

## **Artists at work**

### **Doku.Arts in Rio**

A boy in Flims: he invents worlds in the corridors of an Alpine hotel run by women. He often misses dinner, but that's no serious matter. A boy on the industrial periphery of a Russian city: as he grows up he is struck by the raw beauty of the heart of drunkards, gangsters and dogs with limps. Another boy, this one Canadian, is an only child: he hates going to school, he sees playtime as a hellish moment of forced sociability, he is content with his dog Nick's silent complicity and the voice that comes from his piano. The beginning of last century: a girl walks through the streets of Choisy-le-Roi with her father and governess. Those afternoons, that evil complicity, the sheer terror of keeping vile secrets will mold the vibrant material in the head of the old lady that the girl will turn into. A boy in New York: his father forbids certain things: playing in the street and forming phrases, for example; at the age of four the boy plays with words and thinks only of getting out of there. The son of German immigrants in Milwaukee: in the intervals between baseball practice he observes the landscape, the flow of time, and little by little realizes that there is something tragic and marvelous in those big empty spaces. What brings these children together is not so much their solitude, some traumatic event or their precocious geniality but rather the fact that they all grow up to become artists. And in spite of all the ways in which it has been misused and become worn out, what is still left of the word **artist**, nowadays so uncertain and unreliable? Seeing as it is impossible to offer a convincing answer to the question "what is an artist?", the cinema presents itself as a particularly powerful device that can bring us very close to how those we call artists think and live.

Since the very beginning, cinema has been fascinated by the other arts – the Serpentine dancers, magicians, clowns and actor-acrobats in popular theater were the first figures to be transposed to the screens of the nickelodeons. And it was this same urge to interrogate the artist that created the **Doku.Arts** festival. In May it arrives, in pocket version, at the Moreira Salles Institute. Conceived by the German actor and

director Andreas Lewin, the festival is dedicated exclusively to exhibiting documentary films around the theme of art and artists from all areas who are often not so well-known to the public at large.

Since it started in 2006, **Doku.Arts** has received guests such as Agnès Varda, Shirin Neshat, Olivier Assayas, Helmut Lachenmann and Bruno Monsaingeon, to mention only a few names. The idea of organizing a festival with such a specific theme arose after Lewin himself decided to investigate more deeply the enigmatic trajectory of the actor Klaus Kammer, who was responsible for one of the most brilliant interpretations of Kafka's *A Report to an Academy*; he died at the age of 34 in obscure circumstances. The project resulted in the full-length *Er spielte seinen Schatten mit* (*He acted with his shadow*) and aroused Lewin's interest in producing films about actors made with actors or in some way ventured beyond the comfort zone of journalistic *portraits* of celebrities. Today **Doku.Arts** is the only important European festival devoted exclusively to the rich production of documentary films (and videos) on the arts and artists. By eschewing "biopics", the festival presents authorial productions that talk about artists who are often not so well-known to the public at large.

The six films to be presented in Brazil allow us some insight into different pacts made between the film directors and the artists they admire. They all seem to be based on the principle that when you make a film about an artist, the days of sugar-sweet contemplation are finished, now you must reject not only the all too comfortable distance of the concealed approach but also the temptation to intervene too much. Because it is rare for artists to offer themselves as an object of study or analysis; they rather tend always to frown on any interpretative gesture. The film-maker who plans to approach this restive animal faces both inflated egos and noncommittal comments, as artists constantly question the image that others make of them. The BBC documentary on Bourgeois made by Nigel Finch, perhaps the least ambitious in form, shows this discomfort very clearly. The film is punctuated by moments of heavy tension between the director and the artist, who does not shirk from addressing to the director the same questions that she finds captious and inconsistent. It is interesting to see Louise - queen of the autobiographical and subjectivist discourse – dodging

Finch's interpretations and finding out that the model for one of her most emblematic works, *Arch of Hysteria*, was a man, her assistant Jerry Gorovoy.

*James Benning: Circling the Image*, by the German director Reinhard Wulf, shows us the work of one of today's most daring North-American directors. The film accompanies Benning from California to Utah, where he is filming *13 Lakes*. For several decades Benning has been involved in serious, solitary work aimed at dissolving the borders between cinema and plastic arts by capturing the potency of locations in long sequence shots that put the spectator in contact with the vibrant American landscapes. Moving in the opposite direction from mega-productions with enormous teams, Benning conceives cinematography as something solitary, a solemn and almost monastic ritual of quiet communion with terrestrial spaces.

Quite different is *Paul Bowles - Let it Come Down*, which launches us into a series of associations to reveal the thinking of writer and composer Paul Bowles. Best known to us for Bertolucci's adaptation of his book *The sheltering sky*, published in 1954 and written mostly in the desert, where the novel and film are set, Bowles was an inveterate traveler and as a young man frequented Gertrud Stein's group of friends. The film, woven around interviews with Bowles in his house in Tangiers, where he spent most of his life, manages to capture Bowles' spirit very well: a non-violent and at the same time placid and intransigent transgressor, someone capable of speaking about himself and his own art with overwhelmingly peaceful clarity.

*Daniel Schmid – Le Chat qui pense*, by James Conway, shows us the instigating trajectory of the Germany-based Swiss director who made a series of exuberant films with strong operatic context. The film addresses the place of Schmid's work in the context of German political cinema, his collaboration with Ingrid Caven and his tumultuous relationship with Fassbinder. This first feature film for Pascal Hofmann and Benny Jaberg includes abundant archive material and fine moments such as the scene in which Schmid and Fassbinder sing a Zarah Leander song in front of Caven, who looks on in astonishment. The film translates precisely the decadent and somewhat melancholy aesthetics of Schmid's films and offers us a discussion of the

connection between this apparently uncommitted cinema and the engaged German cinema of the 60s and 70s. For the Brazilian public, the film is an invitation to the work of a great director who is still practically unknown to us.

But the biggest surprise of the festival is the poetic essay on Boris Rhyzy, the Russian poet who committed suicide in 2001 at the age of 26. “All my poems are about love and death, there are no other themes,” said Rhyzy in several interviews. Besides being an acknowledged and award-winning poet, Rhyzy was also a boxer and lived close to the effervescent criminality of the *Perestroika* period. Director Aliona van der Horst first of all sets herself the thankless (and seemingly naive) task of finding out the reasons for Rhyzy’s suicide, and then manages very cleverly to disarm the clichés involving the myth of the suicidal poet. Little by little the film unveils the sordid context of the Ural region where Rhyzy lived and from where he dug up his poems. Another great merit of the film lies in managing to avoid the schematic comparison between poetic material and experienced material, by creating a turgid, enigmatic atmosphere that involves the spectator gently and leads him to the small cemetery where some of his school friends are buried in luxurious black-granite graves adorned with their full-size portraits.

There is also a documentary on Glenn Gould, *Glenn Gould, au delà du temps (Glenn Gould, Hereafter)*, drawn from precious archive material very well woven together by Bruno Monsaïgnon. In a way, Monsaïgnon – who is also a violinist and has made documentaries about other great musicians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – has made a film that synthesizes the objective of the festival as a platform for deep reflection on artists who, given the wealth of their production and the way in which they led their lives, continue to have an effect on us and on our time. In this sense, all six films question the idea of time adopted by today’s cultural industry, making everything so quickly obsolete and disposable. In an age like ours, where art criticism tends more and more to be a mere consumer’s guide, these films return complexity to the artistic field by showing the contradictory and unusual processes that generate the art that is all around us.

**Laura Erber, 2012**

(translation: James Mulholland)