he had previously disregarded the existence of this supposedly highly significant location in Lithuania, dismissing it as just another instance of the sort of ethnocentric ideology typical of new countries, but that he now considers this geographical datum the central point of reference governing all his travels regardless of direction. For eight minutes, the camera, shooting out the window of a moving car, captures the bustling streets and traffic in Narkevičius’s hometown; the route gradually leads farther from the city center and into the outskirts. Finally, the car comes to a stop, and after a brief walk through a deserted park, recorded on a handheld camera, we reach a little hill where the coordinates named in the title are marked on an unspectacular plaque set into a rock.

Europa 54°54'–25°19' uses post-Communist Lithuania as a case study in the subjectivizing effects of the historical upheavals in Eastern Europe following 1989, deploying a cinematic form that is both laconic and reflective: The center of this new nation in the new Europe, ostensibly a key point for local identity formation, is actually



Deimantas Narkevičius, *The Dud Effect*, 2008, still from a black-and-white and color film in 16 mm, transferred to HD video, 15 minutes 40 seconds, looped.

peripheral in various senses. It therefore proves a chimera, at least from an ideological standpoint. It isn't by chance that the artist closes his monologue with the words "It could have been anywhere in Europe," a sentiment of doubt confirmed by subsequent historical developments: After the first eastward expansion of the European Union in 2004, including Lithuania among its new members, the country lost its position as the geographical midpoint of the political and economic community of nation-states that from then on served as a frame of reference (rather than the abstract idea of Europe as a continent); the new center lay just outside the German town Kleinmaischheid; the second expansion of the Union in 2007 shifted the midpoint to Gelnhausen.

Narkevičius's first solo show at Galerie Barbara Weiss juxtaposed this early film with a recently completed project. In *The Dud Effect*, 2008, Narkevičius combines documentary archival material focusing on a Soviet missile base in Lithuania dating back to the Cold War (now abandoned) with slow, almost meditative sequences and tableau-like shots featuring Evgeny Terentiev, who was stationed at the base starting in 1975 (as his voice-over tells us). He wears his old uniform in his spartan office, some of whose furnishings he has preserved. As he must have done at the time, he assumes a commanding tone as he lays out the strictly regulated bureaucratic steps that would have been involved in the emergency launch of medium-range nuclear missiles against the West—and each of his orders is shown resulting in military activity somewhere in the enormous catacombs of the missile base. Although the titular "dud" refers to a missile that fails to go off, at the end of the film we are shown a blinding white light as if from an atomic explosion, followed by traveling shots and stills in which the catacombs and grounds of the base can be seen in their present state of decrepitude. Although these images suggest a process of abandonment more than of instantaneous destruction, Narkevičius consciously blurs the boundary between fiction and documentation—the effect of this bomb resides in flashes of individual memory, shedding light on a collective history in ruins.

—André Rottmann

Translated from German by Oliver E. Dryfuss.