

# THE PHENOMENON

Anton  
Ginzburg

OF

THE  
PHANTOM  
LIMB







The title of Anton Ginzburg's *Walking the Sea* is a misnomer. There is no sea. In reality, the anonymous, wordless hero of the film – the second in a trilogy of works – walks the desert between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, where the Aral Sea used to be before its name came to be synonymous with one of the worst ecological disasters of the twentieth century.

The short version of events is that in the 1960s, the Soviet Union diverted two rivers feeding into the Aral Sea in an effort to irrigate the desert and stimulate the production of cotton. The cotton was an export hit but the irrigation plan proved ruinous for the region's ecology, local economy, and population; it pushed the Aral Sea 'underground', so to speak, out of sight, out of mind, a sea out of water.

Anton Ginzburg is going to be telling the long story in a solo show called 'Terra Corpus' at the Blaffer Art Museum in Houston. There, he will be premiering *Walking the Sea* alongside an accompanying sculptural installation, at once an exposition and abstraction of the area, its mythologies and history. Among the artworks are a jacquard tapestry scroll featuring aerial shots of the Aral Sea (or lack thereof) from 1989 to the present; plaster and concrete sculptures; photographic prints; plaster and pigment relief works; and a sculptural installation of an aeolian harp. Heard throughout are Ginzburg's field recordings of the region's wind.

It's rare but satisfying to see a work that is at once 'therapeutic' and 'in need of therapy'. *Walking the Sea* is deeply meditative and seemingly classic in its documentation of a presumed pilgrimage. Yet this meditation is interrupted by flashes of disturbing, incongruous imagery: hollowed concrete buildings; abandoned ships, eroding under the desert sun. The protagonist – Ginzburg but not Ginzburg – is dressed in a three-sided mirror, reflecting the landscape away from his body, at the same time that he is absorbing it with his presence. This wouldn't be a work by Anton Ginzburg if it didn't touch on the maddening, absurd psycholo-

gies of place, on the mental delirium and defeatism of trying to pin a phantom spot on a continually shape-shifting map.

Originally from St Petersburg (well, Leningrad technically, before that name went the way of the Aral Sea), Ginzburg came to the US in 1990 as a teenager, but he doesn't really want to talk about that in relation to the work. We talk about it, anyway. He successfully deflects questions about the project he's working on now, however, which will complete his trilogy.

In 2011, Ginzburg and I met for the first time in New York, just as the first installment of his trilogy, *At the Back of the North Wind*, was closing at the 54th Venice Biennale. In Venice, visitors walked between four rooms and two floors in the Palazzo Bollani, between three large-scale sculptural installations (*Ashnest*, *Bone Totem Owl* and *Bone Totem Owl Shadow*), eight site-specific bas-reliefs, photographs, paintings, maps and the centrepiece – Ginzburg's film *Hyperborea*, which 'documents' the artist's epic search for this mythological utopia, taking him from Portland, Oregon to St Petersburg, and finally to the haunting structural skeletons of gulags on the White Sea.

At the Blaffer, Ginzburg will again show *At the Back of the North Wind*, this time as a companion to *Walking the Sea*. Both are complex works, which surround viewers without ever embracing them. The projects have in common a specific ability to invade the psyche but evade tangibility – they allow neither the comfort nor convenience of certainty. They are deeply uneasy works, even as they are deceptively peaceful. When we talk again, just a few months before





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'Terra Corpus' opens, Ginzburg calls it 'the phenomenon of the phantom limb'. Beyond that, there is no shorthand to describe Ginzburg's trilogy-in-progress. These are massive, detailed archaeologies. Digging at them raises only more questions and more dust to obscure the view.

— *I can't imagine there's a big tourism industry around the Aral Sea. How were you received?*

When I first started, I actually didn't comprehend how difficult it would be to film in Uzbekistan. Kazakhstan wasn't so bad, but Uzbekistan is still a totalitarian country. They don't openly tell you they won't let you shoot there, but they do everything in their power to prevent you from doing it. I have to say, in Uzbekistan things got quite aggressive in certain territories. When we arrived in one town, we were immediately taken to the police precinct by over-eager local policemen. We spent an entire day there. It was pretty hardcore.

— *Beyond the bureaucracy, how were the natural conditions?*

There's really only a window of one month between May and June when one can shoot around the Aral Sea. Before that, the area is difficult to access because of salt and sludge. After, it becomes really, really hot. It was already about 40 degrees Celsius when we were there. I went several times just to establish contact and prepare for the crew.

Most of the territory is only accessible by train and jeeps. There were entire days spent just on rail travel. It was a long trip, and time is a big aspect of the film, too: there's a bit of a trance quality to it. It's important for me that the piece feels intuitive. There are specific references to twentieth-century art and the region's history, which are important, but the most challenging part of the film and the entire project is getting across the emotional charge of actually being there.

— *It's as if the 'Soviet' buildings you come across in the desert are relics of bureaucracy – kind of like your run-ins with local authority.*

It's really incredible to see, within the natural textures of this landscape, ships just sitting in the middle of the desert. There are these islands there, which you won't find on any maps – they're what's left of secret Soviet military bases. The water around them disappeared and created access to Soviet buildings of the sixties and seventies that nobody could have imagined seeing up close, let alone filming. *Walking the Sea* shows a Thoreau-like character as a lyrical hero travelling these parts.

It was so strange to see these military bases in person, and see hawks nesting in the buildings. These used to be active settlements there, but we saw only something like two buildings still standing. Local people are taking the

buildings apart by hand, for the stones and other parts. It's fascinating to see the Soviet presence in that area just kind of evaporating. You get the sense that nature, in the twenty-first century, is undoing what man tried to do in the twentieth century.

— *Is that the core emotional charge you want the film to express?*

Well, in my first book, *At The Back Of The North Wind*, [critic] Boris Groys called this area a readymade Earthwork. It was made 'anonymously', by the Soviet people and their conditions. The water disappeared and so did the Soviet people, but the aftermath of the readymade Earthwork stayed. That's one important element to consider.

But talking to some locals, I began to hear another really powerful theory about what happened, which has nothing to do with Soviet irrigation plans. The locals talk about an inner sea – a sea that goes under water and is connected to the Caspian Sea. They think that, historically, the Aral Sea has 'gone away' before, then come back again. They don't feel the sea has disappeared forever, but that it's just gone underground for some time and might return again. This image of two conditions – 'the inner sea' and 'the outer sea', the conscious and subconscious mind of nature – really pushed this project for me. It became a kind of psycho-geography, a psychoanalysis of nature's subconscious.

— *Does the Aral Sea have personal resonance for you?*

Growing up in the Soviet Union, it was an important topic as one of the biggest ecological disasters of the twentieth century. That the disaster sparked an ecological movement in the Soviet Union makes it an important place just from that perspective. But poetically, the image of a sea without water is incredibly strong on its own. The protagonist in the film wears a big mirror structure on his back as a moving reflection of the landscape within the landscape. It's an exploration of different possibilities of representation. The artwork is a negotiation between the subjective and the real. It's a combination of the histories and mythologies connected to place, but also a story produced by the trip itself. The artwork is about discovering tension between those elements.

— *A 'readymade' Earthwork has a very different connotation than a 'ruin'. Is that a tension you address, as well?*

What's interesting to me is that sixties and seventies land art that took place in the West wasn't really present in the Soviet part of the world and its visual culture, except for a few exceptions like Francisco Infante-Arana. But that's an important period for my practice, and I wanted to research those methods in relation to the landscape of Central Asia.



Walking the Sea series, 2013, #3, 12.05 x 20 inches (30.6 x 45.7 cm)  
archival inkjet print

Walking the Sea series, 2013, #28, 12.05 x 20 inches (30.6 x 45.7 cm)  
archival inkjet print





Walking the Sea series, 2013, #18, 12.05 x 20 inches (30.6 x 45.7 cm)  
archival inkjet print



Walking the Sea series, 2013, #27, 30.6 x 45.7 cm, archival inkjet print



Walking the Sea series, 2013, #30, 30.6 x 45.7 cm, archival inkjet print



— *Is that where the mirror comes in, again – as artistic reference?*

In part. The character is definitely constructed with some humour and clearly references sixties and seventies history of art. The character is like a golem of the twentieth century and twentieth-century art, which walks along the landscape and reflects it onto itself.

With regard to art history, I also kept in mind how the landscape was historically addressed by the 'Peredvizh-niki' ['Wanderers' or 'Itinerants', Russian realist painters of the late 1800s, who broke with the imperialist Academy of Arts; many of their famous works concentrate on the Rus-sian landscape]. Also, I considered the phenomenology of American artists and Thoreau's Romanticism, as well as the notes of [George] Gurdjieff on his early twentieth-century travels through Central Asia. His writings were an important influence for the New York art environment of the sixties and seventies.

— *I suppose the Aral Sea is not an area frequently referenced.* Because it's so inaccessible, this territory is almost forgot-ten by the world – at least the world outside of the former Soviet Union. A lot of people I talk to in the West confuse Aral and Ural. But the territory is so historically and visually rich. It was an important intersection of religions and cul-tures along the silk route, and has fascinating histories of Sufi Islam and its dervish traditions, Zoroastrian influences and later colonial past. In my project, I try to employ a lot of materials and techniques characteristic to Central Asia – so there's a lot of attention to surfaces, patterns and grids, and I use materials like plaster, concrete and weavings.

— *Specifically, what are some of the artworks you've created for the Blaffer exhibition?*

After I have all my film footage, the studio work becomes a meditative process. A lot of it is about the discovery of relationships and tensions between histories, objects, ar-chitectural space and the footage. So, one of the central pieces in the show is a jacquard weave made out of cotton; I was interested in creating the conceptual sequence of the Aral Sea's water as it turned to the cotton fields. The water becomes cotton, and the cotton becomes a representation of water. I created this scroll out of aerial shots of the Aral Sea from 1989 to 2012, showing the terrain and shrinking silhouette of the sea.

There are also a few plaster compositions inspired by Central Asian plaster works and tiles. There's a sculpture of an anchor based on ones I found in the Aral desert; it serves as an element of the aeolian harp installation. Strings are attached to the anchor and also to the wall with a plaster relief. The room functions metaphorically as a seashell's interior. I made field recordings of the wind at the Aral Sea, which are heard both in the film's soundtrack and the sculp-tural installation.

As you enter, you'll also see an opening by the entrance, with facets of glass and mirror: this frames the installation before you see it completely. It's reminiscent of a camera lucida, a device used for perspective studies by artists, and of the photographic camera. It's also a sculptural interpre-tation of the mirror structure my character wears in the film.



Walking the Sea series, 2013, #19, 30.6 x 45.7 cm, archival inkjet print

— *Let's return to the mirror in the film and this idea of 'the golem'.*

So, as the traveller moves, you're able to see flashes and collapses of the landscape's reflections in the mirror. In a way, then, the human figure is secondary, yet the only time the landscape's reflection occurs is when the human figure appears. It was important for me to film the mirror constan-tly moving, its relationship to the landscape constantly changing. It's a 'moving picture' of the landscape and its unconscious expression. Especially when we talk about an inner sea, it's a chance for me to deal with my own uncon-scious. *[Laughs.]*

— *Let's talk about it.*

Let's move onto the next issue. *[Laughs.]* It's too much of a direct metaphor of the Lacanian mirror stage!

— *Clearly there must be something of yourself in the artwork, considering the geographies you're drawn to.*

You can probably relate to the process of immigration in these works, where the Soviet Union becomes not just a country that's left behind, but a country that exists only in memory – a country that's disappeared entirely. My gen-eration lived the last years of the Soviet experiment before it became something else. I'll tell you that it's definitely not a nostalgic condition. But I'm drawn to the exploration of time and geography.

— *I think nostalgia is often mischaracterized as a positive emotion.*

I think it's quite negative. It's like the phenomenon of the phantom limb, which is quite characteristic for post-Soviet Russia.

— *It's not there anymore, but you still feel it?*

Yeah. The nostalgia for a fictitious imperial past. The dreams to resurrect it are quite disturbing.

— *Do you think all of your works need to deal with the phan-tom limb, somehow?*

I hope not. *[Laughs.]* I hope this project will kind of deal with it. But who knows? You can only really look at artworks in hindsight.

*'Terra Corpus' opens on 17 January at the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, Texas*