



Delo – Pogledi, Slovenian weekly periodical about art and culture, 12/21/2015

Nataša Prosenc Stearns, Artist and Filmmaker

Body in the Center of Creativity

By Vesna Teržan

Slovenian artist and filmmaker Nataša Prosenc Stearns has been living in California for 17 years. Her works have been shown at international galleries, museums and festivals since the mid nineties.

The artist is creatively blurring the borders of figurative and abstract expressions and is challenging the conventions of different genres.

In 2001 Nataša received the Prešeren Fund Award, the Slovenian National Award for Great Achievement in Art for her video installation *Gladiators*, which was presented at the Slovene pavilion of the 48th Venice Biennale.

Currently her work is on view at Vžigalica Gallery in Ljubljana. The exhibition, which features Nataša's video installation along with videos by Jasna Hribernik, is organized by the Slovenian Center for Contemporary Art and is part of the Station DIVA program.

Question: Your creative field is very wide, from gallery installations to feature films. It looks like you are a person who needs a wide playground and a lot of freedom.

Answer: Yes. I'm attracted to both extremes and to everything in between since the beginning of my career. It is the idea, which dictates the genre and the structure of the

piece. Sometimes it requires an experimental approach; sometimes the idea or the concept commands a narrative strategy. I've often been asked when do I plan on deciding to be an artist or a filmmaker. But for me the world of moving images is only one, so I will always be jumping from one genre to another and "trespassing" them. Also the merging and blurring of the borders between categories has become an excepted practice. Many accomplished contemporary creators like Miranda July, Pipilotti Rist or Steve McQueen, are all artists and filmmakers at the same time.

Question: Where and when did your "love at first site" with moving images happen?

Answer: During my studies at the Academy of Fine Arts there was a small class about video art, which was not required, but I took it anyway. We only had one camera. My schoolmates say that I took that camera and wouldn't let anyone else close. This story is a slight exaggeration, but since that moment I have been obsessed with moving images and have been continuously creating in this medium. If there were no cameras, I would be working on storyboards. With time I realized that for me moving images are the most attractive medium for creative expression because of their kinetic nature, which corresponds directly to constant motion and changes of all things, with a pulse of everything alive.

Question: What is your creative process? Does material ever "escape" and creates its own story?

Answer: The fact that work in a certain stage of the artistic development suddenly adopts its own independent life, is immanent to any creative process. At a certain moment the process starts accelerating, it starts producing its own energy and language. I have to be in tune with this language and I have to listen to it and articulate it. I believe that this plunge into the unknown, which happens when an idea or a concept meets the energy generated by the process of its realization, is a requirement for a birth of any work of art.

Question: How important is the length of your videos and films?

Answer: Different ideas, different projects require different lengths. I'm also taking the spectator's time in consideration. I usually present the works without a narrative structure as video loops, which are "infinite" moving images without a beginning or an end. It is up to the viewers to decide for how long they will watch a video. Longer pieces call for a narrative approach, which engages the viewer beyond the power of images themselves. The story does not have to be a classical 3-act narrative at all, but any progressive development of the subject.

Question: You exhibited at the Venice Biennale this year...

Answer: My videos were presented as part of the exhibition *We Must Risk Delight, 20 Artist From Los Angeles* organized by bardoLA. The curator Elizabeta Betinski first chose my video object *Wishing Well*, which is an older piece. But our exhibition space Magazzino del Sale 3 required additional engagement, so I created a new video *Night Spring*, which is an autonomous piece, but it is in a conceptual dialogue with the *Wishing Well*. The current exhibition in the Vžigalica Gallery includes both pieces from the Biennale, but the experience of the show is new because of the particularities of the space.

Question: What is today's role of video art?

Answer: Digital technology allows for anyone who has a cell phone to record their own video. This is great, but the amount of works out there is enormous and unmanageable. Video art often cannot be separated from the computer art and Internet art. Using a variety of applications, however, the role of authorship and artist in general somewhat decreases. Many projects remain at the level of tricks, technological attractions and gimmicks. But defining video art was problematic from the very beginning. It was most widely adopted to express social, political and feminist messages, but video art never in fact became a purified genre. As soon as it became an important part of contemporary art, the categories of different art practices started to blend. So video art has become part of not only art installations, but also music performances, theater shows, literary and other projects. For me the most interesting and influential video artists are for example Shirin Neshat, Bill Viola and Garry Hill, who all have developed a specific language within the media and thus clearly anchored it in the framework of art.

Question: Can you be counted among socially critical artists?

Answer: It depends on how one understands social criticism. My work is not illustrative or literal, but it does grow out of the world that surrounds me and informs me. For example, my videos *Innocence Dissolved* and *White Gold* are about consumerism and alienation, my feature film *Souvenir* deals with consequences of colonialism in the Western world, the video *Red Carpet* is about the role of women in the film industry, the short film *Mother for Dinner* addresses our obsession with unattainable physical perfection, and so on.

But the center of my work has always been human body. Today, when various devices and gadgets tend to cast out humans, I find it even more important to turn the camera towards our bodies. Our technology has clearly surpassed us, but our humanity has not changed much. Therefore, the anxieties and alienation caused by our non-stop engagement with the non-physical and body-less cyber space. Technology robs us of our pleasures, pains, and emotions. I believe that our bodies hide many unrealized hidden potentials, but we can only ascertain them if our engagement turns inwards into the mystery of our physical existence, instead of outwards, into a seemingly safe virtual environment. I am convinced that answers to a number of contemporary existential questions are hidden precisely in the human body. By putting it in the focus of my creative process, I strive for the survival of authentic, experiential and mysterious.

Question: After studying art in Ljubljana you received a Fulbright Grant and completed the postgraduate studies at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles. What was the influence of the school on your work and what was the impact of the city?

Answer: CalArts was my introduction, my entrance to the US and to Los Angeles in particular. The city immediately charmed me by its light, by its spaciousness and its variety of cultures. This was the time of my transition from one culture to another and of hands-on creativity. A wide variety of film and video technology, which was not as accessible then as it is today, was suddenly available to me. By mastering all the levels of film and video production I attained a kind of creative freedom, especially in the extremely specialized system of film industry.

Question: And where do you feel at home?

Answer: On the plane! (laugh) During my studies, I realized that I want to stay in the US, but this decision put me in a personal distress. I always miss Slovenia a little, so I keep visiting as often as I can. I had become an “amphibian”, a person with two cultures, with two often incomparable and mutually untranslatable lives. Regardless the fact that I have been living in L.A. for 17 years, I’m still an “alien.” But it is also true that to be a foreigner in Los Angeles and in most of the big US cities, it is something completely normal. Almost every other person here is an immigrant. On top of that, Los Angeles seems like a big hotel, the city of constant transition, to which I become accustomed to over the years.

Otherwise, I think it depends on the character of each individual: some respond to smaller environments, which may be less demanding in terms of survival, while others prefer larger, more cosmopolitan places, offering more possibilities for self-realization, but also more obstacles and challenges. For me the most important thing is to be able to create work I believe in, being on this or on the other side of the ocean.