



GLI OCCHI DI LINCE

ANSELM KIEFER

Dear Mr. President, (Signor Presidente della Repubblica)

Dear Mr. Antonelli, (Signor Presidente dell'Accademia dei
Lincei)

I am particularly touched to be awarded the Feltrinelli Prize here in Italy, both personally and as an artist.

In the seventies, as a young artist, I spent several months in Rome. I oftentimes wandered around the city. For me, the surface of the street was just a thin layer on the ruins of a past civilisation, like a glaze on an old painting, broken in some places, revealing layers underneath.

It is not only these memories of the city whose streets I walked as a young artist that make me happy to be here. There is also a more professional reason for gratefully accepting this illustrious award. As an artist, HISTORY - both my own, German, and that of other peoples and cultures - has always been an important inspiration for my work. That is why I am delighted to be honoured here at the *Accademia dei Lincei*, whose eventful history goes back to the 17th century, to a time when there were still lynxes in Italy.

Even the name *Accademia dei Lincei* has something to it. Inspired by the book *Magia naturalis* by Giambattista Della Porta, the sharp-eyed lynx was chosen as the emblem of the Accademia. Incidentally, this book also includes one of my favorite images. It is an etching showing Della Porta in front of Athanor, the alchemical furnace, holding a rapier pointed towards a mirror. The two rapiers, one thrusting into the mirror and the other coming out from it, do not meet on the surface of the mirror but about a half-meter in front of it. A strange curvature of space.

But back to the Lincei, the lynx-eyed. It was believed at the time that lynxes could see through stones and walls, a belief that was even documented in the bestiaries of the Middle Ages. And as a non-anthropocentric artist, I still believe this today.

This goes back even further in history, because already the sharp-eyed helmsman of the Argonauts in Greek mythology bore the name Lynceus ("the lynx-eyed"). Much later, Goethe also named the tower watchman in the second part of his "Faust" Lynceus, as he had the task of monitoring the surroundings to warn of approaching enemies and fire.

Goethe has Lynceus sing at Faust's observatory:

*I was granted powers of vision
Like the lynx, high in the tree (...)
I am born for seeing,
Employed to watch,
Sworn to the tower,
I delight in the world.*

The wondrous and multi-faceted history of the Academy, as is only possible in this vibrant country of Italy, is extremely fascinating and inspiring to me.

The precursor of the *Accademia* was founded in Naples in 1560 by Giambattista Della Porta as one of the first academies of natural sciences in Europe. A few years later, it was dissolved by order of Pope Gregory XIII after an investigation by the Inquisition, on suspicion of magic and sorcery.

Following the example of Della Porta's *Accademia* in Naples, the *Accademia dei Lincei* was then founded by Federico Cesi in Rome in 1603. In addition to Della Porta, Galileo Galilei,

whose *Letters on Sunspots* (Istoria e Dimostrazioni intorno alle Macchie Solari), were published by the *Accademia* in 1613, was also a member.

After the sudden death of the Academy's founder in 1630, there followed the closure of the Academy, several futile attempts at a renaissance and finally, in 1847, its reestablishment by Pope Pius IX.

Mussolini, for whom the independence of the *Accademia dei Lincei* was a thorn in the flesh, founded his own *Accademia Reale d'Italie*, with which the *Accademia dei Lincei* was forcibly merged. In protest against the fascist racial laws in Italy and the exclusion of Jewish Italian members, Einstein resigned his membership of the *Accademia* in 1938.

In the liberated part of Italy, the *Accademia dei Lincei* had already been re-founded in 1944 and the fascist *Accademia d'Italia* dissolved in 1945. The *Lincei* had finally regained their independence.

I don't need to continue recapitulating of the rest of the story, which you know better than I do.

Returning to what I had previously mentioned, history has always been a favourite source of my art.

In a lecture at the College de France, I said that one History does not actually exist. Not only is it rewritten by rulers in power at a given moment, but the view of historical events is also always subject to the perspective of its respective time.

In this respect, history is not a fixed block for me as an artist, but a malleable material, like clay for a sculptor. And we will see whether in a few years something new will perhaps emerge from today's presence at the Accademia, in which the tumultuous history of Italy is inscribed.

Like the historian Jules Michelet, I do not compile a dry list of events, but rather nestle myself in the historical material like a parasite. History penetrates me like acid penetrates the varnish of an etching.

For Michelet, history is ambivalent, like the little girl who smiles at her doll even though she knows it is made of wood. When I say history, I don't just mean human history—I also mean geological and cosmic history, which for me stretches from reptiles to Waterloo and beyond.

For me, history has two roots: a historical and an existential one. It is food for me. In this, I recognise myself in Jules Michelet. I have always thought that Michelet, like the cows, ate the soil of history; and that he digested it, thus transforming it into something else.

Michelet and I, in his footsteps, graze history like a cow and what comes out after the digestion process is what the Aztecs called *teocuitlatl* i.e. translated gold, excrement of the gods. This is what Octavio Paz told me, whom I met in Mexico many years ago. I still remember his vivid explanations about the excremental view of civilisation and the equation of excrement

with the sun. He put it all together there: Sigmund Freud, Erich Fromm, Max Weber, Quevedo - life begins with tears and excrement.

I act like Michelet: I create history through my art, because history in itself does not exist. There is actually no historiography either—there is only the processing of history. The artist, like the scientist, sees with the eyes of the lynx, but he proceeds differently. As an artist, I try to get close, in an unscientific way, to the centre from which events are controlled. We know actually very little about a figure like Alexander the Great, and yet his persona has occupied artists again and again, throughout the centuries, because of being a very complex phenomenon.

The events that have been written and handed down are one thing, but I tend to see time between individual events. I thus suspend events from time. Proust, the master, the philosopher of time, says it like this:

Yet a single sound, a single scent, already heard or breathed long ago, may once again, both in the present and the past, be real without being present, ideal without being abstract, as soon as the permanent and habitually hidden essence of things is liberated, and our true self, which may sometimes have seemed to be long dead, but never was entirely, is re-awoken and re-animated when it receives the heavenly food that is brought to it.

We can also study a similar phenomenon of the in-between, the not easily definable, in Monet's haystack paintings: he painted the same motif, a haystack, at different times of day. And when you see the pictures hanging next to each other, it is no longer about the individual haystack, but about the empty, unpainted space between the individual canvases. It is abstract, but it also brings to life an ideal, namely time. In this way, something that has always been there but is temporarily forgotten becomes visible again.

And so perhaps I will be granted, in a few years' time - remembering the Accademia - I will write an entirely different pictorial history.

In any case, I am proud that today, as a guest of the Accademia dei Lincei in Palazzo Corsini, I can be part of this wonderful history for a short time.

Thank you very much.