

Katja Novitskova

Spirit, Curiosity and Opportunity

3/5/14 – 28/6/14

Spirit, Curiosity and Opportunity is a follow-up to Katja Novitskova's first solo exhibition, *MACRO EXPANSION* that took place at the gallery in November of 2012. The exhibition is a continuation of the artist's interest in the relationship between the nature of contemporary visual forms as they are disseminated online and their ancient socio-material origins.

Spirit, Curiosity and Opportunity are names of robotic rover missions that have been deployed in the exploration Mars by NASA since 2004. Spirituality, curiosity and opportunism are qualities which could also be used to sum-up the unique behavioural patterns of human beings throughout time. Curiosity, the newest and most advanced rover, is equipped with 8 cameras that help to navigate the Martian terrain. As the rover undertakes its daily activities, the cameras capture high-resolution landscape photographs from the surface of the planet. The images that Curiosity sends to NASA are then freely and widely distributed online. The dawn of space programs in the 20th century triggered the emergence of UFO related conspiracy theories which attempt to excavate truth from these images. Many of these theories have been fueled by the imperfections and anomalies 'found' in the official imagery (the Moon landing conspiracy, the 'face on Mars', etc). Familiar forms found within zoomed in and pixelated areas of the Mars landscape, spark suspicion of alternate realities, evidence of a possibly staged event or photo manipulation. With the exponential rise in the availability and quality of images generated by robotic agents in space, UFO theorists are as prolific as ever.

Novitskova takes the case of Mars UFOlogy as a study of the highly complex phenomena of visual perception and information interpretation; features which have been evolving for millions of years in response to a variety of environments on Earth. The human tendency to mistake tree branches for snakes, if seen at the edge of visibility, is one example of the myriad of instincts that first developed to protect humans from danger. These instincts have generated a set of weird byproducts like *apophenia* (identifying meaningful patterns in meaningless randomness) and *pareidolia* (perceiving vague and random images or sounds as significant). Combined with *hieroglyphy* (perceiving the manifestation of the sacred in the usual fabric of reality) these perceptual effects are argued to be at the base of animistic and religious thinking, helping early societies to organise chaos around them and make the world intelligible.

Katja Novitskova's first artist book, *Post Internet Survival Guide 2010*, features the following sentence in its foreword: "The notion of a survival guide arises as an answer to a basic human need to cope with increasing complexity. In the face of death, personal attachment and confusion, one has to feel, interpret and index this ocean of signs in order to survive."

The artist's exploration of human condition and the objects it renders into the world have thus taken her to Mars, where new forms are being discovered in the dim light of a Martian sunset.