



Deimantas Narkevičius The Unanimous Life

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Deimantas Narkevičius

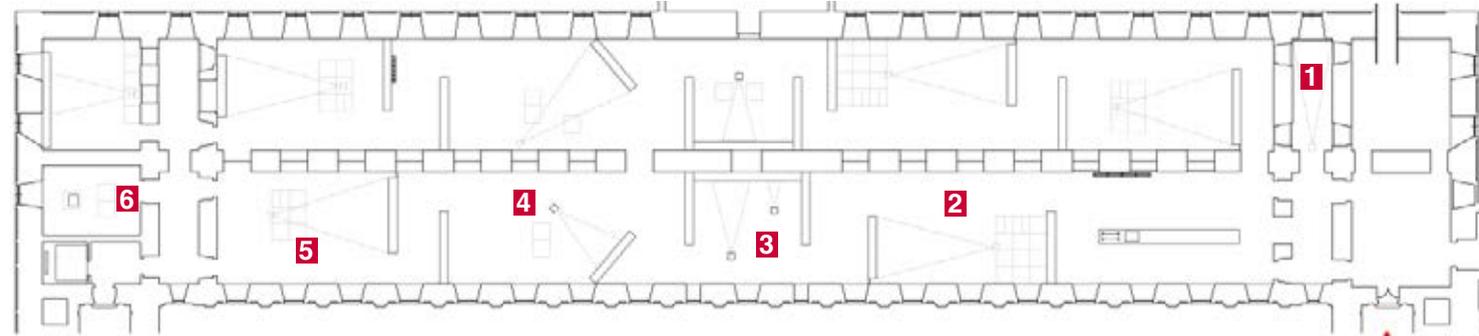
The Unanimous Life

This is the largest retrospective of Deimantas Narkevičius's work to date. Deimantas Narkevičius is an artist who has worked mainly in film and video although he has also produced sculptural pieces. These sculptures contribute to the creation of a rare synthesis between filmed reality and the almost performative presence of objects in space. This Lithuanian artist's oeuvre subtly develops an underlying theme of contemporary society: our relationship with temporality and memory. The transition that took place in Lithuania from a Soviet society to an independent democratic state gave Narkevičius the opportunity to insist on the importance of understanding the emergence of a new dimension of historical time.

The fact that most of his works –excluding two– are films will require the visitors' utmost attention, as screening lasts a total of nearly four hours. The best way to enjoy the exhibition would be to consider repeated visits. Narkevičius captures and transforms images in very different ways, sometimes recurring to historical –but not professional– formats, such as 16mm or appropriating existing material and combining it with his own original images; other times he uses technology to highlight aspects of a more cinematographic nature. His work is a confirmation of the difficulty of portraying history through images. As such, experiencing the images is of equal or greater importance than the story they tell.

It would be a mistake to describe his film production as “documentary” cinema, although the relationship between record, memory and testimonial it displays is at the forefront. In the various stages that make up his filmmaking, one perceives that historiography is an exercise in the interpretation of images and spaces. At the same time, it feeds on listening and conversing. The reception and production of the past depends to a large extent on an unstable and complex negotiation between fact and fiction in which we as individuals and part of a group or society, all engage.

What Deimantas Narkevičius's different works have allowed us to understand is that it is just as feasible to mythicise the real –that which truly happened and is happening– as it is to discover that myths are capable of engendering a strong sense of reality themselves. The need to understand the relationship between the memory of



- 1.- *Disappearance of a Tribe*, 2005. 9'16"
- 2.- *The Head*, 2007. 12'15"
- 3.- *His-Story*, 1998. 7' and 30"
- 4.- *Countryman*, 2002. 19'
- 5.- *The Dud Effect*, 2008. 15'40"
- 6.- *Matrioškos* 2005. 23'36"

what is experienced and what is imagined is strongly present in the films *Scena*, *Energy Lithuania* and in a more radical way, one of his latest works *Revisiting Solaris*, to mention three examples. The latter takes the assemblage of extremely disparate materials, a technique used frequently in his work, to the extreme.

Following the definition of the philosopher Manuel de Landa, this is about combining elements that make up the “content” of history –in this case the architectural spaces conceived by the modern project to convey the rationality of progress– with other diametrically different material, such as the reference to a classic element of the science fiction film genre as seen in *Revisiting Solaris*. This apparent play between references to a real historical project and a fictional utopia seeks to reveal history as a complex subject, heterogeneous and non-linear.

In these works the linguistic aspects, the scope of the different narratives that link each of the protagonists, has just as much significance as the visual dimension, the spatial investigation that takes place through the camera. From the very start, the viewer is immersed in a situation where he is forced to distinguish between useful pasts and those to be discarded, just as he realises the importance of “remembering the future”, that is, producing a collective imagining of what lies ahead.

Chus Martínez
Curator of the exhibition



Disappearance of a Tribe, 2005
Lithuanian title: *Genties išnykimas*
Betacam SP video, b&w, stereo sound. Running time: 9'16"
Exhibition format: DVD

Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, gb agency, Paris,
and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

Disappearance of a tribe is the continuation of a series of work examining the period of radical social experimentation that took place in Soviet Europe in the post-war period. This examination is not inspired by a sentiment of a utopian past. The creation of a multicultural mega-state under the common idea of an international socialist community, which covered nearly half the planet, ironically, is similar to the current moment, when we are facing the challenges of European Union integration. *Disappearance of a tribe* is a cinematic assembly of private photographs, which portrays the life story of a family. The pictures depict a common life in the Socialist era and that experience, which seem to have been totally lost.

The Head, 2007
Lithuanian title: *Galva*
35mm film footage transferred to Betacam SP video, colour, mono sound
Original version: Russian and German. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 12'15"
Exhibition format: DVD

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía
Gift of the artist

On my way home, walking along Gediminas Avenue (formerly called Lenin Avenue), I dived into a mob, which, overcome with enthusiasm, had been waiting for something to happen. This was an ubiquitous feeling, during August and September of 1991, right after the hapless Moscow coup attempt to regain its Lithuanian colony. The atmosphere was brimming with the anticipation of change –although it wasn't clear what type of change or what it would bring. The ‘Velvet Revolutions’ passed by quite peacefully (they were also endorsed by the Communist elite) and did not draw borders of ethnic or political separation –at least at the time– and there was no clearly distinguishable enemy (apparent collaborators disappeared in the far reaches of Russia or mingled in the same rejoicing mob), which could be identified as ‘the defeated.’ Initially, the enthusiastic mob began spontaneously disassembling Communist regime symbols (although Communism in its true sense had never been implemented), and its objects of public political propaganda –namely, the monuments. In the Soviet Republics, these sculptures were primarily interpreted as domination markers of the occupying state. Public mobilisation to peacefully break free from Russian occupation was a principal desire of the Lithuanian people and was successfully implemented with firmness and patience in the years to follow. Meanwhile, the disintegration and transformation of the Socialist bureaucratic state has been continuing ever since, though has yet to be implemented in all areas of the state sector. Hence, in a matter of days, with the support of the joyful crowd, the monuments to Socialist Realism were dismantled: Communist ideologists, creators of the Soviet state and portraits of subsequent political figures. Monuments of the same period and style, depicting Lithuanian cultural figures, escaped this fate. The dismantled monuments were stored away and left –as if any concept of what to do with them had, for the moment, been exhausted. No historic period passes without leaving a trace, and its aftermath does not disappear naturally, especially such a dramatic, extensive, radical and overwhelming tide as Soviet rule. After nearly two decades, it remains difficult to reflect upon the period without guilt and it feels uncomfortable to analyse the cultural genesis of this period. Moreover, the change in contemporary aesthetics is so complete that the Soviet past is simply difficult to recognise, and the heritage is so sizeable, that its impact is being felt over a longer term than it was possible to expect. The historical circumstances of the Cold War are well known and are often remembered with nostalgia, not only in the former Eastern Bloc. Despite this awareness, one might question whether the visual synecdoche of



that time –Social Realism– has been properly evaluated, and if people are generally aware that one of its functions was to duplicate international modernism. Readings of this neoclassical style, which synthesised an everyday realism, provide more authentic information than a number of political evaluations of the period. The art of the Soviet era has preserved its astonishing and apparently expressive cynicism, as individual creativity was reduced to a minimum in the face of canonical requirements. Consequently, these objects constitute a visual heritage of political terror, and monuments of the psychological pressure (and intentional and financial repression) exerted on individual creativity. We shouldn't, however, confuse things. Objects from that time are not a crime. Rather, they are witnesses to the crimes of history, a visual heritage of the epoch, which must be preserved and cherished if we are to feel any sympathy for what was lost by people living in that era and separate individuals from their creatively constrained art works –even if the consequences of this aesthetic repression are still felt in the former Eastern Bloc. Meanwhile, the 'competing' arts in the West made dynamic developments that seem accelerated –even now– because of relative political situations. The removal of monuments from central squares of East European cities visually softens or falsifies the development of the history of art and politics. A new generation of artists (and citizens) can hardly perceive that for 45 years freedom of individual expression and criticism of the domination ideology was not tolerated. By their very nature, Socialist Realist monuments are representative of their epoch. We might well ask: on what grounds, by what rights should they be preserved? As a visual design of the historical period or simply a fashionable style, Socialist Realism is an equally valuable art style within the canon of 20th century art movements, although its principles are radically divergent from Modernist art. It was an art style in service to ideology that formally referred to a classicism which was equally far from democratic. This essential difference seems

paradoxical and ensures its vitality by inspiring contemporary artists from the very beginning of collapse of Communism, lowering the veil of nostalgia for the collapsed Utopia, even several decades prior to its 'official' end. As such, Socialist Realist works can be displayed in art museums next to works of other canonical movements as equally valuable historical indexes, representative of the gap which evolved at that time and split the formerly united Europe. Monuments that until recently were symbolic markers of the most important public spaces should not become carousels within theme parks built as undefined testaments, displayed as if for the appreciation of important achievements of the past and fetishising something corrupt (1). No doubt, the largest impact would be, given the means, returning the sculptures to their former locations, at least for some time. Not that the enthusiasm of the early 1990s was futile; the spontaneous and sincere campaigns of the mob changed the symbolic meaning of the monuments. The gigantic sculptures lost their political meaning and ideological significance. They were 'de-sacralised.' Monuments became sculptures again, just like any other that can be transported, deposited, displayed elsewhere or returned to their former sites. My proposal for *skulptur projekte münster 07* is to dismount the monumental sculptural portrait of Karl Marx in the town of Chemnitz and transport it to Münster for the period of the exhibition, and then return it to the same place in Chemnitz.

(1) There is one such Soviet sculpture park in Lithuania and another in Hungary; I am referring to Grūto Parkas in Lithuania in my work *The Role of a Lifetime* (2003).

His-Story, 1998

Lithuanian title: *Istorija*

Two films, double projection

Part 1: film 35mm, b&w, mono sound

Original version: Lithuanian. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 7'

Exhibition format: 16mm

Part 2: film 16mm in loop, b&w, silent, running time: 30"

Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, gb agency, Paris, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

This film is made using authentic Russian film making equipment from 60's. In the film me and some people very close to me are telling the story of my deceased parents. In the film my partner and me are about the same age like my parents were in the sixties when was the boom of Soviet realistic movies. The difference is that such a political story could not be produced at that time.

Countryman, 2002

Lithuanian title: *Kaimietis*

16mm film, colour, mono sound

Original version: Lithuanian. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 19'

Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, gb agency, Paris, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

The narrative of the film *Kaimietis* is based on the monologues of two individuals who do not know each other. These monologues have been recorded for a young sculptor, the male character of the film who is getting ready to leave his country, while the text of a female student was recorded just after leaving the home country. Both characters are not typical economic or political immigrants. They share a common hunger for new experiences in another country, in another cultural context. Both young people delve into the issues that they deem personally relevant, without attaching too much importance to linear sequence. The visual structure of the film is aimed at creating visual suggestions of these two documentary narratives without filming the actual narrators. The sculptor is speaking while showing a portrait of the national hero, created by himself, while the monologue of young female student is accompanied by photographs: snapshots of her first days in the strange city. The first reflections of travelling, moving house and new experiences are compared with the point of departure, the city which they know well, and from the first moment of departure, this starting point becomes an object of remembrance.

The Dud Effect, 2008

Lithuanian title: *Nesprogusios bombos poveikis*

16mm film transferred to HD video, colour, stereo sound

Original version: Russian. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 15'40"

Exhibition format: Blu-ray Disc

Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, gb agency, Paris, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

Abandoned Soviet nuclear rocket launch bases form the subject of this film. There is a base like this here in Lithuania. It was closed down back in 1977, but the underground catacomb structure is still impressive in its scale and scope. I have found a few people who did serve on such a base and who provided me with all the specific technical information about the way it once functioned. My basic idea is to create a film in which the scenario would be a launch of such a rocket from the site in Lithuania. Fortunately, such a thing never happened during the Cold War era, but

with the new political atmosphere of confrontation between West and East (including Russia), the horror –which we thought was gone– of a possible strategic nuclear weapons conflict is rising from the past. The other source of inspiration for this theme is the outstanding film by Peter Watkins, *The War Game*. I do not want to comment extensively on this film, but the fact that such a film appeared in 1965 shows the individual and collective concern about the danger of nuclear weapon competition that existed in the UK back in the 1960s. Unfortunately, such a concern has never sprouted in the former Eastern Bloc. I am afraid there is much less will to understand the deadly potential of weapons of mass destruction, which are still available today. My basic scenario for this work is to (re)create a shot of an R-14 rocket launch on the site. I am not using animation or 3D technologies to illustrate such an act. It is still more about filming this rather large territory of nature (with the remains of the base) as well as the structure of the catacombs, with the intention of conveying a psychological perception of consternation in the face of such a possible act and its outcome. In addition, I am using some extra found footage from the 70s that was filmed around Lithuania (the area is actually very beautiful; it is one of the country's few national parks with a rich fauna). There are also some unique black-and-white photographs of the R-14 complex ready to launch an attack, taken during practical training at an identical site used for the film. To recreate the "launch," I used the very modest media of film collage (more like a suggestion), including the black-and-white photo shots and a soundtrack of commands in Russian. I actually met a Russian officer who still remembers them by heart.

Matrioškos, 2005

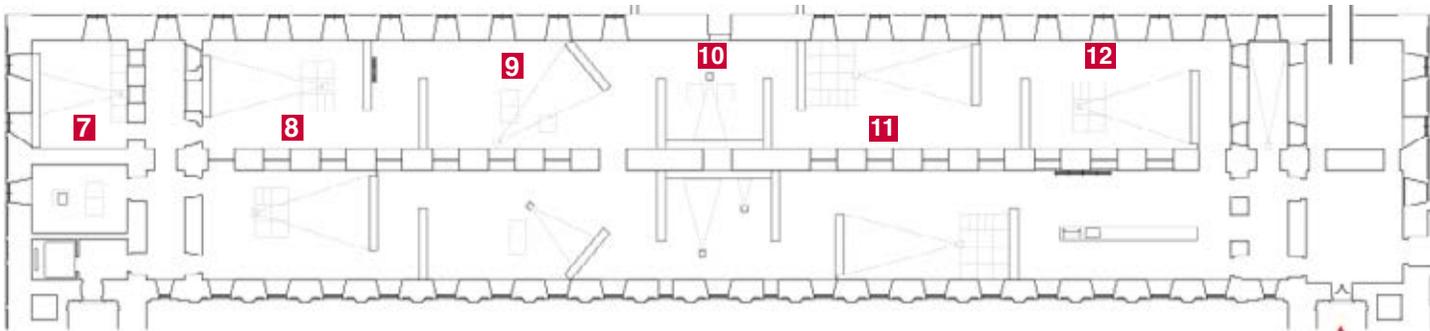
Betacam SP video, colour, stereo sound

Original version: Lithuanian. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 23'36"

Formato de exposición: DVD

Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, gb agency, Paris, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

Matrioškos is a documentary-style video that is, in effect, a re-enactment of a fictional story. Three professional actresses, who took part in the commercial television project "Matriojskas" produced by VTM in Belgium, are re-telling the scenario of that film as if it was biographical. The fictional story, "based on a true story," is presented as a documentary that traces the experiences of three individuals. The project questions the current or imbalance between fictional narrative and documentary practice in contemporary popular media.



7.- *Legend Coming True*, 1999. 68'15"
8.- *Energy Lithuania*, 2000. 17'36"

9.- *Once in the XX Century*, 2004. 7'56"
10.- *Europe*, 54°54'-25°19', 1997. 9'

11.- *Scena*, 2003. 9'30"
12.- *Revisiting Solaris*, 2007. 18'28"

Legend Coming True, 1999

Lithuanian title: *Legendos išsipildymas*

Super 8mm film transferred to Betacam SP video, colour, stereo sound

Original version: Russian and Yiddish. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 68'15"

Format of exhibition: DVD

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (R. AD04937)

The film is divided into three parts.

Part one: A small girl's trembling voice reads an excerpt from a romantic legend about a city, which is supposed to become world-renowned. Indeed, this fame was acquired in the middle of the 20th century. Vilnius became a symbol of the Holocaust.

Part two: Fania Brantsovskaya is telling the story of her youth in pre-war and wartime Vilnius. The fundamental topography of the film is made up of four aspects of the city: the childhood street, the school façade, the ghetto yard and the Rudininkai forest. All of these locations are dramatically associated with Lithuanian Jewish history, and visually they remain largely unchanged since the mid-1940s. A super-8 film camera was programmed to shoot one frame per minute over a period of 24 hours. In this way, the 24 hours of shooting became 14 minutes of viewing time. The result is similar to an animated film. Four days and nights are compressed into a story that takes an hour to tell. Fania spans the entire 20th century in the course of her story.

Part three: Chasia Spannerflieg is performing a partisan song, in Yiddish, exactly as she did onstage in a little theatre during the ghetto years. Chasia did not agree to tell her story in the film. (I found out later that her experience during that time was even more dramatic).

Energy Lithuania, 2000

Lithuanian title: *Lietuvos Energija*

Super 8mm film transferred to Betacam SP video, colour, stereo sound

Original version: Lithuanian. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 17'36"

Exhibition format: DVD

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (R. AD04936)

An instrumentalist, production-oriented society was an actual realisation of the avant-garde visions of the early 20th century. Lithuania in the second half of the last century was undergoing vastly more radical changes than the artworks of the period would ever allow you to sense. In Lithuania, the avant-garde ideas of 20th-century art were more successfully implemented in other areas of life. This is why I have been looking for thematic and aesthetic impulses for my films in the reality of industrial society. The film *Energy Lithuania* is a documentary study of an industrial installation (an electric power plant), which includes conversations with people who have worked there. Although the power plant is functioning, it has now become like a museum of industrial thought. Still, the livelihood of thousands of people depends on it. It will not be easy to reform industrial society. The biggest challenge is to find a credible intellectual replacement for positivist industrial Romanticism.

Once in the XX Century, 2004

Lithuanian title: *Kartą XX amžiuje*

Betacam SP video, colour, mono sound. Running time: 7'56"

Exhibition format: DVD

Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, gb agency, Paris, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

This film is based on already existing video material. I acquired material from Lithuanian National TV archives which documents the action of taking down the sculpture of Lenin. In addition, I bought video footage of the same action from a freelance video reporter. Consequently, there is a two-camera perspective on the event. The images of taking down the sculpture of Lenin in Vilnius are very familiar because they were widely broadcasted by CNN and several other major news networks. The images of Lenin hanging above the crowd and waving his hand were



repeated a thousand times by CNN during the last decade as the symbol of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and failure of the idea of communism. In this new work, the materials are edited in a way that will make it look like the crowd is prepar-

ing for and then celebrating the erection of the sculpture of Lenin. The concept underlying the work is not nostalgia for the olden days. In many Eastern European countries (which are going under an extreme new liberal development of their economies), there are quite large numbers of people who still long for certain socialist ideas, dreams or even utopias. As the reality of Soviet Union is becoming alien and forgotten to the majority of Eastern Europeans, the ideas of socialism are resurfacing as a possible alternative to the extreme new liberalism. For the younger generation, communism is becoming something very exotic. In their mind, it definitely doesn't represent a state of terror versus the individual or the ideology of colonising entire nations. On the other hand, the recent past in the East is denied by the new politicians. Some of them (who launched their political careers before the changes of the 1990s) are becoming something akin to right-wing populists. Oftentimes, their rhetoric is rather reminiscent of something from the past, and there is something scary about even the vaguest possibility of repeating the not-so-distant past.



Europe, 54°54'-25°19', 1997

Lithuanian title: *Europa, 54°54'-25°19'*

16mm film, colour, mono sound

Original version: English. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 9'

Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, gb agency, Paris, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

This film is a simple documentary of a trip I made one morning from my former flat to the geographical centre of Europe. One Friday morning, I got the urge to go and see the centre of Europe. Though I had been aware for some time that the centre of Europe was in Lithuania, I had simply disregarded the fact as unimportant, as one of the many phenomena of the ethnocentric ideology typical of a young country. That morning I asked myself what my relationship was to that geographical fact. It occurred to me that it was also the centre of my travels, the central point in the time I had spent elsewhere. I looked at the map, trying to remind myself of the time I had spent in Russia, in places east of the centre. I discovered, however, that I had spent the same amount of time in the West. The distances I had travelled in different directions were also evenly distributed around the town I knew best. So I decided to go and see the centre of my travels and of the time I had spent elsewhere. As I got closer to that place, I got the feeling I had been there before and had seen the spot. Maybe it was in Lithuania, or perhaps it was somewhere in Russia or Poland. It could have been anywhere in Europe.

Scena, 2003

Super 8mm film transferred to Betacam SP video, colour, stereo sound

Original version: Lithuanian. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 9'30"

Exhibition format: DVD

Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, gb agency, Paris, and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

The film is inspired by the architecture of the building of the CAC, the Contemporary Art Centre, in Vilnius. As I have been working at this institution for 9 years, I could say that the situation surrounding the CAC is Utopia. The architecture of the building could be described as a product of 1960s Soviet functional modernism. It was built as an exhibition pavilion for the 50th anniversary of the great October Revolution and was christened the Palace of Exhibitions. It was an official venue for official art exhibitions up until the early 1990s when, ironically and somewhat irrationally, it became a Contemporary Art Centre with an independent artistic programme. The institution's programme is so ambitious that no other institution can compete with it; and because it focuses on contemporary art, the



number of visitors has plummeted in comparison with the days when it was The Palace of Arts and offered an artistic programme for "all the people." Consequently, the institution has isolated itself from the local infrastructure because it has refused to compromise with its programme in order to "bring back the masses." The modernistic building has become a refuge for the people who work there. There is everyday life going on inside the institution, which seems to contradict its purpose, but in fact the people working there are supporting this Utopia with their activities even if they do so unintentionally. Most of them are special characters.

Revisiting Solaris, 2007

Lithuanian title: *Aplankant Soliarį*

35mm film transferred to HD video, colour, stereo sound

Original version: Lithuanian. Subtitles: Spanish. Running time: 18'28"

Based on an original text by Stanislaw Lem

Exhibition format: Blu-ray Disc

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (R. AD04938)

The futurologist Stanislaw Lem predicted that technological development would increasingly dominate human relations. Artificial (machine) intelligence would even go so far as to attempt to substitute feelings inherent to human beings. 'It will not,' Lem stated in one of his late interviews. He knew that true artificial intelligence could not be created; better and better imitations would appear instead. The electronic device called the computer already pretends to have intelligence, and is even capable of being a conscious conversation partner for human beings, but that is neither deception nor substitution, only imitation. Materialised psychological projections based on an individual's memory appear in Lem's space drama *Solaris*. The astronaut Chris Kelvin is visited by a woman who is outwardly identical to his dead wife. Legendary Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky, who interpreted the novel quite freely, filmed the story in 1972. In his film, Tarkovsky added a family element, so that the astronaut visits his father and his family home before going to outer space. Additionally, quite a long part of the film version takes place on earth – both the astronaut's departure from it and his return at the end of the film when he goes back to his father's house. Due to the way the film is constructed, or more precisely, composed, the frames of nature scenes have quite a symbolic meaning and are visually connected to the paintings of Renaissance or Romantic masters. To me it seemed that Tarkovsky was less critical than Lem of the increasing impact of the electronic media (or media in general) on human relations. In my short film, *Revisiting Solaris*, the actor Donatas Banionis again appears in his role as Chris Kelvin, more than forty years after Andrej Tarkovsky's *Solaris* was made. *Revisiting Solaris* is based on the last chapter of Lem's book, the part that had been left out of Tarkovsky's version. In this last chapter, Kelvin reflects on his brief visit on the "soil" of the planet Solaris shortly before his return from the space mission. As material to visualise the landscape of Solaris, I used a series of photographs made by the Lithuanian symbolist painter and composer Mykalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis in 1905 in Anapa. Čiurlionis' works are marked by an original conception of space, producing the impression of an infinite expanse and limitless time. The pictures thus take on a quality of cosmic vision and deep inner concentration. I found it very interesting that in 1971 Andrej Tarkovsky filmed the same surface of the Black Sea in Crimea to represent the landscape of the mysterious ocean.

**Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte Reina Sofía**

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Opening Times

Mondays to Saturdays: 10.00 - 21.00

Sundays: 10.00 - 14.30

Closed Tuesdays

The exhibition rooms will
be vacated 15 minutes before
the museum closes

Illustrations

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