

## **Allegoria Sacra**

AES+F, 2011-2012

A third part of The Liminal Space Trilogy.

HD video installation (5-, 3-, and 1-channel versions), series of stills, series of pictures.

Giovanni Bellini's *Allegoria Sacra (Sacred Allegory)* hangs in the Uffizi in Florence. The subject of this painting is a mystery to art historians. The earliest figures of Christian and ancient mythology are gathered together on a balustrade by a sea or a wide river, surrounded by hills on which can be seen, in the distance, village huts and a palazzo. St. Sebastian, the Madonna, a centaur, small children playing by a tree in the center, a Saracen-Muslim, a man somewhat like the Apostle Paul with a sword in his hand, in the background a peasant with a mule, two beautiful ladies one of whom is St. Catherine, a naked old man reminiscent of Job – this is a far from a complete list of the heroes who Bellini brought together in this picture.

One interpretation of this painting is that it showed Purgatory, where the souls of the righteous, of virtuous pagans and of unchristened children await their fate – heaven or hell.

This painting has always intrigued us. When we started to think of a third project after Last Riot and The Feast of Trimalchio, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and 2009 respectively, we decided that the mysterious image of the Allegoria Sacra was in keeping with our view of the modern world.

We see Bellini's heroes in those passengers who meet accidentally while awaiting their flights at international airports. The feelings of being cut off from one's life and of the as yet unachieved aim of traveling from one world to another are familiar to the majority of those who fly, whether with large or small airlines. We become part of a special club of people who are united by the condition of a body and soul located between the abandoned and the not yet found. Together, i.e. simultaneously, we listen to the flight announcements, watch the flight board with its changing tableau of figures and cities, try to focus on the newspaper, on an SMS or the internet, or simply on the advertisements on the airport monitors. But everyone is wrapped up in himself and it is this, which unites us. There is, perhaps, one more thing we have available and which somehow links us during this interval in time – we look at each other, having never seen one other before and being unlikely to do so again.

The airport is Purgatory. Only there does one understand that the knowledge of one's 'tomorrow' is a total illusion. We imagine the airport as a space where reality transforms itself – it gets covered with snow, which alters the interior and then melts, the runway turns in to the river Styx as in Bellini's painting, airplanes become ancient, mystic craft. The lightboxes in Duty Free live a life of their own, showing pictures of heaven. In our new project, Allegoria Sacra, we wish to retain Bellini's metaphorical heroes using the image of modern-day people from various countries and cultures. At the same time we believe that the airport space can include such mythological personalities as the centaur, who we imagine in his literal embodiment. Or the Indian elephant-god Ganesha, with the features of a coffee machine. Even the various companies' planes may take on the image of ancient gods like the eastern dragon.

The allegorical heroes of the painting can be seen in those awaiting their flights. The Saracen turns in to a group of transit passengers from Darfur or Peshawar. Sebastian is a young traveler from the exotic countries of the south, naked to the waist and barefoot, having not yet changed his shorts for jeans. Job is represented as an elderly patient being transported on a hi-tech stretcher and covered with tubes, indicators and monitors, who becomes younger before our very eyes and turns in to a magical mutant-baby. A policeman of Biblical appearance carries a sword alongside the more traditional equipment, like Paul. The stewardesses, angels from a new heaven, appear on fantastic flying machines like the cabin crew in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and start to serve passengers.

The film follows in part the reality of airport life. As well as experiencing the usual crowds of passengers we witness the location and destruction of an unidentified piece of luggage, a fight between migrants, the emergency services helping a patient. Alongside everyday reality we see a whole range of mystical transformations of this world, from a jungle with exotic tribes to an underwater kingdom, then to a snow field which melts to form the river Styx, flowing to the horizon in to an endless sea in the direction which the passengers will eventually fly, their planes becoming mystical craft...

*HD video (5-, 3-, and 1 channel versions, 39 min 39 sec), a series of pictures.*