



Rosella Biscotti, *The Undercover Man*, 2008, 16 mm transferred to video, black-and-white, sound, 30 minutes.

Rossella Biscotti

BLITZ

Like a sleuth, the Italian artist Rossella Biscotti stalks her subjects for years, enfolding them into the fabric of her own existence. Her show “Three Works and a Script,” curated by Sara Dolfi Agostini, documented the progress of four forensic investigations into some of the covert psycho-social frameworks that not only underpin our assumptions about how things work but also, for that very reason, dictate how we behave.

In *Alfabeto* (Alphabet), 2018, twelve black-and-white photographs captured the consecutive position of a physiotherapy patient encased in the robotic exoskeleton of a Lokomat—a treadmill system used to train people with paralyzed limbs to walk again. The series cites Eadweard Muybridge’s filmic depiction of the mechanics of natural body movement, “Animal Locomotion,” 1884–87, yet likens the process of learning to walk to that of learning a new language by rote, each position evincing the letter of a cryptic alphabet. The headless body in this work becomes part of a system of cultural signification dictated by hierarchical social codes.

Scrolling off the wall and across the floor like a computer printout, the tapestry *Acquired Nationality*, 2014, bore a graphic matrix representing aggregated census data on naturalized citizens living in Brussels and their registered partners differentiated by national origin. The work was produced with the binary system used to program the automated Jacquard loom that presaged the computer as the basis for information processing. Here, the misleading binary path of demographic inquiry compresses humanity into limited categories that deconstruct identity down to the extent of total dysfunction, engendering a multiplicity of “others.” Such efforts to encapsulate human existence in code, one could argue, form the very foundation of today’s society.

Staged as a film noir featuring the artist as a deadpan police interrogator, *The Undercover Man*, 2008, purported to investigate the life of the former FBI agent Joseph Pistone, aka Donnie Brasco, portrayed by Johnny Depp in the eponymous 1997 Hollywood movie. The narrative intersperses surveillance clips of Pistone’s clandestine work and recordings of phone conversations with the agent’s disjointed recollections of facts and names (mostly red herrings) related to his undercover relationship with a New York mafia family. Framed by the artificial devices of a vintage psychological thriller—exposed lightbulbs, a clicking film projector, venetian blinds—the video is actually an examination of the efficacy of film as a credible reflection of reality. More riveting and true to life is the backstory of how the artist tracked Pistone down in a men’s room and convinced him to rendezvous in Rome after decades of hiding from the mobsters he betrayed.

A blueprint for a future performance, *The Journey*, 2016–, was presented in the form of maps taped to the walls charting the undersea territory between Italy, Malta, and North Africa in economic, military, and political terms. Evoking the plight of human refugees, slides of invasive aquatic species under surveillance as interlopers—migrating from the Red Sea via the Suez Canal—were projected over the outlines of maritime borders painted on the wall. The impetus for the plan was a prize the artist won: a certificate for a chunk of Carrara marble to be quarried upon request, its ultimate value contingent upon not only its extraction but also what the artist makes of it. Biscotti intends to drop it into the sea, where it will serve as a conductor for the migration of meanings across form, culture, history, and geography. The alien object will eventually grow native flora and perhaps be

found someday by archaeologists who will endeavor to trace the origins of the artifact and codify its significance to civilization.

Whether *The Journey* ever comes to fruition hardly matters. For Biscotti, things are never what they seem, and her use of documentary methods to convey alternative truths ultimately undermines even her own versions of the facts. There's always a glitch in the structure, a loophole, a quirk; even the slightest tampering can crash the system, ultimately demonstrating how easily we are led to believe our own delusions. It is as if Biscotti were attempting to plumb the depths of human consciousness only to show that it's all a confidence game.

— Cathryn Drake

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