

Big Other Land

Catalogue essay by Andy Thomson for *The Russian Project*, solo exhibition by Laresa Kosloff, Margaret Lawrence Gallery Melbourne, 2012

The video is so bleak, and the monument so big and now perhaps pointless. People show scant regard for it really, the mother grandmother person letting the child pose on it like that. Is it a symptom of their disregard, their bit of fun, an improvised photo opportunity taken as if oblivious of the artist and her camera looking on? You wonder if the people who fought in the revolution, or whichever conflict the statues symbolises, who probably died for the cause whatever it was, would be happy with the strange people who populate the world now, teetering past on the plane of immanence, or lifting their child onto the great plinth as a backdrop for the here and now. Even the artist with her tourism, her subjectivity and western sophistication, looking on like this from a stranger's distance manages to alter the scale of the thing, capturing through the image an act of monumental forgetfulness.

Kosloff has been walking around cities using her eyes and her recording equipment again, once more making art from the proceeds of her disinterested watching. Now she's walking the streets on her father's side, in Russia looking the part but not able to live it. What was she doing, going back there to a place she had never been to? She would have been born to it if it weren't for a most recent genetic migration, a shift of time and space to a future now past. Perhaps she was seeking to lose the real world's grip on her being, and instead allow herself to form a strange super vision not entirely familiar. We all know how fascinatingly clear the characteristics of a country other than one's own are until it all becomes normal, known and lived. On arrival from a distance, how easy it is to see the vernacular of the real! The shape of a paving stone, the unfamiliar curve of a sandstone architrave out of the corner of one's eye, even the clothing styles of the populace seem absurd to those who come from the faraway land of the flat shoe and a newer feminine. Time is embedded in such things, for the traces of a social history and present day norms lie just beneath the surface and the immediacy of what we see.

The space between the boots and the foot of the pedestal, or maybe the base of the massive representation of Lenin's head, is a practiced space¹ – a place to enact new opportunities for meaning. It is where a tactic takes space in this case, scale relations aside; it is literally the space between the boots and Lenin's chin. Seen metaphorically, it's a completely new space, as we think we can know the whole of a society's attitudes and predilections from the shoes they wear, but something funny happens to our, and their, sense of history when a pair of yellow boots is placed in front of a gigantic monument to Lenin. An alterity is revealed through this small gift of intervention, pointing up a dislocation between politics and ethics. Who is Lenin now? In this work, this alterity is enacted by a kind of slapstick tactic of the uncanny, improvised from the margins of the imagination of the ambivalent foreigner.

The foreigner here, is the artist who is in disguise as a local – a local until spoken to, even once detained at the border by a suspicious man who could well have been a relative. Made to wait without language, caught at the border as a Kosloff impersonator – an impudent western woman, in flat shoes with a direct gaze. Travelling the big distances, she listens to endless tales in railway carriages, from men and women who know very well she doesn't understand a word of what they are saying to her. She tells them in perfect Russian she doesn't speak their language and they laugh to hear the irony of such an emphatic denial expressed with an Australian accent. The artist is in, under their skin without them knowing it. They are studied, like an archaeology, with a fine mixing of subjectivity and objectivity, the raw material is collected and a new place is created for the stranger. In this way Russia becomes the product of an anthropological curiosity.

¹ *A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements...Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.*

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Its culture, its institutions, rituals, or meta-narratives constitute it as a location with its own rules, rules that the artist's image making transforms into a new paradigm. This newly located space is a practiced place, a space of metaphor and language, and a place where something previously experienced and understood from a distance of great remove, is made anew by being there.

So still teetering on the plane of immanence towards the substantive statement, the artist's sortie into the other is a melancholic risk-taking, a play with synchrony and a garnering of information against the new steady state. Here in Melbourne there is no obvious risk except to be misunderstood, but take this work back to Russia and the project turns incendiary. There its political potential is not just a bleak recording of travelogue made by an impartial, yet audacious antipodean artist, but a swingeing critique of a corrupt and dying capitalism superimposed on the monumental remnants of a murderous fascist regime. The mobile phone helps to disseminate the capitalist reverie – an opiate for the masses blah, blah, blah. "Then he said", "then I said..." floats by in the hand of the neo capitalist consumer. How could the observing artist intervene in this everyday reverie of the ordinary person? By the irresistible lure of the gift of course!

The artist drops many pairs of shoes, like something from a cargo plane, into the temporal and linguistic mix just to see what happens in a new microscopic cargo culture of her own making. She repeatedly sets up these trivial, tactical traps in the Russian everyday; a pair of shoes is left in one place, and then in another. Eleven alluring pairs left for the desiring, and definitely in their own terms, discerning other. So beautiful, so desirable, these high heels designed as tactical instruments of the old feminine now entice others into an illicit relationship in public space where private property, freely redistributed can be had. Utilising one of Lacan's main ideas, 'the name of the father', namely that the only thing that drives us is desire, Kosloff implicates Russian others in an unsanctioned and unmitigated desiring. In doing so, she insinuates herself into a new virtual relation to the social. Her desiring is directed at what Lacan calls the Big Other, or the symbolic order of things. This Big Other manifests when we exchange objects for words. This process of abstracting reality is what promulgates understanding between us. But verbal language is from the other, or another order of things that is constructed before our arrival here on the plane of immanence, and therefore, according to Lacan, it is always somewhat foreign to us.

This fits Kosloff's actual situation in her ancestral Russia, for Lacan's notion of desire refers to the basic feelings of loss that emerge upon entering the symbolic order of the social and language. A person can never explain herself, she can never be completely understood and her needs can never be fulfilled, she can never be in touch with the symbolic order or get rid of the feeling of that constant regress. Her interventions play out the situation for real – perhaps it's that mixing of the subjective and objective again. Under the name of the father, Lacan imagines the subject's psyche as functioning in the same manner as language does, through metonymy and metaphor. The differentiating Laresa, here with this new work, acts out the ineluctable modalities of subject theory, in the land of the Big Other.