



RIVANE NEUENSCHWANDER WASHINGTON

Rivane Neuenschwander's *Quarta-feira de Cinzas/Epilogue (Ash Wednesday)*, 2006, stirs up potent memories of childhood curiosities and fears. Produced in intimate detail with the help of Cao Guimarães, the captivating film about ants at the close of Carnival festivities sends us back to the playgrounds and roadsides where we once studied, challenged or blissfully tormented similar creatures (Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, December 17, 2007–April 20, 2008). It also rekindles the sense of horror produced by the Marabunta in the 1954 film *The Naked Jungle* seen on TV many years ago.

The film begins with scenes of single ants coping with the colorful leftovers of the celebration. In true ant form these loners display their trademark strength and determination by moving oversized discs of paper—confetti to humans—for some unfathomable purpose. What attracts them? Color perhaps, but we rarely see more than one focusing on a single object. As the film progresses, a scene of vicious greed suggests that pink holds special status. A large ant not only separates a pair of smaller ones from their prize but, after unsuccessfully corralling them in a curled up leaf, crushes one of them in its jaw. As the daylight dims, the number of discs and ants gradually multiplies. The scene turns into a community effort, and the audience witnesses a steady stream of quivering dots descending into the darkness of a nest.

The intensity, inherent complexity, and curious beauty of Neuenschwander's film compel us to sit through repeat screenings to discern its possible meaning. On one level, the composition comes across as a

nature documentary; on another, the dramatic changes in landscape suggest a pint-size travelogue. We can also see it as an energetic, virtually nonsensical, performance. What's more, we tend to anthropomorphize these creatures and their behavior. Naturally, a group of four ants around one paper circle elicits the notion of conference. We also want to know what rationale drives the irrefragable need to collect this chromatic debris and what the legacy of this activity will be. Is it a spontaneous response to the confetti's sudden appearance, or has this frenzied conduct been triggered by an external factor outside the ants' control? Will it result in the birth of a cargo cult, for example? The surprising flicker of tangerine, hot pink, DayGlo yellow, and metallic purple against a dense and somber carpet of broken branches and dry brown leaves also captures our attention. The unexpected nature of the event not only surprises, but lets the eyes delight in vivid contrasts of color, material, and kinds of movement.

After several viewings, the film's structure and context move to the forefront. As the film progresses, the number of color discs increases. Contradicting the systematic rise in circular foliage, the conspicuously discontinuous terrain shifts from exposed rock to underbrush. What are we to make of the ant colony's proximity to the Carnival celebration? The reason for the confetti's presence in this particular location remains elusive. The film's soundtrack reinforces this sense of uncertainty. At times, the clicking and thumping suggest natural sounds; at others, they are clearly musical additions. Despite such discrepancies, the film retains its consistency.

Ultimately, the artist's process of collection, intervention, and close observation discloses the implausibility of the visual narrative. Though the behavior of animals frequently reminds us of human strengths and weaknesses, Neuenschwander's film avoids direct reference to human trickery and manipulation. This evocative work lets us come to our own conclusion as to its meaning.

—John Gayer