

Anton Ginzburg

At the Back of the North Wind



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Eventi collaterali





Imagine a place on Earth devoid of seasonal change and natural disaster, whose inhabitants were free of pestilence, aging, and war. It was a land situated so far from explored territory that it seemed otherworldly and could only be described or imagined through second-hand accounts of its existence. First chronicled by Hesiod, Homer and Herodotus, the ancients believed in such a place. They called it Hyperborea, a realm lying far north of the winter territories, where the sun never set and whose landscape and waters were lush, fertile, and wild. Its mythology and

association with the god Apollo grew in scope and credibility over the centuries, with fantastic accounts crediting the Hyperboreans with the construction of mysterious temples like Stonehenge, and in the modern era, to their race being the origin of human spiritual and physical evolution.

Now imagine that this place has been discovered, not in its entirety, but rather through artifacts and remnants of animal species whose age and complexity match no historically documented civilization. *At the Back*



of the North Wind, Anton Ginzburg's project for the 54th International Art Exhibition at la Biennale di Venezia, confronts us with this curious premise. It embraces both the scientific and the fantastic dimensions of the "discovery" of Hyperborea, especially in the modern era, with its disparate and geographically dispersed attempts to reconcile its existence.

Situated within the Venetian Palazzo Bollani, the exhibition of photographs, sculpture, reliefs, drawings, film, are fragments of the artist's impressions

and experiences from his research and travels over the past year that together form a master narrative of journey and discovery.

The installation as visitors enter the building sets the stage. Here, we are confronted by an expanded journal of Ginzburg's expedition, presented like an explorer's museum or three-dimensional travel record. Documentary images taken at different locations around the world, along with drawings, notes and objects help map the territory of his travels. A surveyor's theodolite

holds court in an adjacent gallery, a monument to the task of measuring the surface of the earth. Here one also finds granite rock from the islands where Hyperborea was thought to be discovered, as well as custom-made bronze glasses based upon an Eskimo design for spectacles that decrease the glare of the sun in the snow.

In contrast to the empirical nature of the works on the ground floor, the galleries on the upper floor contain fantastic objects that create the atmosphere of a dreamscape. The



grand salon is dominated by the *Ashnest*, a large serpentine sculpture of ivory mammoth tusks, metal and high-density foam which rises up from a black pit containing an amalgam of other relics and artifacts. It embodies the collapse of one civilization as another takes its place, preserving fragments of the past as clues to moments in time long since erased. Facing it is a tall, dark monolithic object composed of wooden cargo pallets, each one containing traces of its own record of travel around the globe, another monument to the transience

of time and travel. Finally, set into the molded panels original to the Palazzo's architecture here and in the adjacent room are site-specific bas reliefs of geometric motifs and topographical compositions relating to the locations and references presented throughout the exhibition.

The next gallery houses two tall biomorphic marble sculptures, one of which has the distinct features of an owl at its head. The initial forms, like those of the *Ashnest* sculpture in the grand salon, are derived from CT scans

of human bone which are then morphed into more intuitive organic shapes. They peer down at us like sentinels or creatures from a place at once foreign and familiar. A pair of abstract paintings fills out the space and helps contextualize the reliefs and three-dimensional objects.

The last room contains a film installation that brings together all of the elements of the exhibition, with excerpts of the artist's journey from the American Northwest to Saint Petersburg, Russia to the White Sea.

—Matthew J.W. Drutt

In the exhibition *At the Back of the North Wind*, I explore the presence of mythological patterns in the fabric of everyday reality, particularly the tension between the actual and the potential. By combining new technologies with traditional forms of art, media, and cultural artifacts, the installation conveys a currently relevant approach to these universal themes in visual terms.

I was drawn to the theme of Hyperborea, a region thought to be far north, “beyond the Boreas” (the North Wind), through recent sensationalistic exposés claiming the discovery of a mythical land on the White Sea around the Kem’ and Solovki Islands (site of the Gulag camps).

I am intrigued by these attempts to locate Hyperborea and to confirm its specific location, rather than considering it as a mythological country or a state of mind. I think of these endeavors in a Jungian context, as signifying a confrontation between consciousness and the unconscious. The past, or rather our subjective interpretation of its remnants, becomes the sculpting material, the metaphorical clay we build up and embellish to communicate our experience of reality.

In this project, I take Hyperborea as a starting point and create a dreamscape that articulates connections between the actual and potential inherent in our experience of the phenomenal world.

Growing up in Saint Petersburg, the idea of a northern expedition held romantic appeal for me, inspiring ideas of heroism, discovery, and an enigmatic representation of the “other.” The Zoological Museum and the Museum of the Arctic and Antarctic showcased findings from northern expeditions. Housed in neoclassical buildings, the museum’s collections included grotesque taxidermal mammoths with their impressive tusks, as well as costumes, tools, and other objects used by the northern dwellers. From a 19th-century Rational European perspective, the museums themselves appear as relics and elaborate installations.

Walking through their rooms, I remember looking at glass vitrines showcasing the black and white photos of the expeditions and mysterious rituals of the Arctic natives, carved wooden maps, and journals with drawings of exotic facial tattoos. These representations seemed to exist outside of reality and a familiar sense of time.

The frozen void of the tundra, replete with prehistoric topographical and animal remains, could be thought of as the materialization of ancient beliefs in a geographic underworld. It has a disposition of its own and the power to alter reality for those who encounter its formidable terrain. It’s a blank canvas for the projection of our collective unconscious.

—Anton Ginzburg