

Maxine Kopsa on Jani Ruscica

On Pulling the Viewer

Someone once told me about a short animation in which the protagonist, fiddling in front of the bathroom mirror, picks at the odd hairs of his beard. He finds a good one, partially ingrown, and pulls. And pulls and pulls while, after minutes of constant yanking, this one impossibly long hair twists around his body and envelops him almost completely. Then, all of a sudden, he reaches the follicle and – pop – the hair is deliciously freed.

I thought of this last night while I was pulling the hairs out of the shower drain. The same peculiar (sick?) feeling of satisfaction can arise, I think, from both these domestic activities: plucking at ingrown hairs and wrenching the seemingly incessant clumps out of your shower drain. With each little tug you get closer to the cleansed objective but at the same time you don't want it to end – you want the promise of fulfilment to go on and on. Different from the odd facial hair, the hairs found in drains carry more 'abjectional' worth, thanks not only to their definitive separation from the human body but also to their altered state – tucked away beneath the shower floor they manage to become an inexplicably organic grey mass. Amazingly vile.

You'll be asking yourselves now why I mention drain hairs here and what they could possibly have to do with Jani Ruscica's work. Of course I have my reasons. But I think more importantly than any rational argumentation, I should admit that while crouched over the drain not thinking of anything but the tasty task at hand, Ruscica popped into my thoughts, unannounced. I believe an uninvited guest is often the best kind so shaking its unsolicited hand I followed my intuition and can sum up its visit in two words: Organic Satisfaction. I don't have to stick to only two words, though, I can use a whole murky sentence: Jani Ruscica's films exercise a power to pull you in, lock you – seduce you – into watching and, like with a flowing, undulating, gripping song, or an incredibly long ingrown hair, you hope they won't end.

A young girl carefully traces a white chalk line across the concrete floor of a large, empty enclosed space. She is spot lit and the camera follows at close range, first her hand and the piece of chalk and then pans out to include her whole figure. 'This version begins here', she says in Finnish and looks up at the camera, at us. 'This line represents the biological timeline of the universe.' 'It's exact. Absolute.' She is barefoot and wearing white pants, a chequered blouse, her blond hair is held back by one barrette. She never stops tracing. The line gets longer, the camera pans out and the spot light allows for a wider circle. She's still drawing the line, crouched over, moving slowly step by step away from us when she says: 'There, we just broke 3 million years.' A few centimetres later, her head still bowed down, she tells us she is born 'here' on 22 April 1991 on Crete. And then she reaches the back rim of the spotlight, she stands up to face us: 'And this is now.' Cut.

Evolutions (2008) is an 18-minute single channel video work comprising seven stories. Seven encounters with young people between the ages of 12 and 19 who, each, in turn, lead the viewer as a guide would, pulling him slowly through time. Intimately. The setting is always similar. Always the empty space, theatrically lit, spots flashing on props depicting parts of the story. Ilmari's for example starts off with him dexterously playing a video game. The time is 12.46 and 10 minutes ago he broke his own record, he boasts. We follow him into an adjoining space, he continues speaking with the camera (us) close behind him, saying, in present tense that he is 6 and that he receives the book *Our Globe*, which 'captivates' him. And, he adds, his sister is born, which is 'amazing'. He turns and motions us to look to his right, which we do, or the camera does, to where his sister (presumably about 5 years old) sits in a red dress cross-legged on the black floor, brightly lit from above, reading a picture book. She doesn't look up for she is a part of the set, she is part of Ilmari's story. Suddenly the lights go off, the screen goes dark and for a second we are left alone, until, close-up facing us, our narrator reappears. 'I'm now 4 and I've learned how to read', he informs us without skipping a beat. 'The pictures I've chosen there have helped me to grasp the galaxy.' 'There' is, we see, 'his room', pictured here as another prop: a bed with a skeleton head patterned duvet, strewn with books full of images of the galaxy and the theory of evolution. 'That's enough', he soon tells the camera and we leave the bedroom. Still walking forward, moving backwards in time, he mentions that 'now' is when a meteorite hit the Gulf of Mexico and that the dinosaurs died out 'here', and a few seconds (steps) later, that 'this' is the birth of the universe. For the first time we are given a glimpse of the floor: at our narrator's feet we see we have come to the end of the chalk line once again, to the beginning of it all, to when it was 'all dark'. Ilmari looks off screen and yells out: 'Would you turn off the lights'.

Galaxies, universes, dinosaurs, meteorites, little sisters, books, and video games. We are moving here amidst the basics, the fundamentals of life. Amidst it ALL, really, not only in terms of the inconceivably BIG and BEYOND – 'our' solar system – but amidst the make-up of the smaller and the daily: social connections, human behaviour, personal mythologies.

In 1977 Charles and Ray Eames made a film called *Powers of Ten* for IBM, when IBM must have seemed like a potential key to the futuristic future. What you see in this 10 minute film is a portrait of the relative size of things in the universe. From the close-up of a detail of a couple having a picnic in a park, the camera moves steadily upwards to show the park, the city, the country, the continent, the earth up, up, up past stars and planets and galaxies to, ultimately, 10 to the power of 24 or 100 million light years away (approximately halfway into the film). Pure darkness. Nothing? After 'resting' there suspended momentarily like a thrown ball at its maximum height, the camera begins to redescend, more quickly now, past the same galaxies, planets, stars, eventually returning to the same park and the same blanket and the same reclining couple. Now, though, the journey continues to zoom in past the details of their lunch onto and into the man's hand as it lies across his chest. At 10^{-1} we enter the human body getting an abject close-up of his skin's lines, his pores, at 10^{-5} , his cells, and finally after leaving his molecular DNA string and finally his carbon nucleus 10^{-16} or 0.000001 Angstroms behind, we reach, again,

pure darkness: the end, or as we are of course meant to assume: the beginning?

Interestingly, each step in the power of ten, back and forth, is demarcated by a graphically illustrated white rectangle, not unlike the chalk line our youngsters were drawing on the floor of Ruscica's set.

'Unfolding' we learn in the last credits of *Evolutions*, is another term for 'evolution'. And unfold Ruscica's work certainly does, accurately collapsing time onto itself, folding it in and out like an accordion, seven times over, elegantly overlapping, carefully cross-referencing. But *Evolutions* might also have been called 'Cosmologies'. For cosmology as the 'metaphysical study of the origin and nature of the universe' and its related phrases (Hindu cosmology, plasma cosmology, Buddhist cosmology, physical cosmology, Atacama cosmology, supernova cosmology, metaphysical cosmology, Iroquois cosmology) incorporates the machinations of belief systems in its 'unfolding'. While looking for and at the overall structure of the physical universe, cosmology is both specific and grand. It covers the beginnings of the universe – it covers IT ALL – and allows man to play but one of the many significant roles.

Ruscica, you could boldly and somewhat audaciously say, is fascinated by Man and his World. More specifically, you could say he is interested in location, in how one defines one's location, one's placement in the world, and how this definition changes – continuously, if necessary – according to personal, cultural or even scientific factors.

Batbox/Beatbox (2008) is a two part video work, which joins and compares bat and human habitats. Part one, *Batbox, Take One*, takes place in a dark cave in England, where small bats are being scientifically scrutinized by a young chiroptologist. We watch as he carefully weighs, pulls, prods, measures and categorizes various species. He speaks to himself or to us as he works. In the next scene we are out of the cave. As though from the bat's viewpoint, we are in a dark forest, trees, shrubs and ground lit now and again by the strong beam of a flashlight. We hear the shrill squeaks of bats all around, testing, measuring. As the viewer you realize that this is their habitat, this is their location and this is them in the midst of defining it.

Part two is called *Beatbox, Alternate Take*. Now, in New York City instead of the woodlands of Dorset, the incredibly charming spoken word artist D'Janau Morales a.k.a. Vocab works together with beatboxers Kid Lucky and Shockwave to mirror the bats' echolocation – first in words, as a poem, and then in pure sound. *Beatbox* opens with Vocab, on a sunny city street, telling us, the camera, close-up, her story. She starts telling about the subway, about the rhythm and the times of the subways, of the people waiting on the platforms. Of their 'Heads bobbing in....and.....out.' Of the 'visual poetry with their headbobbing'. Her voice is like syrup, she moves to the beat as she talks (sings? rhymes?) she smiles, she pauses, she lengthens a word, stops short on a K, draws out an M. And while 'they' watch the commuters on the train, she says, they 'like to look the other way,

because [they] have all the time in the world.' 'All the beats to write a movie to.' Just like the bats can use sound as a tool to locate themselves, they 'read the wrinkle lines on people's faces [instead of the paper] to tell [them] what's really happening'. Vocab finishes her poem and we're launched into the next scene, into the dark of what looks like a basketball court at night. Maybe three (or more) beatboxers, on occasion lit by the strong beam of a flashlight, sometimes alone, sometimes standing together, mimic the sound of the bats' echo. Base beats, shrill long shrieks, short yelps and the swoosh of the bats' wings. Like the bat, they test the geography of their environment, measure the distance between the metal fence and the first tree branch, the concrete cracks on the ground and the parked car. It's all a relation to habitat. It's all a matter of placement and perspective.

Batbox/Beatbox, like *Evolutions*, like all of Ruscica's films, is meticulous in both image and sound. This portrayal of both the bat and the human claiming their social, natural position is lusciously heaving with spectacular close-ups of bat wings and rhyming beatboxing faces and bodies, with elegant shots of bats in mid-flight and people moving to their own rhythms. And always, always sharp, scrupulously incisive sound.

'Eventually, everything connects', Charles Eames said and to pay due honour, not only to him, but to Ruscica, I should return for a second to the long, now perhaps lost, ingrown hair. That grey mass coming back out the other way of the drain or the endless ingrown hair, both so satisfyingly organic, both so repulsively attractive, are *base* – 'base' in a Georges Bataille kind of way, base in terms of 'base materialism'. The stuff of matter and intuitive thought. Unquestionably part of us and yet continuously denied proper membership into the acceptably social, this is – Ruscica's films are – Man and his World, in broad, sweeping terms. Where the hair meets the hand that tugs it there rests the connection of the social and the natural. We navigate in the world with words, with sounds, through the making of diagrams and through the tugging at unwanted-wanted hairs. Ruscica knows this and shows us the beautiful underbelly of human cosmology.

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