

## Measure of distance

Ritual is a recurrent element in the work of Kostana Banovic. Her drawings, which she embarked upon in 1990, register the constant repetition of the same action: the drawing of tiny pencil lines. The lines rarely touch and together form a more or less regular, rhythmical pattern of lines and spaces. Yet these are not typical drawings. Sometimes, if the beginning or end of the lines are marked by a small hole in the paper, it looks as though someone has set about the drawing with needle and thread. Clearly, the emphasis here is not on the image itself but on the action, its repetition and the state of mind it evoked. The drawings are the product of intense concentration, bordering on a 'trance' state. By practising a ritual learned in former Yugoslavia, her native land, before starting to draw, Banovic partly loses awareness of her immediate physical surroundings – something that is part and parcel of this state of mind. The ritual itself comprises laying out a series of 41 beans according to a set pattern. The numbers and their combinations reveal the nature of your relationship with another, and how it might progress. Although the artist first used the ritual for personal ends, it has gradually become intrinsic in her artistic work, even playing a seminal role in Banovic' changing attitude to her artistic practice, which first crystallised during the exhibition

*41 Droomjagers* in Lokaal 01, Breda. To realise her project, the artist sought direct contact with the public, inviting them to take part in the same ritual in a spatial installation Banovic constructed for the occasion. In 1998, she gave this 'performance' repeatedly during the exhibition *Power Up* in the Museum for Modern Art, Arnhem. It was during this period that the lack of acknowledgement of the media-created image of the history and identity of the Yugoslavian people and the conflict itself - prompted by the war in Yugoslavia – evoked in the artist a sense of alienation from herself and her background: "It's as though your personal geography has been rocked to its foundations" (Banovic). Against this backdrop, Banovic developed the bean ritual into an artistic communication tool with which she tried to give both the artist and 'participant' a grip on reality and personal identity. The artist seems driven by the urge to reduce the distance between herself and another by including the Other in her ritual, a ritual that Banovic considers an inextricable aspect of her own identity.

In her most recent work, comprising among other things two short video films, Banovic also continues to explore her fascination with rituals. This 'area of experimentation' closely aligns her work to the practice of contemporary visual anthropology – that aspect of anthropology dealing with all visible aspects of culture, on which it sheds insights through visual means. Over the last decades, specifically in this branch of anthropology, an increasing involvement with disciplines outside of the sciences, such as cultural studies, film theory and architecture theory, has occurred.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in the present era of globalisation, artists travel throughout the world more easily, often with the purpose of reflecting upon the social and cultural realities they find there. This has ushered in a time in which the practices of artists and anthropologists have developed numerous parallels. In her research into the interaction between the practices of experimental film and ethnographic film, American film expert Catherine Russell dubbed the interplay of both 'experimental ethnology'. According to her, more than anything, this term refers to: "(...) dismantling the universalist impulse of realist aesthetics into a clash of voices, cultures, bodies, and languages."<sup>2</sup> Banovic' videowork, in which the fascination for rituals she shares with anthropologists goes hand in hand with artistic strategies, also seems to inhabit this common ground.

In Banovic' first film, *Droomjagers* (which roughly translates as 'Dreamhunters'), completed in 2000, she returns to Serbia after ten years of largely enforced absence. There, she participates in a number of traditional, still frequently performed, rituals.

The film is divided into various episodes. The first comprises dark images of a female figure, (the artist), who takes part in the Eucharist while the slow voice-over (again Banovic) expresses a sense of abandonment by God. The second section is entitled Paraskeva, after the

patron saint of women. The voice-over – that seems to emit from a dream or trance, asks the artist her name. “Kostana”, she replies, “Kostana Paraskeva”. If the expression of abandonment by God can be understood as a sense of being thrown back on oneself – that can in turn be connected to the war in Yugoslavia – and if the question about the artist’s name can be interpreted as a question about identity, both sections are key in understanding the film that was created in a response to Banovic’ sense of alienation from herself and her background. Because of that I would like to propose that documenting rituals is far from being Banovic’ ultimate aim. Undergoing rituals, such as her performance with the bean ritual, is more often used as a means. A means of communication, of coming into contact not only with her country of origin but, by extension, with the ‘Other’ in herself. Because, as Russell also states: “If for Benjamin the Other was the proletariat, in postmodern culture it is, (...), the cultural other. But for many filmmakers, this cultural other is “within” – within themselves, their families, their communities and nations.”<sup>3</sup>

The episodes always start with a title and a staged scene that symbolically relates to what follows. These scenes reinforce the impression that the question of identity is crucial to the film. The artist is often shown clad in what could be traditional East-European dress. This is Banovic’ reference to her Yugoslavian identity, although the dated style of the clothing places that identity in the past. The artist is also shown wearing a tall black bonnet with, in the background, the blue checked cloths she always uses when performing the bean ritual. These scenes can be understood as a reference to herself as artist, and to the present.

In the exhibition catalogue *Transformers* Ralph Rugoff describes a theory relating to identity that is widely adhered to by postmodern theoreticians, in which the individual is seen as a “being who is centerless and divided, a compilation of partial identities where disparate potentials freely compete (...)”<sup>4</sup> But where, for example, he cites artists like Cindy Sherman and Yasumasa Morimura who seem to embrace this postmodern notion of identity wholeheartedly, Banovic seems to long for an identity rooted in the past, as though she is striving to express a sort of ‘purity’. In one of the scenes, she dons a white dress, her hair is pinned up and on her shoulder she carries a vase bearing a strong resemblance to a classic amphora. The image summons up associations with classical antiquity and, by extension, stereotypical purity. Purity is a theme that also returns in the rituals, including a baptismal ritual undergone by Banovic in *Droomjagers*. Were it not for the fact that this yearning demands complete surrender, rendering it a sort of blind desire, Banovic’ longing for purity could be branded romantic. However, the artist undermines this notion in several ways - for instance simply by imperfectly staging the amphora scene. The background clearly comprises ordinary wallpaper and Banovic’ piled-up hair is a little too unruly by classical standards.

But the film fragments depicting the artist taking part in rituals also contain elements that defy total submission to romantic yearning. During the first ritual we see Banovic, in a traditional folk ritual, sitting in the kitchen of an elderly woman ‘reading’ lead shapes produced by smelting and rapid solidification, to gain insight into her personal wellbeing. Any expectations of the possible mystical depths of the rite are invalidated as the woman clearly seems to have very little to tell. For her, the imploring force of the ritual seems to lie rather in the power of the repeated acts. The contact Banovic seeks is found during the apparently incoherent dialogue that evolves between the two women, rather than participation in the ritual itself. They touch on Sarajevo, a child, born without lungs, that died. Later, as part of the ritual, both women speak of a third person in the artist’s personal life. “His country causes him pain,” says the old lady. These repeated, ostensibly casual, references to the war make *Droomjagers* a film in which the everyday and the personal are politicised detachedly but effectively.

By employing poetical texts in a voice-over that often references a reality never visualised, non-linear narratives and elusive symbolism, *Droomjagers* apparently presents a reality that bears a direct relation to a statement by Russell about how contemporary experimental ethnology deals

with visualising reality. She writes: “The real” conceived as history differs from “the real” of referentiality in that it includes the spectator and the filmmaker in its scope. Beyond the limits of representation exist other realities of experience, desire, memory, and fantasy.<sup>5</sup>” Indeed, the presence of Banovic in the film not only plays an active role, but also acknowledges the presence of the viewer. This occurs in the section *Taking leave of Satan*, in which the artist is baptised. The complete baptism scene is filmed in slow motion, which not only lends it a certain aestheticism but also captures the atmosphere of the baptism ritual. Or perhaps the atmosphere is closer to a fantasy about a christening rite: the slow motion images evoke a sense of ‘trance’ that goes far further than the ‘ordinary’ sacred aura one imagines during such a ritual. The camera angle, the hand-held camera and the lack of voice-over in this scene – that, however poetic, would have introduced a certain distance – give viewers the feeling of actually being present at the baptism.

Banovic disrupts both this impression and the (illusion of) trance when, immediately after the actual christening – and still in slow motion – she turns to the camera with a mysterious smile. Her oblique glance meets the eye of the viewer. Is she trying to say that she has actually been purified by the ritual? Perhaps, but her self-aware, almost theatrical movement seems contradictory. What we are witnessing could be an almost ironic distancing from the events – surely, if she had actually given herself over to the rite, the artist would have denied the presence of the camera? Scenes with voice-overs from later episodes seem to be conclusive in affirming that the purification process failed to establish contact with the supernatural. In a later scene, which shows the painting of a saint, the voice-over says: “You are mute. You don’t answer.” As Banovic herself indicates, *Droomjagers* is not only a quest for a lost identity and a return; it is also a farewell.

Banovic second film is entitled *Na Tragu* (2001). The title is difficult to translate, meaning both ‘to return’, ‘to chase’ and ‘to search’. As in ‘Droomjagers’, the artist returns to Serbia where she visits two cloisters.

There was a very real reason for Banovic to revisit Serbia: she had come across a newspaper article about lakes that had turned red for no clear reason. Banovic was eager to film them, but by the time she arrived, the waters were no longer red. The film opens with the text of the article; by showing a painting of Christ on the cross, focusing on his stigmata, a connection with suffering is made. Although not mentioned in the film, the newspaper report heralds from 1992, which once more irrevocably evokes an association with the war that had commenced not long before. Is the country’s suffering represented by its blood-red lakes? In her search Banovic does not, however, concentrate solely on concrete facts and incidents. She recounts how she regularly returns to Serbia in the hope of finding something without actually knowing what it is. In contrast to *Droomjagers*, *Na Tragu* seems to be more concerned with the search for an ideal site, a specific place, rather than a lost identity.

The film – again divided into episodes – begins in a park and leads, via a visit to a women’s cloister, to the orchard of a monastery. As a place, a cloister could be considered a ‘heterotopia’, a term used by the French theoretician Michel Foucault. He describes heterotopias as “(...) real places (...) which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.”<sup>6</sup> One of the principles of heterotopias mentioned by Foucault is that they – as is also the case with cloisters – are seldom open to the public or only if the individual has undergone specific rites and purifications.<sup>7</sup> With this, Banovic refers to the moment when she talks to a nun about wearing a headscarf, and when she asks a young monk about his calling. The cloister could, moreover, be seen as a ‘heterotopia of compensation’, as Foucault calls it. The function of such a place is to create a perfect, well-running, actual space that compensates the chaos of our world.<sup>8</sup> Gardens are also included under Foucault’s notion of heterotopias. They are the oldest example of heterotopias in which the capacity for: “(...) juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible,”<sup>9</sup> is expressed. He writes: “The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and

then it is the totality of the world. The garden has been a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginning of antiquity (...).”<sup>10</sup>

The last part of *Na Tragu* takes place in the garden of the monastery. By referring to the Paradise of Adam and Eve, Banovic does not depict the garden only as a heterotopia, but as a utopia, a typology of Heavenly Paradise. The reference to Paradise is unmistakable: an old white-bearded gentleman offers her apples. As in *Droomjagers*, the theme of purification – this time closely related to guilt and sin – plays a key role. In another scene we see the artist washing clothes in a river, and spreading incense over the land; symbolic actions intended to purify the soul and imbue the land with renewed fertility (Banovic). The scene with the apples can also be read as a gesture of purification, a gesture of God’s forgiveness of human sin. The utopia Banovic seems to be in quest of is unquestionably a place without guilt. However, just as she overturns the sublimity of the ‘trance’ of the rituals in *Droomjagers*, Banovic also reveals that the utopia in *Na Tragu* is flawed. Both the nuns and monks talk of sin, laws and commandments. In the Garden of Eden – to recall the here and now and, most probably, sin too – coil endless lengths of sinuous black. Utopia is beyond reach. And Banovic knows it.

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Ruby, “Visual Anthropology”. In *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*, David Levinson and Melvin Ember (red.), New York 1996, vol. 4: 1345-1351, p. 1345.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography – the work of film in the age of video*, Durham and London 1999, p. xvii

<sup>3</sup> Ditto, p.24

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Rugoff, *Transformers*, exhibition catalogue, New York 1994, p. 12

<sup>5</sup> Russell, p. 25

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Of Other Spaces’, in: *Documenta X – the book: politics poetics*, Ostfildern 1997, p. 265. Original text in: *Diacritics* 16-1, Spring 1986.

<sup>7</sup> Ditto, p. 270

<sup>8</sup> Ditto, p. 271

<sup>9</sup> Ditto, p. 268

<sup>10</sup> Ditto, p. 269