

On Port Authority. A Project by Gintaras Didžiapetris with AaBbPp, Elena Narbutaitė, Rosalind Nashashibi and William Eggleston

By **Agar Ledo Arias**, curator of the exhibition

The potato is the edible tuber of a plant native to South America. Wikipedia tells us that it was domesticated on the high Andean plateau by its inhabitants some 7000 years ago, and brought to Europe by the Spanish out of curiosity. Its consumption spread around the world until becoming, in our days, one of the main ingredients in most diets.

The Spanish term 'patata' is a cross between the Quechuan 'papa' and the word 'batata' from Santo Domingo, the island 'discovered' by Christopher Columbus in 1492. From Spain it spread to other countries that have preserved the name, sometimes with slight variations: patata, potato, patatis, potet... or *Patate*, the title given by Gintaras Didžiapetris (Vilnius, Lithuania, 1985) to one of the works in the exhibition, a publication that includes a ten-page text that is the result of combining the writings of several authors from whom the artist requested contributions and several different approaches to the idea of the synthetic.

The convergence of several authors is a common feature in the artist's projects, who has produced a number of works, exhibitions and publishing ideas in collaboration with colleagues who either share authorship or else, as in the case of the new publication, cancel it. The result is an anonymous text, edited and synthesised by the artist, in which several levels of correspondence coexist. Its title, *Patate*, reminds us that as well as being a combination of two terms – a foodstuff, a title or a book – the potato contains in itself the memory of other potatoes, the simultaneous existence of several times.

\*

A process of synthesis involves the combination of the elements that shape independent material or abstract entities into a unique and unified entity. This definition could be applied to both the new publication and to the exhibition itself, for they both constitute structures created

by the organisation of elements in a process of information exchange: 'I think of an exhibition as a little system, paradigm or construction that is built as an example. It is not an illustration to a problem but a structure in itself. It may contain more knots than one. Not just something that exists, but a structure that actually works as an organism. I believe that certain objects have the capability of thinking for themselves. It is no longer the case that you produce something and then put it on show, [rather] they are little thought organisms that you bring into the world without even knowing what kind of an adventure or effect they will have,' was the artist's response some years ago to a question regarding his way of understanding the exhibition.

Gintaras Didžiapetris is more interested in the mental processes that shape objects, or their use, than in their appearance or material representation. In earlier exhibitions such as *From Time to Time* (2007), his first one-man show presented at the Contemporary Art Centre (CAC) in Vilnius when he was still a student at the Vilnius Academy of Fine Arts, he already called into question concepts related to temporality, function and context of the art work, issues he would re-examine in the work *Gerard Byrne's 1984 and Beyond at The Art Exhibition Hall, Vilnius* (2008), documenting a Byrne exhibition in Vilnius in 2007 and removing all references to the moment it was produced. In recent shows such as *Prince* (2012) he focused on the state of transformation of objects in a constant time flux, while in *Color and Device* (2013) he revised issues of representation and abstraction starting from nature and the physical qualities of objects, their associations and the various interpretations they conceal.

In the last decade the art scene of Vilnius has been invigorated by CAC and Tulips & Roses art gallery, and by people like Jonas Žakaitis, Deimantas Narkevičius, Raimundas Malašauskas, and the artist's peers Liudvikas Buklys and Elena Narbutaitė, which enables us situate Didžiapetris's work in the context of the cultural scene that has emerged in the Lithuanian capital at the turn of the century. Members of his generation, which would soon take centre stage in the international art scene, came together in the Lithuanian-Cypriot Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, entitled *oO (o Oo o oo)* and curated by Malašauskas. The exhibition suggested notions of asymmetry and cohabitation by bringing together artists and works of diverse origin, which, despite preserving their independence, formed a new and unique structure.

Echoes of past exhibitions and works reverberate in the show that Gintaras Didžiapetris has prepared for MARCO, Museo de Arte Contemporánea de Vigo, in which the artist's works coexist with others by a range of artists that act as the constitutive elements of a single entity or organism. *Port Authority*, therefore, is an exhibition conceived as a place where ideas, objects and beings intersect, where visitors are free to strike up subjective associations through a group of works by Didžiapetris and AaBbPp, Elena Narbutaitė (Vilnius, Lithuania, 1984), Rosalind Nashashibi (Croydon, UK, 1973) and William Eggleston (Memphis, USA, 1939), invited by the artist to participate in the project.

\*

The call to prayer in a mosque reverberates throughout the exhibition. It's the sound of the work by Rosalind Nashashibi entitled *Dahiet Al Bareed, District of the Post Office* (2002). Shot in East Jerusalem, in the district of Dahiet Al Bareed, this is one of the artist's short films in which she records seemingly trivial everyday events, the substance of life itself. English of Palestinian and Irish descent, the artist films the area of the Palestinian post-office, in which her father grew up. A place she visited a decade ago to verify how the neighbourhood designed by her grandfather and managed by local residents, most of them post-office employees, had become a chaotic non-place, a place of transit between Palestine and Israel.

Inevitably, visitors will attempt to shape narratives starting from these images of a region that is always at the forefront of international geopolitics and will draw political, cultural, racial and religious conclusions from the film. Yet Nashashibi's work, like that of Didžiapetris, isn't narrative and has neither beginning nor end. These are works in their own right that invite us to challenge established ways of looking, and yet there are no stories linked to the images. More than interpret or narrate they show, present.

Equally futile is the idea of attributing a single meaning to Didžiapetris's works, where interpretations can be found at several semantic levels. Each materialisation gives rise to free narratives that define his work, avoid monolithic thinking and suggest a modulated vision,

adapted to the present, in which all moments converge. This simultaneity would be a poly-temporal framework in which open relations would coexist with multiple meanings.

The exhibition includes a group of works by Didžiapetris – photographs, drawings, films, publications, sounds, posters and objects – made in recent years. These works aren't identified with a specific medium, and among them are open files: 'The open files are parts of the real world,' Didžiapetris tells us, 'like images; they are complete, but as entities they exist among updates and other decisions that have little to do with the image and that depend directly on instances of travel, translatability or economic exchange. In this way, open files like *Transit* should be understood in this transfer space, between the image and its materialisation, without historicity or pre-existing narratives.'

*Transit* is one of the open files created by Didžiapetris that has the same name as another of the works in the show, a film shot at the same time. The open file is a motif made up of squares measuring a set 0.5 cm each side, in black and silver. This is an image we find applied to different spaces and formats in a process that implies action and transformation: it has been used as a design for a magazine cover, as the back cover of a book, as a textile motif, etc. Both *Tea* (2013) and *Hoods* (2014), also in the show, are the result of the action of transferring the motif (i.e. they exist because of the previous existence of the open file) to the paper pop-ups, in the case of *Tea*, and to the fabric subsequently used to make the four hoods on display, under the same generic title *Hoods* (2014). The *Monk Hood* resembles the mediaeval hoods that pilgrims and monks wore to protect themselves from the cold and the wind; *Leaf Hood* evokes the conical Vietnamese *nón lá* hat and the typical fisherman's hat, so useful in a storm; *Ripped Hood* is the copy of an old Stone Island jacket...

*Hoods* triggers reflections on the fact of concealing, protecting and camouflaging ourselves as a matter of style or a basic need, and takes us back to the issue of authorship for it is a work by the AaBbPp grouped formed by Elena Narbutaitė and Didžiapetris. According to the artists, the name, which includes variations like ABP, AaBbPp, aabbpp and abp, is 'as obvious as the abbreviation "abc" for the alphabet, or as cryptic as an acronym or a sequence of characters forming the name of a company.'

\*

Like the works by Didžiapetris, those by Elena Narbutaitė are determined by a continuous updating, according to their transformations in different contexts. On this occasion she presents two pieces that belong to a work in progress entitled *Loom at the Fool* (2015) begun some years ago as a part of a broader study of shapes and colours and the discovery of the diagonal as a way to determine the behaviour of the pieces. The series began with nine yellow watercolours of shapes that get gradually narrower and was completed with six pieces made of plastic, paper and a laser.

The watercolours that prompted the work are like the raw, unprocessed material. Scanned and converted into digital files, they generate new shapes. Three of them now appear transferred onto adhesive paper, adapted to the exhibition space, and act like Didžiapetris's open files, whose identity changes according to the circumstances in which they are shown. The laser beam that Narbutaitė presents in the exhibition, which gets gradually narrower as the light drops, derives from the same research into the performance of forms in space. 'To achieve this behaviour of the laser beam, it must be remodelled, altered, inside the box with numerous mirrors,' says the artist, who goes on to explain that 'inside the laser box a complex operation takes place that transforms the nature of the beam, which, instead of getting wider gets narrower. This is an action that nobody sees yet can be perceived in the resulting image. A peculiarity inside the box, where the combinations between elements define the properties of the beam.'

\*

Originally shot in 16mm and now digitally projected, *Transit* (2012) is a short black and white film made by Gintaras Didžiapetris in New York and Naples, that presents the various means of transport we use to move around and communicate: systems, trains, cars, feet, trolleys, waiters, escalators, printers, lights, carts, dishes, sales systems, banks, roles, assembly lines, glasses, computers, etc.

*Audi Fantasy* (2014) consists of three short films and a sound piece, a gong – a range of independent items that form a unity. The first film, *23*, presents edited excerpts of the Tokyo marathon, a march of runners but also of logos, numbers, symbols and texts; *88* is an animated film where the number 88 is drawn as a symmetrical palindrome, with neither beginning nor end; *Day* is a succession of images that alternate electric lights, trees and people meeting in a park. There is no related story, even if we can create our own. As the artist remembers, it is a question of transforming the images in our mind into images that everyone can see. *Untitled (NJ)* (2013), another example, are seven photographs of New Jersey taken in Harlem, along the River Hudson, in New York. Previously presented as a mural and now revived in a series of impressions on paper, the scene shows the city drawn as dots of light that illuminate it by night, traces that speak of existence beyond the visible world.

William Eggleston's work is related to developing techniques, especially the dye-transfer process, are inseparable from the creation of the image, as we see in the five photographs in *Untitled (from the series Graceland)* (1983) on display. Dye transfer is a technique associated with Eggleston's work since his days as a lecturer at Harvard in 1973, shortly before his important exhibition at MoMA when he discovered the effectiveness of a printing process that was popular in the advertising field and which, besides offering a huge spectrum of colours and tonalities, granted him greater control than any other photochemical colour printing process. In this series, a commission he had received in 1983 to photograph the mansion on the outskirts of Memphis owned by Elvis Presley, who had died a few years before, saturated colours acquire depth; to quote the writer Mark Holborn, the series gave the artist 'the opportunity to produce more intense dye transfers'.

The presence of the rock'n'roll legend in the house, a mausoleum converted into a pilgrimage site, is sensed in the saturated colours that also characterised the character himself, his costumes, his cars. Yet, once again, the photographs of *Graceland* are of domestic interiors, trivial situations, angles (like Eggleston's insect's eye) and unconventional diagonals, altered scales. They reveal the ability of all facts, however insignificant, to tell a story, and are able to point out how important it is that we forget the element of familiarity, and regard the pictures not as

objects and signifiers but as interrelated forms in the flat space of the photograph. As Eggleston himself says, 'I am afraid that there are more people than I can imagine who can go no further than appreciating a picture that is a rectangle with an object in the middle of it, which they can identify. They don't care what is around the object as long as nothing interferes with the object itself, right in the centre. Even after the lessons of Winogrand and Friedlander, they don't get it. They respect their work because they are told by respectable institutions that they are important artists, but what they really want to see is a picture with a figure or an object in the middle of it. They want something obvious. The blindness is apparent when someone lets slip the word "snapshot". Ignorance can always be covered by "snapshot". The word has never had any meaning. I am at war with the obvious.'

\*

If there is something that sums up the affinities between the artists in the exhibition that is all that related to transfer, exchange, or the fact that their works don't operate as representations of something that already exists, but as fragments of reality in themselves, entities with an existence of their own, presences. Yet the truth is that it's impossible to sum up an exhibition understood as an organism, that isn't 'about something' but 'is something'. An exhibition that changes according to the moments when it is perceived and according to who perceives it. Without artificial light, the works look different at each moment of the day, reclaiming the continuous transformations that affect them, depending on the circumstances in which they appear.

Every time we visit it, *Port Authority* reveals an instant in time in which the observable life of objects shapes a particular vision of the world. It's an exhibition inhabited by multiple voices that operates, like *Patate*, at several levels of correspondence in a shared space of encounters and contamination. As the artist himself says, 'I hope my thoughts are not entirely mine'.