

## **Kari Yli-Annala on Jani Ruscica**

### **About the Creation of Worlds**

I am about to meet Jani Ruscica at his exhibition at the Kluuvi Gallery managed by the Helsinki City Art Museum. Before he shows up, I drift into a conversation with a Finnish artist-politician who is greatly impressed by the works at the exhibition. When the artist arrives, my partner in conversation presents a hypothetical question whether the artist could make a similar personal profile of her as well. I am not surprised at the question. Ruscica's works are often unobjectionably empowering in a certain way that naturally brings out the forces of change which open out from the potential of the subjects portrayed. They are all about community, the collectivity of things and the ethos of collectivity itself. These are also themes for politics, where a connection to people and solutions to collective questions are commonly sought.

### **Black box**

*Evolutions* (2008, 16mm film), made in the form of a short film and projected on a screen in a gallery space, is a work drawing on the methods of installation, experimental theatre and dialogical art in which young people between the ages of 12 and 19 speak of their worldviews, the birth of the universe, evolution and life. The monologues Ruscica has written for the work are based on a dialogue born with the young people in interviews. The work has been filmed in a 'black box' of an empty studio space.

The phenomenal interaction between darkness and light is present in the work's reduced mise-en-scène where the set design and the direction have been focused to underscore the form of exhibition, which carries elements of theatre and installation. 'In a studio everything can be changed', says Ruscica. All in all, teenage is a time when people build their own relationship to the world, and their own place and perspective in it. In the *Microcosm* series of photographs (2008, c-prints), a companion piece to *Evolutions*, the young people are featured in their own rooms, amidst their own 'microcosms'. The exhibition also includes the digital book *55 Variations on Origin* (2008, 3D animation), which presents 55 myths on how the world was born.

### **Memory of the world and the individual**

*Evolutions* begins with a white chalk line, which a girl by the name of Erofilia draws on the floor of an empty studio. As the girl places on the line the history of the universe and events in her own life, I am reminded of the moment in Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958, 35 mm) when Kim Novak sets her finger on the spiraled cross-section of a sequoia tree, and a corresponding moment in Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962, 35 mm), a poetic science fiction 'photo novel' (photo-roman) told through still photos where the same scene is reenacted at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. These films, like Ruscica's works, are about the world's own memory which extends beyond all cultural memory and, on the other hand, the subjective, personal memory of an individual.

Ruscica studied the world of collectivity and myths already in his three-part projected installation *Contrapuntal* (Kontrapunkti, 2005). In the first part of the work, *Sawdust Theme* (2005, 16mm film), a man who could very well have stepped out of a piece of Finnish folklore, plays a saw in the middle of the forest, which has been cropped as a kind of ecosystem of small creatures, fable-like along the lines of Arne Sucksdorff's experimental nature documentaries. Some more mundane figures appear on the path built into the forest: pole-walkers, representing a more recent evolutionary stage.

In *Fluctuation theme* (2005, 16mm) the middle part of *Contrapuntal*, a transition takes place into a 'Smithsonian' non-place, a huge construction site where a big choir walks and sings. Throughout the history of theatre the choir has often been assigned the role of witness and collective narrator. In the closing shots personal gazes and gestures start to separate from the collectivity of the choir, perhaps to comment on the history of civilizations. In the final part, *Kiwano's Theme* (2005, DVcam) street musician Juha Kiwano plays his pots and pans as kind of master of ceremonies, producing what feels like timeless urban folk music. Buskers are probably as global an urban phenomenon as, for example, graffiti artists.

### **Echoes and songs**

The street music of the younger generation is vividly present in the experimental short film *Beatbox, Alternate Take* (2007, 16mm film), which, interestingly pairs up with *Batbox, Take One* (2007, DVcam), presented also in the form of an installation. Featured in *Beatbox* are Vocab, a spoken word artist from New York, and the beatbox artists Kid Lucky and Shockwave who bodily produce rhythms and effects that sound like a drum machine. The urban subculture presents itself as an echo sounder of the various scenes beyond the watchful spotlights of authorities and high culture. The latter work, in turn, documents the studies of bioacoustics researcher Jon Flanders at the University of Bristol, applying a device called the 'batbox', which converts the acoustic frequencies of bat sounds into a form that the human ear can detect.

The more distant history conveyed by the Beatbox culture is linked to the notion that humans have for a long time already used their bodies and voices like animals to imitate the world in order to transfer knowledge and experiences. We have only distanced song into a sphere of its own and developed the flowery language of love as its content. The bat sounds notated by musician Aarne Riikonen for Ruscica's work *Variations on a Theme – Duet for Greater Horseshoe Bat and Beatboxer* (2007, printed sheet music) and the voices of the beatboxers are bridged together.

Ruscica's earlier work *Swan Song* (2004, 16mm film and DVcam) is about the relaying of a tradition in the form of a Sicilian love song through the faces, gestures and being of old people. The song comes across in the work as a kind of collectively shared meme. (1) At the beginning of the film there is a blank, white studio background, against which the Sicilian historical marionette figure, Rinaldo, first rattles his saber and then falls into silence. Metal letters clang out of darkness each at the end of their own chains, forming the title of

the work. The video is, like a song, full of life, a reminder that songs are always linked to personal experience.

### **Finally: the empty stage**

Ruscica often returns in his works to a starkly empty black or white stage, to the background or plane where the different phenomena have surfaced. The method brings to mind modern theatre, Beckett and Brecht. The idea of revealing production structures, corresponding with the Brechtian concept of art, can be seen also in the closing shot of *Swan Song*. The people are shown on the monitor with their names, and the camera quietly pulls back to reveal the small-production tools of moving image that the artist has used when making the work. Similarly, in the closing shot of *Evolutions* the young people collectively clean the floor of the studio, thus marking it as a stage of a completed work. (2)

Apart from the environment, today's hot topic, the great themes of our time have to do with collectivity and work: questions of close community, society, global tribe and alienation. (3) Ruscica's works are connected to this discussion as art that emphasizes the significance of collectively shared tradition and historical evolution in relation to the various forms of communication that constantly affect the moment at hand. They sketch in front of us forms and portraits that remind us of the importance of stories, music, song, rituals and work to the individual and the community.

(1) The controversial concept of meme, which Richard Dawkins introduced in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976) means cultural ideas, symbols, practices and models which are transmitted in a way analogous to natural selection. Melodies are among the examples given by Dawkins.

(2) On the theme of rendering visible the work of cleaning in new Finnish art, I especially recall Eemil Karila's work (2009) for the Vartai Gallery in Vilna, which is made up of a photograph of 'Mrs Vanda' who cleans the gallery and ultraviolet light illuminating the gallery space. A substance that reflects ultraviolet has been mixed in with the cleaning detergent so that the marks of the done work become visible in the space.

(3) According to the capitalist logic, which has solidified its ethos in the 1990s and even penetrated today's art world, a networked and individualized society no longer seeks or delivers justice to done work or special skills. The work rapidly becomes invisible, which is why individuals have to be inclined and ready to link into new realms (Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Eve (2006). *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Transl. Gregory Elliott. London, New York: Verso).

The writer is Helsinki-based artist, researcher and lecturer in the tradition of the artists' moving image.

*Translated by Susan Heiskanen.*