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## ***Grazia Toderi: The Lightness of Being***

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*In a moment of time, too short  
to be measured, space turned  
and twisted upon itself.*

So ends the screenplay for *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Stanley Kubrick's epic, science fiction film, which premiered in 1968, one year before Apollo 11 made its historic lunar landing and Neil Armstrong walked on the moon.

A futuristic vision of man's fate as grounded in the eternal return of endless beginnings - or in Deleuzian terms, endless becomings - *2001* conveys its narrative through the metaphor of intergalactic travel. Stars pulsate, planets orbit, and rocket ships drift to the strains of Richard Strauss's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1895), while the astronaut hero plummets towards his destiny in deep space, where he glimpses, if only for a nanosecond, the other side of infinity. What, you may ask, does the mega-spectacle of *2001* - a film intended to be experienced on a 70 mm Super Panavision widescreen with a full stereo multi-channel soundtrack - have in common with the intimate video art of Grazia Toderi? Bizarrely enough, everything. Putting aside the most obvious connection - that for the last three years, the artist has pondered the depths of outer space in her work - there is a shared theme. Both film and artwork contemplate the infinitude of the infinitesimal and its inverse.

*The infinite will exist as long as its opposite is demonstrated.*

Toderi made this observation in reference to her 1996 video projection *Prove per la luna (Tests for the Moon)*, but it is a theorem that she proves again and again in her work. From the earliest tapes, which focus poetically on the micro-moment and the most ephemeral of gestures, to the more recent videos and light projections, which imagine extraterrestrial skylines, she has mined that dialectical terrain where the minuscule promises to reveal the secrets of the universe. In *Prove per la luna*, we glimpse a strange, aqueous world in which two vaguely astronomical objects - a moon-roving vehicle and capsule - float in space. This antigravitational realm is seemingly without scale; it is difficult to determine whether the hovering technological devices are toys or the real thing. At various intervals throughout the twenty-minute tape, fume-like vapors infiltrate the thick atmosphere. Coming from above, they appear like emissions from jet propulsion, the smokey residue of a rocket launch. A lilting aria accompanies each of the unseen take-offs performed during this science-fiction opera.

Toderi has constructed an operatic dreamscape here, in which the first stages of space voyages are charted with the most minimal of means: water, toys, and smoke.

Another video from 1996, *Nata nel '63 (Born in '63)*, muses on the wonders of space exploration using an equally humble vocabulary, but this work is more rooted in the historical and the

autobiographical. A small, red-haired doll holding a red ball and wearing a red and white polka-dotted dress revolves continuously around herself, carving out a private orbit. She is her own little planet spinning in a decidedly liquid environment, in which tiny water droplets appear like so many stars. Behind her, an old television set airs archival footage of the Apollo 11 lunar mission. We see the countdown and rocket launch, sunglass-sporting spectators marveling at the sight, the upward trajectory of the spaceship itself, and, eventually, the moon walk. After take-off, the camera switches to shots of the earth seen from above, growing ever smaller and globelike as the spacecraft hurls towards the moon. Soon earth and red ball will seem analogous in size - two toys for a child's imagination. The title of the video, *Nata nel '63*, refers to Toderi's own birth date and thus situates her in a specific time and historical place. A child of the sixties, she is a member of the television generation, the first to witness the world through the cathode ray tube. During this era, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights struggle, the first men on the moon, and the Vietnam War were all broadcast into the intimacy of the home, creating, yet simultaneously, shattering any sense of a global community. Different acts of violence and the violence of difference were (and still are) the primary messages of television. For Toderi, however, the televised moon landing in 1969, "brought together the entire world in a sense of wonder," and promised a future filled with such amazement, when science fiction fantasies would become the stuff of the evening news.

This formative experience has infused all her work. On a thematic level, the artist's marvel at the cosmos and man's ability to access it is given expression in works such as *Messaggeri* (*Messengers*), 1997, *Centro* (*Center*), 1997, and *Orbite* (*Orbits*), 1998. Formally, Toderi's evocations of astronomical terrains are almost always structured through her use of the moving image - television's ubiquitous videotape. As it is mapped in *Nata nel '63*, the artist's childhood revelation about the power of wonder was premised as much on the technological achievements of space exploration as it was on the fact that she viewed the event, along with millions of others, on a television set - a "box" she claims, "that perpetuated marvels". This is not an insignificant remark for an artist who has devoted the majority of her career to creating videos. In Toderi's artistic universe, the moving image - with its temporal flow, its narrative capacities, and its mimetic faculties - is a defining technique.

In essence, video is her paint brush, but it also impacts upon her iconography. The futuristic vision of intergalactic expeditions that she offers is a collective vision, one informed by images distributed on broadcast television, in the cinema, and through other modes of popular culture.

Although ninety-nine percent of us have never traveled beyond the earth's stratosphere, we can begin to imagine the state of weightlessness, the roaring silence of deep space, the glimmering stars, and the perpetual choreography of orbiting planets that we would experience as astronauts. In the tranquil video, *Messaggeri*, Toderi sends us earthbound spectators a shooting star, a blazing comet that streaks across the night sky. Seen from the darkened landscape of *Earth*, this object is a conduit linking terrestrial reality to the heavens. It is a messenger from above, inciting all who view its path to hold their breath and make a wish. *Centro* positions us in the outer limits of some distant galaxy, where stars flicker in and out of existence as light years pass. White fine drawings - sketches of bedroom slippers and a circular, halo form - hover in this cosmic video space. Reminiscent of children's book illustrations, these images suggest youthful fantasies of flying saucers, flying carpets, and flying beds - escape vehicles, means of transport to exotic dreamlands.

The allusions to childhood are not incidental; Toderi's art has the charm and simplicity of a child's world view, in which the slightly absurd commingles with the most innocent of impressions. Her technique is deliberately simple, even rudimentary. Employing one camera in a static position, she fixates on her subject for a set period of time. The imagery is then looped so that whatever occurs is

cyclically repeated, ad infinitum. Changes are nearly imperceptible, yet a wealth of tiny events takes place in each meditative video. Before astronomy became her subject matter, Toderi focused on the mundane moments of everyday existence. One of her earliest videos, *Nontiscordardime* (*Forget-me-not*), 1993, shows a small potted plant being drenched under the shower. Cascades of water pour down on the little forget-me-not blossoms, as their name in Italian - nontiscordardime - scrolls across the screen. While resilient to a thirty-minute deluge, the flowers do betray a certain vulnerability through the repeated presence of their name. The words "forget-me-not" become a plea for attention, a lamentation about the slipperiness of remembrance. With the simple turn of a phrase, Toderi has introduced the possibility of loss into this small haiku of a video. Suddenly, the stream of water becomes a flood of tears; watering turns to weeping.

The transformative properties of water - how it circulates from liquid to air to liquid again fascinates the artist. The cyclical process of evaporation, condensation, and precipitation is Toderi's alchemy, and it imbues her entire aesthetic practice. In most, if not all of the pre-1996 videos, water plays a central role. As in *Nontiscordardime*, the charming simplicity of the works allow the symbolic properties of water to come to the fore and work their magic, recasting each greeting card of a video into a deeper, reflective phenomenon. The force of running water is again utilized to poetic ends in *C'era in lei qualcosa della fata...* (*There Was Something of the Fairy about Her...*), 1994, which shows a clear, crystal glass sitting in the sink under a streaming faucet. It is in a state of perpetual overflow. Two green leaves dance in the whirling currents but are never cast out of their container. This is a visual essay on the strength of lightness, the power of resiliency. The beautiful absurdity of the video is revisited and intensified in Toderi's mesmerizing *Zuppa dell'eternità e luce improvvisa* (*Soup of Eternity and Sudden Light*), 1994, in which the artist is seen at the bottom of swimming pool wearing a raincoat and carrying an umbrella, which she attempts to open while floating underwater. An exercise in utter futility, the action is repeated several times during the tape's duration. Like much performance art, Toderi's gesture can be read as an endurance test - physicality for the sake of physicality. But her corporeal presence, the atmospheric conditions in which she finds herself, and the sheer uselessness of her efforts, lends an air of pathos to the enterprise. She may appear clownlike in the pursuit of such a ludicrous activity, but the defenselessness of her actions and her stoic perseverance transform her into a tragi-comic figure, the ur-character of theater. Toderi's underwater ballet is a most modest statement on the human condition; it comments on the drive to survive no matter how impossible the situation. And, perhaps, most importantly, it contemplates the essential lightness of being. Infinity is a state of mind, a looking inward in order to look outward.

*Is it possible to go forward and backward in time? Does time have a direction?*

So asks the artist in her description of *Il cratere 8* (*Crater 8*), 1998, a triple projection video installation, in which we see a vacuous stone formation through the same dense, moist atmosphere found in *Prove per la luna* and *Nata nel '63*. This mysterious crater - the result of a volcanic eruption or the violent impact of a foreign body - disappears from view in the screen on the left, but becomes visible again on the right. The center screen offers us an undeviating view of the crater, which is watched by the now-familiar little red-haired doll with ball in lap. The wave of imagery from left to right and back again echoes the Moebius strip curves of a figure 8, sign of infinity, sign of eternal returns. The doll, no doubt a surrogate for the artist herself, is situated in this lunar dreamscape as witness to the infinitude contained in quiet moments and the transformative potential of knowing this to be true.