

Relive your Dreams with Romina de Novellis

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Living in Paris since 2008, the Italian artist Romina de Novellis is performing and showing videos of her performances at the Galerie Laure Roynette (Paris) from 16 October to 29 November 2015. The exhibition "To be, or not to be" is showing both her series Fase Rem in which she relives the dreams she had while pregnant, and her series Augurii, revisiting her performance with vultures, accompanied by the video Silent Life (1979) by Bill Viola. Art Media Agency went to meet this explorer of present darkness.

You chose the title "To be, or not to be"—a saying drenched in symbolism, even more when you're dealing with the pregnancy of a human being.

For this exhibition, we decided to start with a cliché. Everyone knows this quote, but not everyone fully realizes its significance. In fact, we're not saying anything apart from about life and death: in Hamlet, everyone dies. For me, it's quite similar to the Latin "Hic et nunc" (here and now). It's about knowing if I live or if I die; if I would live like someone who's dead or someone who's alive. In other words, whether I would live in Utopia or a short life. We live in a Utopian cycle, as if in a cage. You French had great thinkers telling you that: Foucault, Levi-Strauss etc. For us, authors like Pasolini had the same thoughts, but expressed them in a more instinctive, aesthetic way. In any case, we're not getting out of the cage. I'm an artist and I live like an artist: my profession corresponds to my place in society. But that doesn't allow me to be.

Would you say that performance lets you be?

In its very nature, yes. It requires technique, as with painting or music. We learn a language to be able to express ourselves and so, to be. But theatre differs from them in that it's about a process of construction which is both artistic and social, as opposed to pure acting. When I'm performing, I'm only thinking of the performance, not the composition.

What is the aim of stark, stripped back acting?

The formality of theatre, with its four walls, is too oppressive for me. But I'm not the first (I'm more like the last in fact) to want to break through this barrier. But also for me, I wanted something else. So I started to perform myself; in a setting, of course, but it was less constraining than the theatre. Namely, it allowed me to combine my different skill sets, from dance, choreography and set design.

It's normal for institutions to lap up art that is framed in a setting. While I must live and breathe my art, I also had to adapt to please them. It's a partnership: the artist lends innovation and creativity and the institution makes it stable and accessible, in theory. One day, perhaps the institutions will be more innovative than the artists.

Is it a way of bringing something new to the stage through an about-turn, aside from by the "communication highways"?

I just want to clarify: I'm not claiming to be above the art of the stage. With geniuses like Pirandello and Pina Bausch, stage acting certainly doesn't constitute a limit to creativity. However, it seems to me that we're living at a time when things are starting to slow down: events are repeating themselves. I am certainly not an art historian or a critic; I think of myself more as a butcher: I cut up meat every day and from where I'm standing the meat looks different to me.

Our brand of artist is totally lost in today's world. Now art schools lay a career path for you. But an artist doesn't create for their career, they create simply to create, end of. Even I had prestigious training; I had to have a high-up career. All this almost petty molding and preening is far from what an artist wants to lose himself in and not find himself again.

Perhaps they find a certain harmony. Your performances have an almost musical quality to them, with their repetitions and variations. How do you regard this harmony?

My experience as a dancer naturally led me to working with harmony, to the music in the movement or the movement in the music. Repetition, or ritual, is also there for a reason. It's about the harmony that the rituals try to restore in life. The repetition that I use serves as a magnifying glass on the details of our lives.

Does this magnifying glass have a didactic element?

Not didactic, no. Some artists lend a certain significance to the transmission, but not me. My performances are too personal. I don't theorise my intuitions to render them universally palatable and understandable. In fact, the emphasis is not so much on repetition but on time. I want to share time, a moment, with the audience. "Hic et nunc". At a time when the virtual allows you to do thousands of things at the same time, it's a challenge for me to hold the audience's gaze for more than ten minutes. Repetition isn't only in my movement but also in this gaze: for once they are just watching one thing repeat itself over and over. They have to adapt to a different pace. Some come only for the beginning and end up staying for several hours.

Do you end up building a rapport with the people who stay several hours?

Unlike other performers, I don't ignore them. But interaction is played especially for its part. I personally don't go looking for it, I stay distant. It's simply the fact that you're living and sharing the same experience that creates a dialogue. That dialogue happens at that very moment—interaction is not something written. At the cinema, the theatre or the opera, the producers foresee the climaxes that are fated to inspire strong emotions in the audience. In my performances, I don't go looking for emotion particularly.

Your work seems to lack any sort of recipe or formula. Can you speak to me about your creative process?

That's a difficult question. If God were before me now, I would ask him the same thing! But seriously, it is difficult to explain that. Precisely because there is no recipe to my work. In *Fase Rem*, I created from my dreams. In general, I forget my dreams. The one time I could remember them, during my pregnancy, I wanted to do something with them. I brought them back to life, which isn't without risk, as it's not just a matter of staging. For *Fase Rem 8*, for example, I called my parents to ask them to help at my funeral. I didn't do it again. And I felt almost ashamed of what I had dreamt and what I was communicating, because it's not the image that I had of me. I didn't think of myself as a feminine icon, a maternal figure who died in childbirth. The public probably weren't aware of this experience, as the end result is a video, a piece of plastic art; but everyone would benefit from reliving their dreams.

Where do you get the idea of the importance of the moment and seizing it? How far can you go with this idea?

Up until the end point. At the end of a performance, I feel as if I were dead. Like my fellow citizens who work all day long: we do the same things day-in-day-out, our heart is no longer in it.

To return to plastic art, your work seems to look to write itself into the History of Art, with references to Caravage and Fellini for example.

I've never asked myself about innovation. For me, I mustn't go looking for innovation. Besides, the great innovators are also the great classics. Pasolini, for example, dealt with very classical subjects, without 'modernising' artifice. In my experience, I'm not especially interested in new mediums, technologies or machines. I am very attached to classicism, to the image of Bill Viola. We both share references to the Italian painting of the Renaissance.

Aside from these references, what connection do you make between your work and that of Bill Viola? Why are you happy to exhibit alongside him?

We both have in common a very instinctive work. And he is also very Latin in his references. His works are also intellectualized in the sense that he resorts to symbols, but it's necessary. He uses the symbol as a signified signifier, which is very French and not at all Italian. But you've got to do your reading, if not it's only for show.

And finally, a delicate question. Performance is deeply rooted in the present. What relationship do you maintain with the trace of this fleeting moment captured in video or photography?

The trace is very important. In this world, we can 'trace' from experience. But in my work, it must be as raw as the performance. My team is a bit *l'armata Brancaleone* (from the eponymous film by Marion Monicelli, 1966), a small team with few means. It's not the post production team of someone like Bill Viola! The trace has to be simple, because the video is not the object of the performance. I don't even keep a copy of it. It's for the gallery.

Tags: [Bill Viola](#), [film](#), [Italy](#), [performance art](#), [Pirandello](#), [Romina de Novellis](#), [video](#)