

DEIMANTAS NARKEVICIUS

AGAINST MONUMENTALITY

Hans Ulrich Obrist

HANS ULRICH OBRIST: *My first question is about your beginnings — where did your work start and how did you become an artist?*

Deimantas Narkevicius: I became an artist very early on, and this was because of my parents. We were living in a forest in South Lithuania and they wanted me to move to the city. I went to school in Vilnius and so was separated from my parents — that was when I was fourteen. It was an art boarding school intended for so-called “talented” people, so I grew up there. I was doing life drawings, modeling, and so on. Much later I studied at the art academy and there was always the feeling that something was not quite working. That was even before the '90s, still in the Soviet Union. There was something impersonal in the practice of artists. Everything was quite impersonal. At the beginning I was trying to personalize what I was doing, to motivate myself.

HUO: *I started to know your work in Manifesta II, through your filmic work, so I wondered if you could tell me about the origins of your work with film and the context in which this work was born?*

DN: I graduated from the art academy as a sculptor. I was not concerned about what was going on in the art academy in Vilnius. I had a chance to go to London for just one year, between 1992 and 1993, which was really great. Coming back I was very much interested in site-specific objects, the places where objects are placed. But somehow it was not enough. I really needed things to tell. So I started to do interviews.

HUO: *Recordings of interviews with people in the street?*

DN: Just recordings of conversations. Then I found it a really perfect medium for narrative, for exploring sound as well as visual language. For a long time, Jonas Mekas and George Maciunas...

HUO: *Who is also from Lithuania...*

DN: Yes, the works of those artists didn't have a substantial impact on the art scene in Lithuania. Also the relationship to film was very local. So everybody knew their names, but there always was a certain alienation from what they did. In the mid-'90s, perhaps in '96, a big show of Fluxus from the United States and Germany was held at the CAC, which changed this relationship.

HUO: *A book has just come out: Flux Friends, edited by Jonas Mekas. It is essentially a conversation between Jonas Mekas, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, and John Lennon. It's very hard to edit the interview, so it leads to a montage. It is almost a new medium, a new literary category, which is the montage book — not unlike the montage film. It prefers to avoid the linear in favor of an informed assemblage of archives, interviews, texts, extracts from newspapers, and so on, using all styles from the cinema — flashbacks, ellipses, sequence, the insert, and so on. You mentioned that your filmic works start with interviews, so there are perhaps some similarities with Jonas Mekas.*

DN: They are more than just artists for me, not only because of their connections to the place that I am from. With Jonas' films, it's not that I just put a tape in a VHS player and watch it. There are other things too. It's almost too difficult to describe. Just seeing it on a monitor already means a lot for me. Mekas and Maciunas were very important, and they led me to thinking about the nature of being an artist — what is an artist? These artists meant for me more than any teacher I had at that time. At the end of the '80s, Utopia was something impossible. So that's my relation to those people.

HUO: *Since the beginning, your films have been about different narrative structures. I wondered if certain filmmakers had influenced you, or whether it was something that came less from cinema and more from your work with sculpture and painting? You keep these links to other mediums in your work — years ago I saw your concrete football sculpture in Zagreb. You continue to do installations and sculptural work, though your most recent work is influenced by film. There are several questions in there — maybe you can untangle them!*

DN: Well, actually, in response to the first part of your question about film influences, I would say that I wasn't really influenced as such, but something that was significant for me was the documentary material on the 16mm film that we used to have on TV in

Europe 54° 54' -25° 19', 1997. Film stills. Courtesy &:gb agency, Paris.





the '70s. Interviews used to be filmed with 16mm cameras, and then they were processed and made ready for the evening news on the same day. So it was often done in quite a rush. This rush provoked considerable experimentation. These films were screened and then broadcast, raising interesting possibilities for using film. I didn't think about this until much later, but I realize now that it was really important.

HUO: *So this was before television became a more homogenized medium?*

DN: Probably, yes. In terms of filmmakers, well, I don't know. I was talking to a friend a few days ago and we were asking about each other's favorite films. I posed the question: "what is the earliest film that you remember?" For me, that was probably the second part of *Ivan Grozny* by Eisenstein, especially the end. I remember that I was five years old when I saw it, and it was really shocking for me. A few years later, I saw his *Bronenosec Potiomkin*. These were very early things I remembered.

HUO: *And what was it that struck you about Eisenstein?*

DN: I couldn't really say. If you remember the end of the second part of *Ivan Grozny*, it's a kind of weird wild dancing, and other suggestive performances. This strangeness, moving out of everyday normality, and in particular moving out of history, gave a sense that there are many possibilities for transformation.

HUO: *In terms of the postmedium condition, Rosalind Krauss describes the idea that artists have different media and so with Ed Ruscha, the medium he uses is not necessarily painting, but rather the car. Or with Dan Graham, it's not sculpture or installation, but rather it's architecture. What you would say your medium is, and could you elaborate on your recent remark that your previous film was more about painting and that your new film is more about sculpture?*

DN: Well, I think my film is sort of an extension of my sculpture. For *Manifesta II*, I made an installation using films. These

films dealt with space. The projectors were equally important. In terms of painting and sculpture, *Energy Lithuania*, which I made two years ago, is an ongoing image like a painting. Even the Super-8 colors are not documentation: they don't have much relation with actual colors. It's difficult to transform a visual language into a spoken narrative! When I was making the film I was thinking of it as a documentary, but the connections with painting very much emerged during the editing process. The documentary element of the film became more distanced. Painting itself cannot really be a documentary — this was a subjective documentary that has a relationship with painting. I brought painterly subjectivity into the documentary, meaning that really it was no longer a documentary. With a new film, I'm trying hard to engage myself in certain situations where I do not know what to do. I'm trying to put myself into totally new situations in which I have no experience of how to solve certain problems.

HUO: *So you don't have a completely pre-written storyboard? Does it somehow evolve through the unpredictable? How far do you plan a film, and how far do chance, randomness, and the unexpected enter the process of making a film?*

DN: It's probably like making a sculpture, though not in the sense of modeling objects. Rather it is a matter of choosing an area in which you're going to work. It's more like a sculpture for a specific location. Within this area that you yourself define, I start to look for a certain structure. Because of the specificity of medium, there are always things that I leave to happen in unexpected ways within the filmed objects and people, the unexpected surfaces. I'm always clear about what I'm doing, but I always leave a space for things to happen that aren't necessarily expected.

HUO: *Could you tell me about how this works in your new film? You have moments of acceleration and slowness, and even animation.*

Energy Lithuania, 2000. Film stills. Opposite: Kaimietis, 2002. Film stills. Courtesy &:gb agency, Paris.

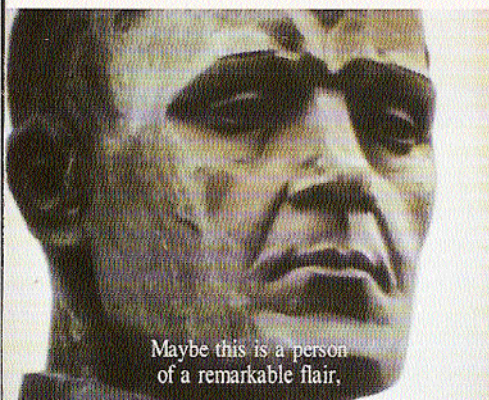
DN: As with my other films, the main protagonists don't really appear in the film. They exist through narration and through the objects in the film. Again, this is about the idea of subjective documentary. I asked the main character's brother to make his brother's animated portrait, which appears in the film, and this is the kind of way in which I try to involve people so that their relationship with the film is special and not neutral. It is a portrait of the main character who talks in the film but appears through the drawing as an animation. That's an important aspect of documenting things — I don't always film a portrait or a talking head, but things that are related to the person in different and more diverse ways.

HUO: *You've said that you felt this new work was related to the themes of Utopia and Dystopia. Could you tell me a little about this?*

DN: Well, the narrative is about being creative or creating something. It is also about the impossibility of creativity, when creativity reaches a point where it is not fulfilling. Even if you feel that you have given everything, like the character that I just spoke about did, creativity is Utopia in a particular situation and it always reaches certain limits. It is this pushing of the self to these limits that is something that I find intriguing but cannot control. Utopia is about understanding what being creative is, and the failure of that. It's difficult to say in a few words. Being creative with a definite target is Utopia.

HUO: *Ernst Bloch once said that "something is missing."*

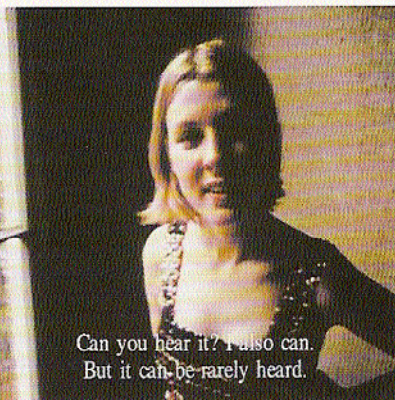
DN: Yes, probably, something is missing: communication not by talking about something, but in relation to something. Utopia is doing something yourself and creating yourself, coming to certain limits in



Maybe this is a person of a remarkable flair,



...just like you wish to be understood.



Can you hear it? I also can. But it can be rarely heard.

a particular situation. In my film, that is the situation and that is a Utopia. The second part is about relations — personal and other.

HUO: *So it's an idea that is concerned with defining a new social contract. After '89 "Utopia" as an idea became very unpopular. You lived a very specific experience in relation to the moment of '89, so at that time there was also an anti-Utopia moment. But if we revisit Utopia today, the advantages of Utopia are that it still offers possibilities for defining a social contract not in a totalitarian way but very much on a more human scale.*

DN: My context is a country that was built on a social and political Utopia. But I grew up in the period when nobody really believed in it. The fall of the Soviet Union was at a time when people had other Utopias. These were liberal Utopias, about freedom to do what you do. These kinds of Utopia were also an illusion, and lasted only for a few years. People grew disillusioned very quickly. What kind of Utopias can be created on a human scale? That is the question and I don't have an answer.

HUO: *Do you have any unrealized projects? Are there projects that have been too big or too small to be realized? Projects that have been censored, projects that have been too cheap or too costly to realize, projects which you had forgotten about? What are your unbuilt roads?*

DN: Until now, when I started working on each of these films, I didn't know if I'd ever realize them. I didn't know the costs of working in this medium. I didn't know how much time it would take to realize my projects. I've never had any big plans that would be beyond my control, projects that I can't do by myself or with the help of my friends. So I don't know if I have any unrealized projects. Maybe there are some ideas that I will pursue one day, but I didn't and I still don't know when and how to do that.

HUO: *That's a very anti-monumental approach to art, leading us to the insert in the local paper yesterday, which is a*

newspaper sculpture about there no longer being a need for monuments. Could you tell me a little more about this?

DN: Well, it's part of the text from the film. The character in the film gives a long monologue in which he talks of the importance of a monument, and then he says that there is no need for a monument itself. The process, how it is done, the story behind it and its circumstances are of importance: everything around the monument is of significance, except the monument itself. And that's interesting in relation to film in general. It's not documenting the story or filming the story you have, it's documenting the process of how you deal with it. That is the monument, not the object itself.

HUO: *In relation to what is not there, you told me a fabulous story about Herzog...*

DN: That's probably the answer to your earlier question about filmmakers who have been important for me. I was really amazed by his personality when I had a chance to meet him. I don't know how many films he has made, but it could well be over fifty. It was just a small remark about a kiss that first appeared in his latest film. When you filmed half a hundred films and a lot of them are about male/female relations, and when you are more than sixty years old, that gives something very special in terms of understanding time. Even a film itself has a temporal quality. But the director as an artist was above it, which is really great when considered alongside the interrelationships of everything that you do. And that is true not only of Herzog but of Abbas Kiarostami, when characters from one film appear in another, and stories cross over too. That's a very important form of understanding that works against monumentality. Things appear and disappear in time: the idea of duration, even of a very long film, is very important. It leads to an understanding of the existence of parallel times. Film is an illusion of a certain time. In the space of two hours you can see a saga that spans

several years. Yes, an understanding of parallel timescales within the medium is important for my work.

HUO: *Slowness seems to be becoming very sexy at the moment, very fashionable. Architects and all kinds of practitioners are preoccupied with slowness. With artists I get the impression that there is more an emphasis on duration than on slowness. We are obviously at a moment of the homogenizing forces of globalization, though not only in terms of space but also in terms of time. There seems to be a certain resistance among artists to that — Pistoletto said he has a ten-year project, resisting some of the temporal constraints often placed upon artists. I was wondering if you could talk a little about these issues of temporality, duration, and slowness?*

DN: Either in New York or in Vilnius, if you say that someone is slow, you are saying that he is kind of stupid! [laughs] It's very important for any artist not to be frightened by duration. There are going to be different paces during different phases of your life, and it is this that leads to a sense of understanding your motivation and the work that you are making. It is important for artists.

HUO: *It's a resistance to fragmentation.*

DN: It strikes me as something significant. ■

Hans Ulrich Obrist is a critic and curator based in Paris.

Deimantas Narkevicius was born in 1964 in Utena, (Lithuania). He lives and works in Vilnius. Selected solo shows: 2003: FRAC des Pays de la Loire; Zacheta, Warsaw (with Aidias Bareikis); 2002: Münchner Kunstverein, Munich; & gb agency, Paris; 2001: Jan Mot, Bruxelles; 49th Venice Biennale; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; 2000: Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius. Selected group shows: 2003: *Deplacements*, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris; 50th Venice Biennale; *Opening*, Köln Kunstverein, Cologne; 2002: *Die Aufgabe der Zeit*, Kunstverein, Munster; *Museum in Progress*, Continua, San Gimignano (Italy); *Mare Balticum*, National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen; *The 8th Baltic Triennial of International Art*, Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius; 2001: *Ausgeträumt*, Secession, Vienna; *Wonder world*, Kleines Helmhaus, Zürich; *Oh Europe*, The Netherland Foto Instituut, Rotterdam; 2000: *Central Station*, Milch Gallery, London.