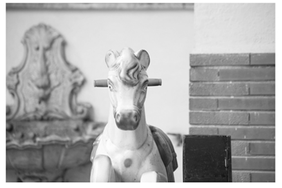
I'M GONNA LIVE ANYHOW UNTIL I DIE

Johanna Billing's videos weave music, movement and rhythm — placing subtle emphases on the individual within representations of changing societies. In her work, Billing partly directs the participants, and partly puts in place a series of improvisations around the notion of performance and the possibility it holds to explore issues surrounding the public and the private. The protagonists in Billing's videos all play themselves but take part in staged situations that oscillate between documentary and fiction, as a multi-layered interpretation of a place.



I'm Gonna Live Anyhow Until I Die, 2012, is a video work set in Rome that has its origins in a project to mark the 150th anniversary of the Unification of Italy, co-commissioned by Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin and the MAC, Belfast, during 2010–2012.

The main characters in *I'm Gonna Live Anyhow Until I Die* are five children who run around the streets of Rome, seemingly doing what they like, having abandoned their parents at the restaurant, *Al Biondo Tevere*◊. After running through the park of the Roman Aqueduct, a courtyard in the 1930s working class district of Testaccio, and Ostia's Seadrome, the children finally arrive in an empty school in the centre of Rome, where time seems to have stood still. The old classroom has been turned into storage, here they begin to play around with the obsolete pedagogical tools and technological instruments that they find, as if they are trying to understand what to do with them or what they could be used for. Little by little, each child begins to compose black shapes on sheets of drawing paper folded in half, creating blots that resemble those of the Rorschach test. The childrens' imaginary or inner journey takes them back and forth in between time, place and genres, freely following their own paces and rhythms.

Harnessing her research methods, Billing used her exploratory approach to identify place and event in Rome, Lazio that she used as source material, drawing on a mix of traditions, connected to the human psyche, film and education — including Italian Neorealism and pedagogical as well as psychoanalytical workshop techniques. Visiting Rome during the demonstrations against University reforms in autumn 2010, Billing focuses the work on the future of the younger generation and the populist political ideology, which has been undermining the education system.

The work is at the same time haunted by the daily life and death of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who expressed a series of thoughts about Italy, anticipating the social and cultural changes that would sweep the country at the end of the 1970s, and parts of the scenes in the video are situated in his locality. The project is in some ways also a loving tribute to pedagogical heroes such as Bruno Munari and his tactile workshops for kids, as well as championing the early tradition of Italian filmmakers, who in their often biographical films about the 40s and 50s focused on the freedom of children exploring their city as a way to reflect upon historical and societal change.

The accompanying soundtrack arranged by Billing features a Romany violin, upright bass and whistling, and includes improvised interpretations of the songs *Cariocinesi* and *Mechanics* (originally written by the Italian progressive experimentalist Franco Battiato), serving as a homage to Battiato and his classic 1971 concept album *Fetus*. The final result is, as with many of Billing's video works, the product of a meticulous editing process, placing equal focus on the visual material and sound recording. This gives special attention to physical movement and gesture as well as activity taking place outside of the centre of the action.

◊ *Al Biondo Tevere (a restaurant frequented by known cultural figures and where Pasolini had his last meal before he died)*

TWO BIRDS KISSING AND A COW

The soundtrack album for *I'm Gonna Live Anyhow Until I Die*, a record produced for Johanna Billing's solo show at Modica's La Veronica Gallery in Sicily, was conceived as a tribute to the coincidences and happenstances that we should all learn to heed and develop. The two musical tracks on this album are featured as part of the full film soundtrack, and as specially recorded album edits. They are instrumental interpretations of songs by the Sicilian-born singer-songwriter Franco Battiato, from his 1971 album *Fetus*, which was censored at the time in Italy for addressing controversial issues, as well as for its cover image — a fetus.

Johanna Billing's works are conspicuous on the contemporary landscape for her creation of soundtracks, which engages the observer in the viewing experience. In many cases, the relationship established between the images, the subjects whose story is being documented, and the audio/rhythmic aspect affect one another — establishing the evolution and genesis of the plot, highlighting not so much a traditional story but the specific sensations and atmosphere tied to the context in which the action takes place. From this perspective, Billing's videos could be seen as both a narrative about and an analysis of (thanks to some refined cutting-room work) the relationship between the context and the visitor, between personal and collective memory, between making facts happen and accepting their spontaneous manifestation.

"What does that look like to you? no, not a unicorn… it's an ibex. What do you mean, Kleenexxxxxx? Not Kleenex, ibex. Yes, ibexxxxx" [...] "That's nice … Looks like two birds kissing and a cow". These comments are taken from the discussion among the five children in the film, about the paintings they were animatedly producing in the corridor of a deserted school. This dialogue was originally not included in the final scene of the video, but is being resurrected for this record in a separate audio track, as an alternate take on the documentation of the event.

Many reflections emerge when listening to these conversations:

1) this is an audio interaction in the same vein as the films that were broadcast on the radio at the beginning of the 20th century

2) the focus of the dialogue is the ability to interpret and describe signs, thereby turning them into images

3) this action takes place in a school, but in the absence of teachers and instructors — the opportunity for interpretation arises democratically among the children, and not in a solipsistic manner (as was the case with Rorschach experiments, originally developed to explore the hidden instincts of the individual subject).

The piece establishes an equilibrium as fragile as it is intense. The possibility of dialogue leads to a shared energy that the children identify in their ability to imagine and talk, and thus "do", all together.

This interpretation becomes even more meaningful if we look at the inspiration for the artist's first visit to Rome in 2010 and at news reports during the period of 2013 when this record was produced (a few days prior to the elections of a new Italian government), which took place in an atmosphere of resignation and despair. The climate of new student university occupations that Billing encountered in Rome two years previously conjured up echoes of the city's 1960s cultural life (evoked by the *Al Biondo Tevere* restaurant and by Ostia), and thus becomes a reactivation not only of memory but of collective action.

Lorenzo Bruni, 26 February 2013, Amsterdam/Palermo

SNAPSHOTS AND MONUMENTS

Johanna Billing and Cecilia Canziani

Palma (6 years old): Let's go on, or we will not reach the end of this fantastic adventure!
Eufrasia (9 years old): I do not really understand where we are going, but I trust you and will follow you.

JB: The day after I came home from Rome a funny coincidence happened right here on my living room floor. Julian, my two-year old son, who has a habit of throwing books he can reach off the bookshelf, was as usual focused on this very task. I sighed and was about to tell him for the 100th time to stop when my eyes suddenly caught sight of a book in the huge pile on the floor that I had not seen in years. Having just been to Rome, seeing this book almost gave me the shivers, and I felt very grateful to my son for bringing it to my attention. It is called *My Roman Lion* and is about the childhood memories of artist and writer Renata Wrede; about the everyday lives of a Swedish family of archaeologists based in Rome during the early 30s, all seen and told through the eyes of a six-year-old.

The book was released in 1974. My mother was then studying to become an Italian teacher and as a huge fan of Italian literature and history she thought this was an especially appropriate thing to read aloud to my brother and me when we were around five years old or so. I have very few memories in general from this time in my life, but somehow the images of hugely confident Renata running around the streets of Rome have stayed with me ever since. Reading it again now, so many years later (the book, hilarious as it might be for children, is mainly written for adults), it reveals a rare story about Rome before the Second World War.

After days and weeks of searching the Internet for an English translation, I find what seems to be the only existing copy left out there in the UK (previously from a library). When I get the copy, I put it in the post and cross my fingers that the mail service will deliver the book to Cecilia before Christmas.

CC: Many months later, and one week after filming with Johanna in Rome, I am at my desk keeping next to me, as a talisman, the copy of *My Roman Lion* that arrived, indeed, right before Christmas. Life has an intelligence of its own, I believe, and from the very beginning of this project chance has proved to be more brilliant then any planning. When I was contacted to organise the site visit of an artist in my region (for the project *Un'Espressione Geographica* (A Geographical Expression), curated by Francesco Bonami, at Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, 2011) I did not know it would be Johanna, and she did not know that her guide would be me. It was a surprise to both of us that we were brought together by this project after a long time. We met several years ago, and the occasion of a road trip together sounded just perfect.

The visit was planned for the beginning of October in 2010, when Rome is still not fully awakened from summer, the heat and the holidays. To me, the summer ended when Johanna arrived and we started talking, as happens with anyone visiting Italy, of the current political scenario. We were walking in the city centre and Johanna asked: 'Why is nobody protesting?' Indeed, why?

Driving in the hills around Rome, on the coastline in the direction of Latina, across Rome, we talked of education, mainly, and culture, history, films, books, people and places, and in short — what makes Italy, as Guido Crainz in a brilliant sentence says, *un paese mancato*. A country that lost its moment: that, in a sense, betrayed its potential, hopes and abilities. We were exploring without a real plan, and again chance directed our steps. I do not remember what we planned for that day, but on my way to meet Johanna I met a former student of mine who told me that they had begun the occupation of the Faculty of Architecture at University of Rome La Sapienza. Our new plan evolved: following the protest. From Architecture we moved to Humanities and Mathematics (hosted in a splendid building by Gio Ponti) on the main campus near the train station. We were always late and did not make it for the assembly, nor for the flash mob. We looked at the traces. We compared slogans. Something started to develop, a thread, an idea, something that was about Italy, of current times, Rome — around the role of education.

Then a stop for a bite, a sandwich at the train station. I had on my cellphone the photos of a school I had visited some months before, they had an amazing room full of typewriters, documents and educational material on tape and film, which Daniela Gallo from the director's office wanted to turn into a museum. I showed the images to Johanna and I think this was one of the first sites she envisioned.

JB: At the very entrance of Scuola Media Carlo Urbani when we first visited the school, in the little janitor's booth next to the door, I took a snapshot of a bright green key hanger that displayed all the important keys to the classrooms and offices in the building. This image I returned to again and again in my mind over the coming months, without knowing that it was actually going to play a little part in the film. I pinned it to my wall, used it in lectures about education and art schools, and kept on thinking about who and how one can access these keys you need in life and work — or just the one right key — to squeeze it in your hand — that can give you the confidence to turn something around.

Next to the photo of the keys on my studio wall is a photo of an old worn football goal with a broken net, probably no longer in use, at the beach in a run down part of Ostia. On the first day of our tour around the outskirts of Rome we happened to pass there by mistake. We had stopped by the Pasolini monument a couple of hundred meters before, and as we could not turn our car around on the narrow road we continued forward. The setting at the beach is not exactly breathtaking — it was a cold and windy October afternoon, and certainly not the best place in Ostia for a seaside snapshot. Still, we felt we had to step out of the car to have a look. Somehow, all this talking and thinking about Pasolini — whom we had obviously started to talk about whilst eating at the famous *Al Biondo Tevere* restaurant just a couple of hours earlier — cast the scene in the most beautiful light, and we realised right there and then that this red painted and battered structure of a football goal was of course — at least to us — the unofficial and real Pasolini monument.

CC: A few steps from where he was found dead, this goal brought back to life the laughs, the fights, the joy of the many football matches that the poet played here and in other *borgate* with children. Monuments seem to have lost their capacity to represent the past in front of our eyes and to serve rather as a viaticum to forget. Bringing back to life, use and function, the site of a death, through a trace that has the strength of a symbol, re-presented to me a way to rethink the capacity of memorials to reconfigure the present today. Which is ultimately what has always fascinated me about Johanna's work, since I first met her.

THEN.

From filming to editing, almost one year passed by, and watching *I'm Gonna Live Anyhow Until I Die*, I inevitably shift from the screen to memories, from what I see to what I remember having seen in the two days spent together filming, from this film to her previous ones. The children in the film move across the city apparently doing nothing specific, and yet they show us the very basis of society. They represent an active community, busy exploring, talking, playing, and (what is most important) in inhabiting space and — by its very presence — giving it sense and function once more. The empty school, the place where a famous poet died, the ruins are made alive by the presence of a group of children. As usual in Johanna Billing's work, the narrative is carried by close-ups, faces, objects; by gestures and gazes; by music and by silence. In the sequence of events that follow, part of the action takes place in a school. The children enter the empty building, get a key, open a door and explore a room that seems a depository of memories, full of old and forgotten educational materials. Then, they take paper and ink and start painting all together. Unrethorically, this film is as political as all of Johanna Billing's work — in the background, and emerging almost casually, there is the crisis of the educa-tional system that is at the core of the failure of western democracy. The children offer a gentle metaphor of our role as citizens, that of claiming back the spaces of formation of the individual as a collective body.

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