

Introduction
to the
exhibition

Deimantas Narkevičius
Once in the XX Century

6 May – 2 July 2006

The films of Deimantas Narkevičius explore the recent history of Lithuania, investigating the relationship of its peoples to their past. As with many other eastern European countries Lithuania was part of the Soviet Union, a socialist state founded upon the political ideology of communism. Lithuania was a Soviet state from 1940 until 1991.

With a fascination for the documentary style of filmmaking, Narkevičius deconstructs and questions the nature of the genre, taking a critical look at its ability to accurately record and communicate.

Using interviews, archive film, animation, Super 8 and video he connects history to personal experience by focussing on ordinary people: their everyday lives, stories and memories. The work explores

questions about political and moral obligations to history and memory, asking how, why and what is remembered.

GALLERY 2
ENERGY LITHUANIA
17 MINUTES

Energy Lithuania tells the story of workers in Elektrėnai—a town that was established to service an electric power plant during the Soviet era.

Narkevičius films inside the power plant itself and also outside, in the surrounding areas. Elektrėnai is, on the one hand, an ordinary town—a group take a Latino dance class, children play in the sun and jump off a pier—yet this is contrasted by the extraordinary tale of its construction.

We hear how, in the mid 1960s, homes and streets were connected

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to the electricity network for the first time. A former worker reminisces enthusiastically about life in Elektrėnai and the optimistic, utopian vision of the time: “Nobody has ever experienced such joy as the ones who laid the electrical cables”, he declares. Although the power station is still in use today it now stands as a monument to a failed political ideology.

The film is shot using Super 8, a format usually associated with old home movies. This intensifies a feeling of nostalgia and creates a sense of distance. Even though the film was made recently, Narkevičius has chosen visual techniques associated with older technologies of film production; like those used in Lithuanian television documentaries when he was growing up in the 1970s.

Part of the film focuses on the socialist mural painted onto a wall of the power plant: a memorial to those who died in accidents during its assembly.

Narkevičius likens this film to a painting; by bringing painterly subjectivity into the film it is transformed from traditional documentary into something far more poetic and poignant.

GALLERY 3 **THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME** 17 MINUTES

For THE ROLE OF A LIFETIME, Narkevičius interviewed the British documentary maker Peter Watkins about his life and career.

Watkins has been called “the most neglected major filmmaker at work today”. Despite a substantial body of work, including seven feature films, and an Academy Award for best documentary in 1966, it is still hard to gain access to his films. The work he is most well known for is *The War Game* (1965), a disturbing description of a nuclear attack on the UK. Filmed in a ‘docu-drama’ style it was so unsettling that the BBC banned it. Since then Watkins has felt increasingly ostracised by the film and television industry and has lived as a self-imposed exile in Lithuania for many years.

In Narkevičius’s film Watkins’s voice is juxtaposed with pencil drawings of himself and of the Lithuanian socialist theme park, Gruto—also known as ‘Stalinworld’—along with archive Super 8 footage of Brighton filmed in the 1960s.

Viewing these apparently mismatched elements causes one to search for connections within the work. What are the relationships between Watkins and 1960s Brighton? Between Gruto Park, drawing and documentary filmmaking? We are left to form our own conclusions.

The film provides us with an intimate portrait of Watkins, whilst raising questions about the ethical and social responsibilities upon artists and about the relationship between cinematic representation and historical record.

GALLERY 4 **ONCE IN THE XX CENTURY** 8 MINUTES

This film uses famous footage from the Lithuanian National TV archive that documents the dismantling of a Lenin statue in Vilnius, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The images of Lenin hanging above the crowd with his outstretched arm were broadcast around the world countless times by television news media. They have since become a symbol of the demise of communism.

In this film Narkevičius has edited the footage in such a way that it plays backwards, appearing as if the crowd are actually celebrating the erection of the Lenin statue rather than its demise. Through this re-editing of the facts Narkevičius shows how easy it can be for filmmakers to subvert and manipulate the truth, bringing into question the impartiality of the medium as an accurate way of documenting historical events. The ‘XX’ of the title can be read as either the twentieth century or as a blank to be filled in by the viewer, alluding to the fact that history often repeats itself.

GALLERY 5 **DISAPPEARANCE OF A TRIBE** 10 MINUTES

This film presents a series of black and white family photographs that show everyday life during the Socialist era — the experience of which has now been totally lost. The photographs are of Narkevičius’s own family, his father in particular, and are of very personal significance to him. For the soundtrack Narkevičius has made field recordings at the locations shown in the photographs, combining contemporary sounds with the images of a personal history. These private photographs were not originally intended for public consumption but act now as a historical document of a specific time in Lithuania’s social and political history.

By appropriating such imagery and bringing it into a gallery context Narkevičius raises questions about the nature of public and private histories and where the lines between them begin to cross.

Rather than documenting history Narkevičius reveals its processes, leaving it for the viewer to come up with the final story. In all these films we are encouraged to contemplate the veracity of the documentary format, and to consider how history is recorded, remembered, edited and constructed.