

## ROSSELLA BISCOTTI

Mieke Mels: Your work mostly consists of video and photographs, and occasionally you create sculptures. Looking at your work — whether it is a video, a photograph or a sculpture — it is obvious why you choose a particular medium for a specific subject. But what makes a subject important for you to investigate? Why do you choose a particular subject?

Rossella Biscotti: I don't really choose subjects. I start researching something that puzzles me and I get deeper and deeper into a story. I'm interested in memory, time, memory gaps and the way people deal with these subjects. At this moment I'm working on a story of FBI agent Joseph Pistone that infiltrated the American mafia in the 1980s. He decided not to record anything but to memorize and to report weekly to his mentor. He was undercover for almost six years. At the end of his mandate he started to testify in different trials. He was asked to recollect his observations and to tell detailed circumstances and facts. His testimony provided the main evidence—and sometimes the only one—in court. This story really fascinated me. I started my research in courthouses and FBI archives. Then I went looking for him, which was rather difficult, because he still lives undercover. But I knew this story would become a new work of art.

M.M. Often you incorporate the research results in your work. For example you made a poster of the process of making *The Sun Shines in Kiev* (2006), a work based on the Chernobyl incident in 1986. Showing the process of getting into a story is as important as the final video itself?

R.B. My work develops through time with the main aim of making videos. I gather a lot of information. I do interviews, I collect visual material, documents, . . . For *The Sun Shines in Kiev* I had been collecting material for two years. It was in this period that I started reflecting on the meaning and the possibilities of this collection itself. This resulted in two different works before the

video was finished: part of my research became material for a poster and some of the gathered footage is integrated in four slide projections.

M.M. Some of your videos — such as *The Sun Shines in Kiev*, or *Shooting on the Dam* (2005), based on a shooting incident in 1945 in Amsterdam — are based on historical facts. The style of the video is that of documentary, yet they're more than that. Can you tell me something about the importance of the element "time" in your work?

R.B. I started working with history about three years ago, when I bought a collection of Italian newspapers, published between 1978 and 1988. It took me a couple of months to read them all. Reading about historical facts in the present tense, day by day, fascinated me. My father started to read some of the old papers too and something happened in his mind. He couldn't recognize anymore which facts belonged to which time. At that moment I decided to work on my video *Shooting on the Dam*. It deals with the recollection of a shooting accident in 1945 in Amsterdam. This video is mainly about collective and personal amnesia, about time and fragments of time that get lost and unexpectedly pop up into the present.

M.M. So, basically what interests you is the relation between the official history and the recollection of the individual. You're interested in questioning the idea of different "times" in one story. Is it, beside that, also important for you to communicate the "message" or the "story" itself?

R.B. The message in my work is communicated in very different ways. Some of my works have a narrative form but the story doesn't always follow a linear path. In other works, like *Mental Archive* (2006), the story is even missing. I made a series of photos of a young guy meeting different people. Each of them related him a story that about an event that was particularly significant in their private lives. What remains of each story is the visual documentation of that moment: two people talking. The story stays

unknown but can be traced back: the people are visible and there are elements of the location in which the meeting happened. Most of the time the message in my work is ambiguous. For example the video *The Sun Shines in Kiev* tells two different stories. As the first story ends the video seems to repeat itself, but some of the information changes in a subtle way. The spectator can choose to go away when the first version is finished. But who decides to stay and watch the video once more, will discover that the first story is not unique (or true?). After watching the two complete versions he will leave the room with a "reasonable doubt" in his mind.

M.M. You use a different way to investigate "time" in several videos you made between 2001 and 2003: *Cesar* (2001), *Patricia e Antonio* (2002), *Rick* (2002), *Coming Back* (2003). All of these feature several immobile people. They don't move for a very long time, but at the end they perform some minimal actions. What does the aspect of "time" mean in those works?

R.B. Normally we cannot ask someone to stand still so we can watch him. In those videos you can observe the persons for a long time, feel the way they stand and analyze all the details of their bodies and the space around them. There is a strong tension that, after fifteen minutes, ends in a short action. In these works, time plays a major part, not only with regard to the motionlessness of the characters during the shooting, but also with regard to the motionlessness of the spectators that are watching them. The motionless relationship between my video and the audience is very important here. What I basically ask from them is a total commitment to my work and to forget what they usually expect from a video: action.

In later works I questioned other basic elements of the medium video: the image, understanding of dialogues and storylines. . . . In *Muctar* (2003) for example the spectator watches a Russian spoken video without any subtitle. In *Shooting on the Dam* the audience is confronted with many different and apparent-

ly confusing storylines. *The Sun Shines in Kiev* develops a narration through the sound while the public mainly watches a black projection.

M.M. You use a documentary style in your work. Many people seek to learn about the world through art, but do you think film and video art are effective media to inform people about socio-political issues?

R.B. I use the aesthetics of the documentary but I'm not interested in informing or educating the public. With my work I want to show a process and to raise some questions that can be interpreted in multiple ways.

M.M. Such as the questions you raise about Italian history and politics in some of your works? I'm thinking about *Cities of Continuous Lines* (2006), *Inauguration of the Empire* (2005), *Italy is A Democratic Republic Founded on Labour* (2004) and *Cinematography is the Strongest Weapon* (2003–2006).

R.B. These projects deal with some socio-political aspect of Italy but they are, with regard to the theme and the aesthetical element, actually quite different from each other. The video *Italy is A Democratic Republic Founded on Labour* creates a dreamlike context in which people engage in various activities — fishing, digging, building a house, . . . — that are all presented very aesthetically. *Cities of Continuous Lines* consists of several works — photographs, installations and videos. It investigates the role, the meaning and the symbolism of some of the fascist architecture of the 1930s that is now being renovated. *Inauguration of the Empire* is a sculpture that doesn't communicate any information about its content. It's mute. It reminds of the laying of the first stone of certain architectural projects in the countries colonized by Italy, projects Mussolini's propaganda made a great fuss about, but which were actually never finished.

In the 1930s Italy was undergoing a process of modernization in industry, agriculture, architecture. . . What fascinates me is the investment of Mussolini

in this modernization, the use of aesthetics and rituals for "building" his regime. He communicated to the people through the image of himself, the architecture of the "empire" and films about his battle victories. *La cinematografia è l'arma più forte* is copied from a banner that Mussolini used to inaugurate the Italian film industry Cinecittà in 1937. This phrase combines the idea of art as a propaganda tool and cinema as the image of modernism. By presenting this banner as a work of art, I reflect upon the risks of political meddling with the cultural field.