

Valeriana* or The No - Enigma Sphinx
by Naomi Aviv

In her video creation “Valeriana”, Masha Yozefpolsky goes back to dealing with her enigmatic image as the “Night Queen”, who chooses to work where the train of thought breaks, in the realm of the un-knowing, at the twilight zone, at the sites of passage or border, a border that is geographical but also heterotopic, thematic and delusional, a border that is also a threshold. The threshold of awareness, and sleep, and dreaming, a threshold of transcendence, a threshold of existence, a threshold of death. The act that she is performing on the threshold of all those thresholds is seemingly designed to cause a “*negative miracle*” – that miraculous, sovereign moment when “*the anticipation dissolves into NOTHING*”. [1] That “*Nothing*” is death, which brings “the freeing enlightenment of life”, that miraculous, mystical apparition that captures our attention like the extreme beauty of an authentic work of art that can only mean “*nothing*”. In the steps of George Bataille, Yozefpolsky takes her viewer’s awareness far from the normal venues of knowing. If until now, in her other video works, there was an acute sense of the search for knowing, understanding, and meaning, it seems that this time, in “Valeriana”, she is longing for the opposite enforced anticipation, free from the enslaving chains of the object (an object in the sense of a thing, a means, and a purpose [2]). She no longer awaits the moment she’ll be rewarded for her desperate search and will “eventually know”, but for that moment when she will “know no more”, the moment that Bataille defines as a sacred, mystical time when “*I would no longer know, when my initial anticipation would dissolve into NOTHING.*” [3]

* Valerian, a sedative drug, effective in cases of sleep disorders and anxiety. May cause delusions.

[1] THE BATAILLE READER, Edited by Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell Publishers, 1997 p. 308

George Bataille explains: This is a moment in which we are feeling relief from the tension of anticipation which enslaves the present and is chaining the moment to something that is supposed to yield a future coveted result. This is, he says, “the routine misery of Man.” By “negative miracle” Bataille means that the miraculous element is contrary to desire (henceforth “negative”). The very definition of a miracle as negative assumes the existence of a “positive miracle”, and justifies the value that is normally attached to the word “miracle”, and the positive pattern of which corresponds to the anticipation of grace.

[2] According to Bataille, the process of the objectivization of Man began at the beginning of time, when Man had produced his first tool. At that very moment, Man and Nature ceased to be united. The very making of that tool and its use in a world that became separate from Man had turned Man into an object. Until then Man, like the beast, had enjoyed an imminent existential experience with no distinction between in and out, an experience that Bataille defines as “water within water”.

[3] There, p. 308

In the world in which Masha Yozefpolsky creates and in which she functions there is a series of actions, a ritual, speech, and Japanese- Renga verses that are inter-linked like the beads of a Moslem rosary. But the act is for the act itself. The poem is for the poem itself. And over all lies that enigmatic obtuseness, an enigma with no solution.

In an objectivized world, in that new realm of humanity, there is nothing to cling to. The rational belongs to the object. "Things" (Man, too, is a "thing") only have meaning as objects or as goods. The new objective is a place where the non-negotiable Man has no nominal value. He is like that blank piece of paper that the "Night Queen" gives out (in a sequence that was shot but is not included in "Valeriana") to passers-by. They take that piece of paper from her like well-mannered automatons, but they do not know what to do with it. Neither does she. She hands them out simply because... because you have to do something and there's nothing to say. And they take that "thing" just because... because you'd better take what is given to you. Perhaps that blank piece of paper holds the solution to the riddle, perhaps that blank piece of paper would suddenly omit some light and shine in the darkness.

In "Valeriana", the artist performs in a costume that she designed herself (Yozefpolsky usually appears as the lead character in her films, always in a costume she designs herself. A kind of East-European Mariko Mori): a black dress, a hat with bell fringes, and black boots split at the top like an animal's hoof (Matthew Bernie, Tarkowsky style?)

Yozefpolsky is the "Night Queen": a witch, a pilgrim/clown in the yard of an asylum, an artist/shaman. This is a film about the dark side of a deep soul with a mystical, very non-American appearance. Quite the contrary. She spreads around her an intense climate designed to ward off anything that is American. The film takes place at the former site of the Berlin Wall. At the border (still a "border", even though the Wall is no more) between East and West. She didn't choose this symbolic enclave accidentally. The video music that she composes, too, has notes that come from both sides. A heavy, colourless world of imagery that brings up hypnotical associations from A.Tarkowsky's world as well as from the mystical world of Ibn Arabi, the Sufi dance, New-Age music produced by running your finger over the edge of a crystal glass, Jung, and a dark forest from a morbid fairy-tale by the Grimm brothers. Her face is like an angel's or a holy nun, a martyr's, her eyes are glazed as if in a trance, her mouth opens and closes like a fish's. Touches of Surrealism, German Expressionism, Russian pathos and Christian symbolism, but also Zen, and Minimalism, and psychedelia, and epilepsy, and coma and fragmentation. Slow vibrations. Another time. Two years of work, 14 modular minutes during which, like this, like some hybrid, grotesque, gothic, eclectic creature in that dramatic black dress, roaming the field or the forest, she is circling around herself with a big, fat, pig's leg. She is dancing some kind of a Dervish dance, she swings her animal-like legs up and down, she crawls over the arched rail of a bridge (a passage object), she lies down, curled, embryo-like and the world circles with her. Her hands, in lace gloves, pass a small frog from one to the other, she unites with a horse in the field and becomes a frozen image of half-woman half-mare, she runs after a

black dog in the woods, she closes her dreaming eyes, and she mumbles silently. And again and again: not in the same order, and for different lengths of time. The repetition will put the order of her actions into a trance, into a circular dance that has no beginning and no end, into a centrifugal state where there is no past and no present, where soul and body are one, and everything mixing and blending until, maybe, some fragments of light (awareness, intelligence, life) will shine like those flashes shining under the entire bulk of imagery in her film as if they were its subconsciousness.

For the film is made of layers of images on the background of a large quantity of fish-tails organized like a grid over a surface of shining silica-carbonate. She had assembled those tails at a fish factory, and had put them in big plastic boxes, and had sprinkled them with salt so that the fat and the blood will be secreted. Then she hung the tails in net sleeves in the sun. At the end of the process she had covered them in clear varnish. The surface made of fish-tails serves as a background to her film, the under current of everything that had been shot in Berlin. In the meantime, in her studio, those tails are still producing fat and smell. "Smell," she says, "is sometimes very important. Sometimes it reminds you of rot and death, and sometimes of sea and childhood. I grew up in Odessa, near the sea. In 1974, when I was nine and a half years old, I was taken to Israel. I have been displaced ever since. Warped connection. Erased identity. Don't know what to do with the world. Mixing languages. I don't like what I'm seeing here nor over there. The world is screwing you, it is diseased with Americanism. Insanity is the norm. Life, here, is a collective, anti-creative masochism. I want to be a witch, to change the way we look at the world. As a child, until I was eight years old, I had a Pravoslav nanny, very orthodox. I'd cross myself and make wishes silently. Reality suffocates, blinds. Desire is drained and converts the blinding reality into some kind of dreaming – survival. Sleep, like the blindness of Saramago, is an unavoidable plague. The punishment is also the cure."

As in some of her previous video works, Masha Yozefpolsky acts upon anger (over experiences of uprooting, estrangement, alienation, loneliness, desire) harnessed to self-destruction, bound to existentialist anxiety. The cries and whispers of the shattered individual have joined forces with the state of Man. Her personal anger that had joined the universal frustrating reality with the anxiousness over the political-economical uncertainty in Israel has grown in her but at the same time had subsided. There is no more point in trying to point out the ongoing rift, you'd better remain in it as an anthropologist researching a remote tribe or, better still, stop trying to look into what is beyond your powers and just get assimilated as if it were nothing, a vacuum.

The objectivisation of Man had left him with two choices: either be an object, a piece of goods, or be superfluous in a world of goods, i.e. redundant. Many philosophers and artists have tried to foresee this crisis - reality, then explain it and mark it, and then point out the imminent catastrophe. But "most of humanity had given its consent to the industrial project... And of course, most of humanity is right. Compared with the industrial boom, all the rest is meaningless... The huge development of production means alone can decipher the meaning of production, which is the non-productive annihilation of wealth... But when

awareness (...) finds itself out and looks at production as destined to annihilation, at that very moment the world of productivity knows no more what to do with its products.” [4]

Yozefpolsky’s work derives from conclusions similar to the ones from which the Dadaist project, and later on the works of Joseph Beuys, were born. In “Valeriana” she wishes “to explain a painting to a dead rabbit” (Beuys, 1964), to speak the language of action in the nothingness, in death, although it is a helpless, castrated, incoherent action. For “The loose thought is also the quickest means to finding out what, in fact, are the wheels within wheels – the impossible. But that has no deep meaning unless it is unaware. This helplessness defines the height of the possible within the limits of that which avoids coherency. If you think coherently, you notice that there is no more room for you.” [5]

But Yozefpolsky, contrary to Boyce and closer to Bataille, does not believe any more that it is possible for Man to transcend the material reality. A dead rabbit is not capable of transcendence any more than a pig’s leg or an object as an object is. A rose is a rose is a rose. Following Bataille’s conclusions she suggests the reverse transcendence: instead of transcending to the metaphysical – the subject is now aspiring to transcend to the twilight zone of death. “Complete abandonment in the vain moment.” [6] The reverse action could lead the way to a clearer awareness. “The intimate order is being represented but in continuous mumbling. Those mumbblings are extraordinarily potent, for they are capable of juxtaposing the principle of intimacy with the principle of reality, but nevertheless, the good will with which they are accepted is forever marked with disappointment. How weak these voices are! How helpless are we against their elusive sound – when reality’s clear voice is ringing in our ears! Authority and authenticity stand firmly by the Thing, by production and by the awareness of the produced Thing. All the rest is just a lie, confusion.” [7]

[4] George Bataille, *The Theory of Religion*, Resling Publishers, 2003

[5] *There*, p. 11

[6] *There*, p. 76

[7] *There*, p. 72

The accumulating bulk of Masha Yozefpolsky’s works shows her as a powerful, expressive, insistent video-poet with an “internal eye” of rare sensitivity. Yozefpolsky, perhaps like humanistic video artists such as Bill Viola and Irit Batzri, has chosen to distinguish herself by a demanding, technological, cumbersome medium through which she is writing her mental, delicately refined poetry. “Poetry is the ultimate realm of survival,” she claims in one of her works.

The psycho-physical environments that Yozefpolsky suggests function as mental-sensual maps outlining circular paths - paths that seem like a brain forest of nerves in existential disorientation.

The longed-for sleep, the dreams, verses spoken out in different languages by

different speakers, the brain as a space where a utricule event is taking place – all point at an objective far from being decipherable or disciplined, and are opposed to intelligence's natural tendency to look ad nauseum for a meaning in everything. Her conclusion, that the clinging to the rational in an irrational world is an impossibility, wholly corresponds to the political reality in Israel. I dare suggest that Yozefpolsky is a unique voice in today's artistic scene, a voice that is looking at mad reality and responding to it with a reflexive poetry, the existential poetry of Man at an era lacking intelligence.

#