

WHITE GOLD

Nataša Prosenč Stearns' videos are visually striking and aesthetically flawless. With rhythms that correspond to the moving images, they engage us so intensely that only over some time do we become aware of their message, which is, in fact, multilayered. We need additional information and are required to use our knowledge, experiences and senses to fully decode them. In her most recent piece, the process of perception and understanding is initiated by its title – *White Gold*. A projection on a white cube with a grainy surface refers to sugar that was once, like salt, called "white gold." Although sugar has been disparaged in recent times due to its links to health issues, it had a very important role in history. In the past, the price of sugarcane determined the global geopolitics and economics; it was equally as important a commodity as oil is today. The British "Sugar Act" of 1764, for example, marked the beginning of the independence of the American colonies. Sugar was very expensive and its production shaped the sad fate of "black gold," the African slaves, who enabled the enrichment of their traffickers.

Today, the masses are united in their addiction to sugar. In video installation *White Gold*, the crowds are swarming over an oversized sugar cube. Large groups of people have been attracting film directors from the very beginning of moving images. Film evolved after the Industrial Revolution, when the world's largest metropolises were forming, dictating entirely new ways of living in the overcrowded urban agglomerations of millions. A film, shot on March 22nd 1895, which is believed to be the first one in history, was created when Louis Lumière set his camera in front of the exit of a family factory in Lyon and recorded the workers pouring through the doors at the end of their shift.

The very etymology of terms related to moving images (kino, movie, cinema, motion pictures) emphasizes moving as their starting point, and most of the early cinematic masterpieces are all but competing in the numbers of extras walking, marching, running or fighting. Overcrowded prisons, battles, lynching, revolutions, parades, demonstrations, celebrations and processions shot from particular angles, edited in a certain tempo or using superposition, allow for dazzling effects, enforcing the impact of the work. Some of the examples are D.W. Griffith's and Sergei Eisenstein's films, Cecil B. DeMille's biblical scenes and sci-fi and manhunt scenes by Fritz Lang. Lang achieved his renowned effects of big crowds by simultaneously recording miniature models and actual people, using the ingenious Schüfftan device. Shortly before World War II, Leni

Riefenstahl directed massive political and sporting events, and soon after, the expansion of the filmmaking industry allowed even bigger spectacles to emerge such as *Ben Hur*, *Spartacus*, *Lawrence of Arabia* and, unfortunately never completed, Stanley Kubrick's *Napoleon*.

The most evocative mass scenes are found in complex social and psychological films, depicting dynamics between an individual and community. Philosopher Gilles Deleuze highlights King Vidor's films, especially *The Crowd* of 1928. These films correspond to Deleuze's concept of "movement-image." On one side, they show the unified community, where everybody feels and thinks the same. On the other side is the individual, either lost in the crowd or leading the masses.

Sweet words attract people the same way sugar captivates ants. Ants are organized in a way that is similar to humans: They are familiar with the division of labor, they communicate through sound, smell and touch, and, just like us, they are solving complex problems together. They have scouts, rulers, warriors, several types of workers and slackers. If they are lacking in the work force, they kidnap larvae from a neighboring anthill and train them to become slaves. When they discover food, ants pave their way to it, marking it with pheromones, which also dictate, subconsciously, human relationships. If an ant leader loses its trail, it begins to walk in a circle called an ant mill. Soon the other ants follow, forming a revolving procession, eventually dying off from exhaustion. Just like humans, who fall for various sweet talkers and follow them blindly. In the Middle Ages they were called "melliflux;" the word refers to honey, the sweetener of the time, which is figuratively flowing from their mouths.

There is an essential difference between the crowds composed by stylized people in video *White Gold* and ants. Whenever an ant encounters another ant, the two touch with their jaws and their tentacles. It seems as if they are greeting each other and hugging, perhaps engaging in a brief chat; they are in fact exchanging information. But the figures in *White Gold* rush past each other, estranged and alienated, like soulless particles on an invisible treadmill, without any interaction. Hopefully they at least text each other.

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