Beyond the Screen...Real Life
Reflections on current Italian video art
by Ludovico Pratesi

Since the beginning of the 1990’s, the increasingly rapid spread of digital technology has lead to the increase in the number of artists of the recent generations who express themselves with video. Thus, an artistic vocabulary that traditionally belonged to few masters of the avant-garde has seen an unprecedented development, with an emphasis on technique and content, attaining for this art form the high status reserved for cinema. Video is a narrative through images without predefined rules or regulations that is adapted to the needs of the artist in a simple or extremely sophisticated way, in order to allow the spectator a direct contact with the work of art which can be experienced on a screen or as a projection in the space.

This exhibition intends to illustrate the evolution of the recent generation of Italian video artists, focusing attention on the concept of identity, a strong point of interest among contemporary artists. This broad theme has been divided into social and individual identity, the two investigations which loosely correspond to the subtle generational changes that characterize the changes in this medium in the last two decades.

The theme of individual identity is explored through the work of four artists who have been active since the early 1990s. Vanessa Beecroft, Marzia Migliora, Diego Perrone and Lara Favaretto place their own personal point of view at the center of the work in order to construct a first-person narrative that considers an authorial perspective of reality constructed and represented like a subjective vision, closely rooted in history and memory.

In VB 48 by Vanessa Beecroft, the female models stand like statues in the hall of the Maggior Consiglio of the ducal palace in Genova, dramatically illuminated to recall the paintings of Caravaggio which were acquired in the seventeenth century by rich genovese bankers. The work is a type of tableaux vivant where the standing body is presented as a classical form, an icon of universal femininity, stripped of personality and offered in its ideal, indeed impossible, physical perfection.

In Forever Overhead Marzia Migliora explores the male body of the diver, inspired by the ancient fresco from the Tomb of the Diver in Paestum. The representation of the dynamic athlete, interpreted as a metaphor of the ritual initiation of an adolescent who becomes an adult, is inspired by David Forster Wallace’s book Forever Overhead. The action of the dive is charged with symbolic meanings tied to human metamorphosis, often in precarious equilibrium between anxiety of the present and a move towards the future.

Lara Favaretto focuses on the absurdly impossible in Sollevarlo non vuol dir volarlo (Donkeys Might Fly), an expression used by Italians to suggest that an occurrence is absurdly impossible, as in English with pigs. Here, a group of people gathered in the countryside attempt to lift two donkeys in order to create the shape of a triangle with their bodies. The ridiculous and surreal tale underlines the artist’s interest in folklore and romantic fictions typical of Italians; here, she gives living shape to the fairytales in order to project them into reality. After many varied solutions and the realization that the task is impossible, the group abandons their efforts. Conceptual paradox, colletive effort, rational versus empirical thought and human ingenuity are at the basis of Favaretto’s investigation.
Diego Perrone uses digital animation to analyze the intimacy and pain of Antonio De Curtis, alias Totò, one of the best known comic actors of post-war Italian film. In Toto nudo (Totò Stripped Bare), the artist offers a 3D reconstruction of the now aged actor standing in a snow-covered wood, slowly undressing and lowering himself on the ground. The melancholic image of the icon of humor and Italian comedy is presented here as an image of old age and death, decay and deterioration, a metaphor of the passage of time: even in art, the show must end.

The exhibition continues with a selection of works by eight artists who came to recognition after 2000. The personal, subjective and individualistic visions of the previous generation have been replaced by an increasing concern with the social and political issues that make the artists participants of a global world. By means of complex and articulated narratives that betray a country in deep crisis, they explore themes such as a fragmented and fragmentary identity made more complex by underlying and contradictory tensions.

Cancan, the work of Rä di Martino presents a desperate and ungainly transvestite dancing uncontrollably in an anonymous and decadent space to the French can can. The dance, normally associated with the gaiety of the Belle Epoque, is here interpreted by a tired and grotesquely made up protagonist, pathetically suggesting the marginalized condition of transvestites, forced to remain on the borders of society with their ambiguous and problematic identity.

This pathetic and moving condition is presented also in Rodolfo Centodue (Rodolfo at 102) by Giulia Piscitelli. Here, an elderly man eats a plate of spaghetti; careful in his gestures, he struggles with a body tired and burdened by every move. The artist offers a cruel view into the demographic collapse of Italy, which figures among the oldest countries in the world for the age of its population.

An elderly farmwoman, protagonist of the film Tanatologia by the brothers Gianluca e Massimiliano De Serio, narrates the death of the artists’ grandmother, who died at 33 of a spontaneous miscarriage provoked by the extenuating labor in the fields. The deceased, a devout catholic who embraced communist politics, was denied a funeral because her ideas were considered subversive in the pervasively Christian Democrat 1950s Italy.

Patrizio Di Massimo focuses his attention on a dark moment of Italian history in Oae. Here, the artist analyzes the Italian occupation of Libya during the Fascist years through the juxtaposition of images that the artist shot in the streets of Tripoli with segments taken from Mustapha Akkad’s 1981 film Il Leone del Deserto (The Lion in the Desert), censured in Italy because of its view of the atrocities committed by the Italian soldiers in Libya. The video unfolds a voyage that links past and present, memory and current events through such politically charged themes as revisionist Fascism, appropriated today by the right wing party with little sympathy for the past atrocities of that dictatorship.

Dark Messages by Domenico Mangano is characterized by a disquieting atmosphere suspended between the everyday and tragedy. The film is located in an industrial port town in southern Italy where a handful of events reveal an underlying and mysterious violence, enacted in the darkness of an anonymous, lateral area. The reduced action and the cinematic language recall the existentialist films of Godard and Antonioni and make Dark Messages an example of a narrative conveyed through images of very sophisticated visual effect.
A similar sense of irresolution is found in Meris Angiletti’s *Aussicht*, a work devoted to the life of the Romantic German poet Friedrich Holderlin, who lived his last years in isolation in a tower overlooking the Neckar River. Here the artist analyses the formation of images in the human mind through the juxtaposition of scientific certainties and paranormal phenomena, creating stories that emerge from the union of science, literature and the visual arts.

Rosa Barba identifies the volcano Vesuvius, protagonist of *The Empirical Effect*, as the symbol of the Italian social and political situation. Politics today are dominated by a sense of uncertainty and the expectation of imminent tragedy, a feeling shared by the population of the towns built at the base of the volcano. Indeed, the last eruption dates to 1944; however vulcanologists do not exclude an unexpected and unannounced recurrence.

The anger of the Italian youth generation is represented by Nico Vascellari, artist and vocalist of the punk group *Lago Morto* and title of this video. The 16 member band played in 15 different locations in the city of Vittorio Veneto – laundromat, pizza shop, bars and vintage shops. Vascellari’s performances include elements from ancient tribal rituals and contemporary pop culture: the extreme and alternative musical experience is also strongly physical and aggressive. We are left with the question of how to address the marginal condition of contemporary culture in a society that ignores the needs of the youngest generation.