

A Conversation between Ilaria Gianni and Jani Ruscica

I.G. We don't know each other personally and it's always odd to meet someone virtually. I had the chance to see your works and read some texts but it's never the same as a studio visit and meeting live: having the chance to see what books accompany your researches, which films lie on your shelves, what cut-outs are pinned on your walls, what objects surround your working space. I like spending time with artists in their studio as I feel the first authentic connection with a human side mirrored in the investigations carried out by an artistic practice. The environment of a studio - and sometimes of a simple desktop - inspire questions and drive me further in the artists' research. Considering a real encounter is not possible at the moment, I was wondering if, as a first step, you could conduct me through your studio.

J.R. I'd be glad to give you a tour of my studio.

I've had the space for a fairly short amount of time, so it is still very bare. I think it is important to consider the location of the studio. It's situated in a solitary building on a little island off the tip of Central Helsinki, a 5 minutes boat ride away from the city. That creates a very particular atmosphere, the sea is very present as is solitude and isolation, even though there is a total of about 20 artist studios in the building.

As you enter the 30 square meter space, you'll first encounter on your left an old book cabinet.

The contents of that cabinet are still rather random and sparse: a selection of Frieze, Mousse and Kaleidoscope magazines, monographs by Ed Atkins and Paul Chan, as well as books about drawings by Richard Serra and Claes Oldenburg among others.

A few DVDs: a boxed set of Fellini films: 'Ginger e Fred', 'E la nave va' and 'Prova d'orchestra'. The last easily being one of my favorite films of all times... Another box set of films, by Huillet and Straub, including 'Sicilia!', 'Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach' and 'Une Visite au Louvre'.

A framed photograph of my mother, who sadly passed away this spring.

Random sheet music. 'Le Chinois' by Couperin among others.

Lots of folders, each containing material for specific film projects of mine. Also folders of newspaper clippings, simply about things which I thought were interesting over the years. And then lots of catalogues of past shows I've been in.

As you make your way towards one of the windows, you'll find a table top lined against the wall. On that lies work completed for my current project *Conversation in Pieces*. To be more specific, pieces of Icelandic sheep skin, a wig and a silicone mask made in the likeness of Wilma, a Neanderthal female recreated by National Geographic magazine based on fossil findings and DNA samples.

On the wall from one window to the next, you can find some pinned sketches. A collection of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic fonts collected for an upcoming publication titled 'Appendix' introducing my current *Conversation in Pieces* project. As well as some "research" clippings of imaginative musical instruments that have appeared in animated films. Again as part of my current project, these are to be made into real playable instruments.

Then you'll encounter my desk. Nothing interesting there unfortunately... my laptop, printer and lots of different papers. That's the admin part of my work, well I guess also creative work like research and editing is bound to the desk.

From the desk you move on to the sofa, and my "kitchen" area, with a fridge and coffee machine, fairly basic. To keep me company there are also several plants.

I.G. Theatre, music, cinema, visual art, science, and a confrontation with the present, seem to converge in your studio space: a manifestation of your mindscape which then leads to the accomplishment of your works. How do your associations build up and how do you direct the gaze of the spectator when dealing with your videos?

J.R. I'm a slow burner, so some thoughts can linger on for years and years, and find a suitable avenue in the most unexpected of contexts. Ideally I'd like to think of my practice as long distance running, I guess that's also why temporal layers seem to be repeatedly playing a significant part in the associative chains that manifest themselves in my works.

It feels as if many ideas are yet at an introductory level, to be continued... Just as self-reflexivity is a corner stone of my thinking, so seems to be a constant awareness of the "prismatic" nature of the present tense.

I.G. When watching *Screen Test (for a living sculpture)* (2012), I was particularly attracted by the fact that I felt as being the subject of the protagonist's vision rather than the screen being the object of my sight. It struck me as it altered the patronizing logic between artwork and spectator. This made me go back to a series of recent researches on the medium of sculpture I've been focusing on, in which I've been questioning the relationship between gaze and object, and its position in the narrative that takes place. When we look at a figurative sculpture the sculpture often looks back at us with its autonomous life. We are overwhelmed with its potential tale and at the same time inscribe our own history to it. Today, sculptures becomes ever more often images and these same images - especially when reproduced on film - take upon themselves a new form. We have the chance to look at sculpture from another point of view, and film itself, in some cases, transfigures in a sculptural work. This gives us the awareness of how perception is constantly evolving. In *Screen Test (for a living sculpture)* the living sculpture itself embeds all these aspects and opens up not only a new vision of the medium but also a new way of creating consciousness. Can you tell us your intentions?

J.R. With *Screen Test (for a living sculpture)* it is important to take into account the original context for which the piece was commissioned: television. As you might already know the piece was a joint commission between MoMA PS1, Creative Time and MTV global, in an attempt to revive the series *Art Breaks*, a legendary series of short artist film commissions that aired on Music Television during commercial breaks back in the eighties. The original commissions included films by Andy Warhol, Jean Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Richard Prince among others.

The format set a certain amount of restrictions, like duration, which was to be a maximum of 23 seconds. For the installation or gallery version I actually wanted to use the full takes, which were about a minute long each. Having always made longer, multi part, multi layered works in the past, I invited Finnish artist Sini Pelkki to collaborate on the piece with me, as I found the short format challenging to say the least...

Sini's work has often dealt with brevity, a push and pull between movement and stasis.

The crowded, visually and aurally overstimulating format of MTV pushed us towards the antithesis of it's visual vocabulary and I guess this leads us to your observation of the video being able to flip the traditional, somewhat patronizing logic between subject and object. Our aim was to interrupt the overflow of images, the fast edits etc. with an image that was self assured and direct, who's gaze was explicitly directed at the viewer, as if to observe you, or at least (unassumingly of course) demand your attention. Also the lack of sound or any action apart from the act of the living sculpture performing stillness directs all the focus on the gaze itself, on this brief and fleeting, momentary exchange between the viewer and the performer. You blink and it's gone.

The act of performing became central to the work, thus the undoing of the performative act gained importance as well. It is in this anticlimax of sorts that the piece gains it's tension. Stasis breaks into movement, rigid form into a free, fluid form. I think, there lies a potentially interesting analogy to the languages of sculpture itself.

Despite it's apparent simplicity, *Screen Test* pulls into multiple directions, which is due to the tension that is created between the different mediums it tries to accommodate and the multiple discourses this opens up. I guess the sculptural concerns are the ones accentuated once the piece is show in an installation format. Inevitably space creates certain demands, where form, materiality and the sheer weight of the image, it's physical presence gain precedence over the works concerns with popular media, performance or even cinema.

I.G. How was *Screen Test* staged? Was there a script to the performance translated in film?

J.R. The piece was very carefully staged, the poses meticulously arranged, all with the sole purpose of maintaining a stillness that was as perfect as possible. After the very first take we instantly realized that the undoing of the performance, that moment of uncertainty and intimacy, that we had accidentally captured was far more interesting than anything we had originally planned to shoot. We had been so stubbornly set to make an image that was moving, yet totally still, with no edits, no camera movement, no action, and no sound.

I have always been fascinated by some kind of outtakes, or more precisely by those moments when a performance for the camera ends, magical moments documenting the undoing of a character. The vulnerability and fragility that emanates from a performer in those few seconds is unique, and somehow that became the core, the heart of this piece.

I.G. How do you usually treat performance in relation to video? The instance of the 'here and now', its indistinct shape within remembrance typical of the performative act caught on tape in some way loses its authenticity and the action falls out of the categories art has set up for it. How do the evanescence of performance and the endurance of film interact in your practice?

J.R. I have never made work, which is a documentation of performance. The performances have always been explicitly directed at the camera, made for film, a different medium altogether. The camera in my work is always very self aware, there is never a pretence of it not being there. Most of the times tracks, film equipment etc. are within the shot. The same logic applies also for *Screen Test (for a living sculpture)*. As its title already suggests, the piece exists only through the lens of the camera.

I respect and cherish the evanescence of performance. Its transience is what makes it so special. Actually the few works of mine that have been exclusively created as live performances, have no documentation at all in moving image or sound. I simply have a few photographs and the possibility of restaging them or revisiting them in a new version altogether in another time and place.

I.G. Very obviously the same work set in different contexts assumes a new significance and recounts a different nuance of intention. Videos in some way embed multiple narrative and visual potentials. As in life, their place and consequent definition changes constantly. How much is this element important in the building of content and in the result of presentation of your works? How do you feel when your films occupy each time a diverse frame and interpretation?

J.R. That's what fuels ones work, the excitement of it never being finished in a way. There is no fixed result, no finality, even ones own reading of ones own work is in a constant state of flux. The older pieces seem to realign themselves with every new addition to the family.

Time changes works. It is always so interesting to see older works revisited, relocated in a new context or suddenly see them partake in a new discourse. I wish it happened more actually. Perhaps in the future, once there is a truly extensive back catalogue of work, this kind of circular motion will be more evident. I see this pattern already emerging now, even with a relatively short practice, thoughts that were on the foreground 15 years ago as a first year student at Chelsea College of Art seem to be re-emerging, considerably mutated of course, but nonetheless the same at their core.

I.G. So how has the past been influencing the future? Can you briefly tell us a bit about your present and upcoming researches?

J.R. I'm working on several new pieces, all under the title of *Conversation in Pieces*. Like a sprawling inconclusive conversation it is an ensemble of film, live performances, musical compositions, text works and sculptural objects.

The project aims at re- or even misinterpreting a set of images retaining cultural, historical, scientific or political charge. Within the framework of my project these images are turned into tangible objects and subjected to a multiplicity of readings and performative actions, thus forced to negotiate a new position for themselves within our physical world. They are forced to deal with gravity, weight, volume, movement, language, sound, emotion etc.

The imaginary musical instruments I mentioned earlier, as well as Neanderthal Wilma, are a few of the images I am dealing with. I hope that once freed of their original, somewhat restraining contexts, a new play can begin. One that sets out to explore the creative potential of these conversation pieces, these oddly unresolved or even problematic images become objects that retain the potential for multiple readings. I guess the whole endeavour is a rather Pirandello-esque quest for several new authors.

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