

Ulla von Brandenburg

(Karlsruhe, Germany, 1974)

After training in set design, Ulla von Brandenburg thoroughly developed a language based on theater's self-reflection throughout the twentieth century. Her works speak of phantasmatic apparitions and open up doorways onto other worlds, where different corporeal and mental dimensions reign. One of her most well-known works, created for a 2003 exhibition at the Kunstverien Braunschweig, consists of an 1858 photograph by Henry Peach Robinson, entitled *Fading Away*, which she displayed on a large wall. The photo portrays a young woman on her deathbed, in the presence of three family members.

The moment of her passing is the threshold between two worlds and, even more, it is the photograph that immortalizes the ambiguous instant when life falls away, since it freezes the scene in an eternal present and amplifies the apprehension about an unknown future.

In the long posing time required in nineteenth-century photography, a melancholy assonance emerged between the bodies of the living - forced into a long period of immobility in front of the lens - and those of the dead - which tradition favored depicting in life like poses. The fashion for photos shot during séances, to capture fleeting presences of ghosts, was part of the same tendency, a somber universe of images that merge in the artist's black-and-white 16 mm films, a series that includes *Kugel*, 2007, the work acquired by the Fondazione CRT.

A reflective metal sphere is framed among the branches of a tree. On its surface is the reflection of the immobile presence of a group of people arranged in a circle in a garden. It is not easy to identify the historical period to which they belong, but they seem to come from an indistinct nineteenth century. The scene clearly conforms to the rules for *tableaux vivants*, also in fashion in the nineteenth century. Likewise that time period is consonant with atmosphere of clinical-surgical analysis that, as Andrew Bonacina reminds us, often refers, in the artist's graphic works, to photos shot of the patients at Salpêtrière (a famous teaching hospital in Paris). In *Kugel* we seem to glimpse the body of a man stretched out on a cot, surrounded by a group of people, both seated and standing, and the object of their careful observation. He is also the threshold of another world, one of the trance, agony or death.

The Objects, 2009, is the artist's second work to become part of the collection. Instead of a human presence, there is a world of only objects, which appear before the video camera as if they were characters in a slow procession, closed off in an infinite film loop: chessboards, fans, ropes, sticks, flutes, mirrors. They share the quality of stage set objects and, suspended from invisible wires, they seem animated by the powers of an invisible magician. But there is also something that is much older: the nature of melancholy. It is a feeling that seizes the human spirit, as in Durer's famous engraving, amid innumerable objects that simultaneously constitute the material of contemplation and the sign of an inability to recompose the universe into a total unity of meaning. Ulla von Brandenburg's *The Objects* features animated objects that waver toward us, presenting us with the impossibility of understanding and taming everything. Even the most everyday things, enlivened by an independent and unknown spirit, interrogate us. (EV)