

22 ways - Jani Ruscica

by Maria Hirvi-Ijäs

The existence of Jani Ruscica's works can be seen as being linked to two different registers of activity. The first is the goal of disrupting habitual ways of thinking and reinterpreting various phenomena, the second is the associative chaining together of these interpretations from one work to another. The works thus constitute rhythmic, conceptual and imaginary cycles, in which the viewer is invited to join. In recent years, their themes and subject matter have been linked to human evolution, to ideas about the end of the world, and to depictions of traditional tourist destinations and sites as part of the history of visual and narrative culture.

As the possible structures of these works we can think of movements, repetitions, compositions, spatial solutions, concrete places, fragmentary tales and dialogical forms. These are frequently recorded on moving-image media and exhibited as composite works in which a video performance is augmented by objects, photographs and texts. The subject matter and the idea push Ruscica to seek out the most appropriate techniques, combinations and modes of presentation.

The somewhat abstract working method often starts from concrete, tangible situations and events. In his latest solo exhibition, *Conversation in Pieces*, at Galerie Anhava in Helsinki, Ruscica's point of departure was the tourist picture postcards produced by the company of Underwood & Underwood at the start of the 20th century. These showed the world's sights and landmarks, which could be seen in three dimensions with the aid of a viewing device called a stereoscope. In the exhibition, constructed around this technology of seeing developed by the early entertainment industry was the theme of three-dimensionality, of dialogue, and of imaginary representations of real places. On show as the key work was a large video projection, *10 Minute Display of Unparalleled Grandeur*, in which a woman looking at pictures with a stereoscope was put in a costume and setting from the beginning of the century. This viewing event was accompanied by an orchestra, which imitated sounds from nature so as to give the subjects of the tourist postcards an even more realistic impact. In the exhibition an interesting connection also arose between a virtually recorded image of Mount Rushmore taken visually to the verge of disintegration and a digital 3D model of a foghorn building. Our mental images of the time and place were condensed into technologies of viewing, displaying and communicating.

An important factor and background influence in Ruscica's composite works is his relationship with music and sound worlds, which runs through his entire oeuvre. Before switching to the visual arts, he intended to train as a professional musician, his instrument being the oboe. His musical studies have left their mark in the characteristic tone of his work, in artistic knowledge, in his system of signs, and in his structures. The significance of music as an influence, as an awakener of mental images, and as a contributor of information and emotions, often alternates with language, words and literary fragments as complements to the visual components.

Ruscica got his foundational artistic education in sculpture at Chelsea College of Art and Design in London. Spatiality and the conception of three-dimensional forms served as the starting point for the internal structures of the works, as well as being used in the presentation of coherent exhibitions and as a means of representation. Spatiality is also

present as an important contentual component, particularly in the works that are associated in various ways with the discourse of tourism. *Travelogue* from 2010 combined literary descriptions and fragments of experiences of the city of London with panning the camera in the empty space intended for the viewing event. At the same time as established notions of London were dismantled, space was left for each individual's own imagination of the place.

In the composite work *Scene Shifts, in Six Movements* from 2011 the starting point was the amalgamation of six place and six stories. Here the viewer is offered a possibly true tale about the Egyptian way of thinking of land as a feminine figure or about the neutral city in the Potsdam film industry's film-set landscape as being alternatively Paris or Rome. The human relationship with places, with mental images of places, and the idea of constructions of places are unravelled in Ruscica's works as narratives, visualities, and spatial interpretations. This interest in place and in the meaning of cultural interpretations of it gets its own distinctive tone from Ruscica's own Finnish-Italian background. Shifting between cultures and languages has become a natural way of observing interconnected issues, phenomena and conceptual connections.

The associative nature of artistic thinking, aided by imagination and ambiguity, has given Ruscica's production the form of a series of fictions about fictions. He himself talks about the concept of "misinterpretation" as a fruitful form of misunderstanding, of mistake making, that surpasses interpretation. Fiction makes possible an extension of information, while at the same time calling the facts into question. One starting point for a future project is a scientific experiment aimed at getting back to the very beginning of human history, to the idea that we could know something about a Neanderthal who lived 43,000 years ago. Aided by artists, researchers have produced a figure called Wilma, who Ruscica is to re-interpret and incorporate into the various layers of a forthcoming set of works.

Even though a Brechtian *Verfremdung* effect has often been seen as giving Ruscica's works their underlying tone, it has also been said of them that the strategy of revealing what is hidden does not necessarily create distance. Instead, the dismantling movement is a way of amplifying the diverse possibilities of reality.