Essay from the text “This Side of Paradise”
by Ida Panicelli
Catalogue Museum Goch, Kerber Verlag, 2010

(…) In a more recent work that employs only sound, exhibited here at the Museum Goch, Landi uses the same method for an incursion into a forest. Nature completely disappears in its visible form to become purely acoustic in this piece, which Landi has titled, in a plain, objective manner, *17 minuti e 45 secondi di passeggiata verso il fiume* (17 Minutes and 45 Seconds of Walking Toward the River), 2008–2009.

Wearing headphones, we can listen to a holophonic recording of her walk, sense the rhythm of her steps and her breath (first calm, then excited), her pauses, her accelerations, but also the ambient sounds—the rustling of the wind, the passing of airplanes in the sky. Sometimes the sound of her accelerated steps creates uneasiness, almost as if it were the soundtrack of a thriller. But mostly we can enjoy the sounds of nature, the birds singing and the insects buzzing.

As in *Plan de Paris*, we can only listen, submitting to the rhythm of the walk over the course of seventeen minutes. And in this concentration the acoustic experience expands into a vaster sensory experience; our minds, stimulated by the sounds, begin to imagine the panorama in which Landi is moving. The work brings us into contact precisely with that part of the brain that creates or recreates images internally, even without our desiring it, as if a film were running inside.

In this acoustic space suspended between two solitudes, that of the artist who is walking and that of the immobile listener, an unusual intimacy of great intensity occurs. And the paradox is that in the midst of all these sounds one can slide, with her, into a meditative space and enter into silence.

Landi creates a total syntony between her own direct experience and that of the listener, once again breaking down the barrier that separates self and other. She transcends the physical dimension to propose the possibility of overcoming the boundaries that separate us, focusing the experience on a very narrow sensory relationship that is established between her ear that records the sounds and that of the listener who receives them.

The artist becomes a neutral mirror for the experience of nature, and she leaves us with the possibility, through sound perception, of experimenting with a space that is simultaneously external and internal. She returns us to ourselves, to our awareness of physical sensations, to our capacity for syntony with the world. She seems to demonstrate that there is no real separation between us and the vast fabric of existence, that the ego has no limits, it is pure inner space.

(…) *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe/Zoo*, 1993–2009, a video installation created for this exhibition, is exemplary in this sense. In the ambitiously scaled work Landi lets us into an apparently idyllic country scene, but the questions that emerge from the experience are among the most intrusive and uncomfortable. *Le Déjeuner* stems from a work titled *Zoo*, 1994, a double video recorded at the Rome zoo in 1993. Landi filmed a Malayan bear in captivity, which had developed a particular compulsive behavior: the animal would walk from one side of the cage to the other, always repeating the same movements, as if to measure the extent of the extremely restricted physical space at its disposal. The compulsive reiteration of its paces becomes a visual loop where time collapses, generating the effect of vertigo and drawing the viewer into a psychical condition of impotence and alienation similar to that of the bear. Landi objectively observes the subjugation imposed by man on animal. This has nothing to do with domestication; it is a question of constricted freedom, annihilated instincts, claustrophobic anguish.

The videos have no sound. In the silence only our breath is palpable, and

our disquietude. We are brought to reflect on issues of subjugation, to take a conscious position regarding where our freedom ends and others' begins.

With *Le Déjeuner* Landi, after many years, closes a circle, presenting ten additional videos she recorded at the Rome zoo while preparing *Zoo,* never shown before*.* These videos present a menagerie of large animals, confined to small spaces, on small monitors, each with its own sound track. The animals exhibit behaviors no longer in line with their temperaments; their instincts have been dulled, their beauty obfuscated by the coercive regime. As in *Zoo*, the camera remains positioned before each cage. The iron bars and padlocks are always in the foreground, emphasizing the distance between viewer and viewed.

We see a lion in a cage about two meters long, unable to take more than a few steps in any direction, emitting castrated roars. And then an immobile lioness, responding to the male's roar with a choked gasp. A black panther running in circles as it awaits its food. A tiger, in a cage extremely small for an animal of its size, licking the rusted iron bars. A female and a male orangutan, a chimpanzee, a gibbon, all looking out into space . . .

In her explorations of animal captivity, Landi leads us to experience what it feels like, both physically and emotionally, to have living space drastically limited. By doing so, she moves from the field of ethology into the experience of humans and our problematic relationship to "the other." It is difficult to see these works today and not think about the painful images of Muslims imprisoned at Guantánamo, also kept inside cages, confined in inhumane conditions lacking any dignity. The space that separates "us" from "them" is one of the most disturbing ethical dilemmas that we've faced in recent times.

On the wall opposite the monitors, on a nine-meter screen, *Le Déjeuner* is projected. The film was shot in the early summer of 2009, in the

countryside near Goch, in a vast clearing with dense trees to the right and a strip of tall grass to the left, using classical perspective with a central focus.

Nature is immersed in a luminous and soft light, speckled by shadows from the passing clouds. On the green meadow, groups of people of various ages meet, converse, read, and play. We cannot hear their voices, only the uninterrupted song of birds. They appear completely and pleasantly immersed in their activities, but at times some of them interrupt their actions without apparent reason and turn toward the camera, staring out intensely, immobile, only to then resume their activities and conversations. The unexpected, intense gazing creates a subtle disquietude, and raises some questions. What are they looking at? Are they looking at us, the viewers, or at the animals in cages on the screens behind us? What do they see *beyond?*

This suspension creates an indefinite space-time, at the boundary between the real world of the viewer and that of the film. The immobile figures seem to have the function of theatrical wings, hovering between the dimension of the viewer and that of the "picture," balancing between reality and representation.
However, not everyone looks out toward us. As in Caravaggio's painting *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, where only a few figures have access to the sight of the miraculous event, not everyone here can see *beyond.* The revelation is not for all.

The direct gaze of the figures in the film leads us to an awareness of ourselves, of the present time. The work mirrors the contradictions and lacerations of reality, implicating us in a situation where the contrast between the open nature of the countryside pleasantly experienced by people and the unnatural condition of animals imprisoned behind bars, no longer able to enjoy that same nature, becomes almost intolerable.

One must also note *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1863, by Edouard Manet, the

paradigmatic painting to which Landi makes homage. There, too, a figure, a nude woman in conversation with two men on a riverbank, looks toward the viewer. Manet transports the subject of the painting into the real time of the viewer and enacts a psychological stratagem that, despite the incongruity of the naked figure, allows us to see beyond every narrative convention. Because Manet "does not see the figures within the environment, but *with* the environment," the time of the action parallels that of the viewer; it "is not realized in experience completed and contemplated, but in the experience that one is having."[3]

Viewers of Landi's work find themselves in a position between the benevolence of a country scene and the anguish of animals in cages. The psychological discomfort that arises forces them to turn their backs on one world or the other, unable to perceive them simultaneously, as if the two worlds were not at all compatible. Landi stages a place of continuous metamorphosis and slippage of meanings, where viewers find themselves cast as both observer and observed, inhabiting a psychological tension with no way out.

The glances among the various "actors" in this expanded scenario—viewers, figures, animals—becomes a short circuit. What is visible and what is seen are inextricably linked, and questions beyond the surface of the experience open up. What is the relationship between the object and the subject of a gaze? Who is the "other"? Where does my conscience lie when I become aware of diversity? Landi does not offer conciliatory or consolatory answers. On the contrary, she leaves the questions hovering over us. Each person can find his or her response and attribute to the images the attendant values, with all their implied existential and ethical significances.

In the other video installation presented here, *Giardino Perduto* (Lost Garden), 2005, Landi again produces a scenario that has to do with separation, but this time does so in a more physical manner. Two videos are projected simultaneously on two large contiguous screens, offering scenes of nature as luxurious and dense as a jungle. Viewers, however,

are kept behind a wall made of wooden planks that prevent them from fully seeing the scenes (which were shot in the botanical gardens of Rome, Naples, and Palermo). The wooden barrier and the limited view it provides represent our unbridgeable distance from Eden. On this side there is chaos; on the other, beauty and order as we can only intuit.

The handheld camera investigates the tangle of branches and leaves; it tries to make space into, and to go beyond, the dense vegetation, but is pushed away by it. The foliage that fills the foreground is impenetrable, and sometimes threatening. Nature appears to offer itself to our gaze, but in fact defends itself from it. It denies us access. Beyond the wooden boards, the vegetation becomes still another obstacle, a second barrier or limit, both visual and symbolic. Beauty, perfection, is unattainable; it protects itself from the intrusion of the human eye. The Garden is forever lost.

It is no accident that the place Landi has focused on—that region described in the Book of Genesis as being between the Pison, Ghihon, Tigris, and Euphrates rivers and identified as Eden, the Dwelling Place of the Just, or the Land of the Blessed—is geographically situated right in the Iraq basin, the site of some of the most violent conflicts in the world. This area has become inaccessible due to wars, distanced from the collective imagination for the violence unleashed there by men. The place of perfection has been transformed into one of torture and death.
Eden could not be further away!

The rhythm with which the camera moves in the vegetation is very rapid at times. The leaves beat against the camera, the out-of-focus foregrounds become pure abstract surfaces. When the camera rests we observe exquisite details, longitudinal veins, complex geometric patterns, and the vast range of greens. In the undergrowth the leaves are dry and rough; in other corners of the garden the foliage is moist, dripping with drops of dew or rain. Sudden flashes of saturated color fill the screen: fleshy and sensual flowers, with silky red, blue, and white petals with hot

orange, pink, or purple centers. These elements emphasize the intrinsically erotic character of the Garden, demonstrated also by a bee's penetration of a red hibiscus.

The sun filters through the foliage, but one never sees it. Only at the end of the video on the right can we briefly glimpse the blue sky, the sunlight, and some clouds as reflected on the surface of a pond, amid the aquatic plants and papyrus.

During the rapid camera movements the soundtrack is harsh, made up of thwacks and rough noises. It is only when the camera lingers on the leaves and flowers that we make out the songs of birds or the gurgling of water. We often perceive the presence of water as a background sound, but we see it only once in the video on the left, when it suddenly fills the entire screen with continuous waves that form an abstract blue-and-white pattern in a movement of extraordinary beauty. The sounds of the city occasionally come through but as if from a distance, like background noises. Landi does not pretend to film a faux paradise, a pure place untouched by the world. She records the pure and the impure, a fragment of wonder created by man and torn from the noisy urban context that encircles it.

The Persian term *pairidaiza* (enclosed park), translated into the Greek *paràdeisos*, and then into the Latin *paradisus*, carries the primary significance of the idea of Paradise: a place marked by an insurmountable barrier beyond which the garden extends, with its luxuriant and spontaneous vegetation warmed by an eternal springtime. The Hebrew name for the garden, *gan*, is also derived from a root that indicates shelter, protection, custody. And the garden of the Song of Songs is *gan naùl*: locked, bolted, chained off.
Everything that is inside the enclosing wall is perfect.
The condition of Adam and Eve in the terrestrial Paradise was a state of supernatural grace, but after the Fall this perfection was lost, the relationships between Heaven and Earth were interrupted, and Paradise

became inaccessible. And so nostalgia for Paradise is not only nostalgia for a place but also for a state: that central state where the intellect and soul are one, and where consciousness, infused with a clear inner perception, is cleansed of all anxiety.

The allegory of the enclosed garden as a mystical place but also as the site of the feminine, is described in sublime fashion in the Song of Songs: "A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. . . . I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse: I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk."4

This abundance of nutritious elements within a protected place indicates not only physical love and desire for the fecund part of the woman's body, but inner wealth. It signifies much more than the desire for absolute beauty and its embodiment in the feminine and in nature. Rather, it indicates the ardent search for the most intimate center of the human soul. (…)

1 Hubert Kiecol, *Là où je vais je suis déjà*, Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Villa Arson, 1990.
2 Donatella Landi in conversation with the author, June 2009.
3 Giulio Carlo Argan, *L'arte Moderna 1770/1970* (Florence: Sansoni, 1970), 117.
4 *The Bible: Authorized King James Version*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 762.