

ART OF INHABITATION: MODULATIONS

It is not important to be in any particular somewhere, but it is important to be particularly somewhere.

– Taina Rajanti

In the Modulations exhibition Art of inhabitation –project approaches questions of different points of view, of ruptures and shifts of varied kinds. At the core is the question how we are in the world; what in our experience shifts and alters and what still remains the same, as we travel from one place to another, from culture to culture and from an age to another. There are many reasons for change, be it physical or mental. Mobility and flexibility, but also durability, are essential themes in considering change: there is no jump from one thing to another, or at least mostly there is a process of adjustment. It is these processes in between that we like to think of addressing as modulations. In this exhibition certain issues inevitably emerge, such as belonging, being at or away from home and the things that create or at least symbolize these experiences, as well as those that may destroy and change them.

Ideals on a drift

One theme in the exhibition is the change of land- and cityscape imageries. Kim Bouvy has been consistently working with urban spaces, and she has a particular relationship with Rotterdam. Her slide series *Phantom City. A Photo Novel* (2008) combines images of Rotterdam collected from found materials and photographs taken by Bouvy. Rotterdam's image as a brave or daring city - Rotterdam durft! - is tightly knit to the city's distinct architecture. This ultra-modern cityscape has served as a stage, for instance, to various car commercials. Bouvy, again, has been exploring the city's imagery and the city behind it for some years now, and her Phantom City series sketches a whole different city. Here, the haunting and often empty scenes are not there to criticize the left-over spaces of high-brow architecture, but to enliven a sense of beauty in the actual city spaces we inhabit. The spooky atmosphere of impending doom, that Bouvy has created with her slideshow of images and a science fiction story, depicts a city that is not anymore what it used to be. The city has been emptied, its infrastructure changed and time stopped... Looking at her work, one begins to wonder how much of all this ordinary devalued urban rubble would be missed if everything suddenly would be gone. A scenario that the city of Rotterdam has more or less already once gone through in the Second World War.

The impending sense of something being amiss, a tensed atmosphere is also present in Tiina Mielonen's paintings. Seemingly innocent in lush colours and eye-catching surfaces Mielonen's paintings deal with much more than reproducing tourist imagery, which is where the images as such derive from. Mielonen's rupture in the idyll plays with the immediate recognition of most of the situations if not places that she depicts. Looking a moment longer or an inch deeper the expectation of the obvious is broken. What are the places shown really? What exactly is happening?

A different shift of landscape images and the question of recognition happens in Karin Suter & Annu Wilenius' photo-installation *The 4 Page-Landscape - A Walk with a Landscape* (2008). The inspiration for their work originates from a shared experience in northern Mongolia, where both Suter and Wilenius felt that the surrounding landscape of meadows, lakes and mountains appeared familiar, as if it collided with their different memories and ideas of landscapes. Returning to Europe Suter & Wilenius built a miniature of this landscape to match four pages in a book. The following year they turned the miniature landscape upside down and covered it with a perfectly grown grass lawn carpeting, put it on wheels and took it for a walk to the Rotterdam airport. In a sense, the idea of taking - or in this case dragging - not only plants but the whole landscape into a different environment, seems to be deeply rooted to the history of landscaping: The English landscape garden

was created to be the image of the Mediterranean arcadia of rolling green hills and clusters of trees and so the English countryside was changed to match this ideal. Some hundred years later when planning the first ever National Park in the US its creator F.L. Olmstead was thinking of the English landscapes in order to make a scenery that the Americans would understand to appreciate. And so on and so forth: landscapes as well as people and ways of life immigrate, settle, take root and set out on travels again.

Whilst the landscape and cityscape imagery mostly address the outside, Aletta de Jong's works explore the interior spaces of storing and representing knowledge of different kinds. She, too, shares a concern in botany: for years de Jong has had an interest in plants. For the first Art of inhabitation - exhibition in Helsinki, she created a poster with plants she could find between the two Huuto galleries located within a few hundred meters of each other. Tracing back the origins of the plants she added a history of botany layer onto the everyday observations within the cityscape. In *Pictura*, we will see de Jong's video diptych *Tropical Garden / Reading Room* (2006), where two spaces seem to dislocate. The videos are straightforward documentations of a tropical green house and a reading room in Basel. Choosing two very controlled and functional environments of this kind, de Jong's video can be seen paralleling these two modes of preservation and cultivation. The work also underlines the paradoxical nature of the idealities between the two space-times: the categories of nature and culture seem once again tightly intertwined as we observe the various technological finenesses that it takes to sustain a tropical garden with various plants with their different needs. Likewise the supposed silence of a reading hall vanishes somewhere under the continuous and insistent sounds of bodily movements, tics and sighs that are required to keep the mind fed.

Traces of violence and time (?)

Anu Suhonen's *Shooting People* (2003) and Kalle Hamm & Dzamil Kamanger's *Afaryan works* (2007) bring forth more acute questions of violence and belonging. Hamm & Kamanger's video on the village of Afaryan, abandoned Kurd village in Iran, is an attempt to overcome the village's destiny of oblivion. A small village of some thirty houses was abandoned by its inhabitants mainly due to land reform and civil war, and finally the move of an army base near by to the village changed everything, so that the life style that had existed for centuries had soon vanished leaving nothing but a wreck and constellation of memories in the minds of those who had survived. In their work Hamm & Kamanger attempt to trace the story of the village as its remembered by the people, but also step into the future with a 3D animation of awakening the village to life again. Unlike the architectural 3D animations that are made to sell new brave plans, this 3D animation has a heavy historical load that it cannot detach from.

In *Shooting People* Suhonen found bullet holes in shop and café windows in Belfast, Northern Ireland, and placed herself with her camera behind the window-glass and "shot" people walking in the street by pushing the trigger just when someone passed the already existing bullet-hole. Passers by become part of a re-enactment, staged as potential victims of crimes taken place in the imaginary world of photography. Thinking about the spectator's place, the images situate us behind a double isolation: we are both behind the camera and the glass. The latter could be marking a screen, in a sense of protection or shield. In *Shooting People* we become, perhaps more than somewhere else within photography, witnesses or observers that do not take part. The only mediation between us and the passers-by seem to be the hole in the glass, the act of fitting bullet-holes on the passers by.

Suhonen's piece is not without irony on the role of the photographer. But could *Shooting People* simply be thought of as a visual game with bullet-holes? If we look at the series from another point of view, the photographs might open up towards a whole different setting. Perhaps this small fracture could also serve as a blind spot: For one thing, on visual level, it brings visible that we are isolated from the surroundings in the image - how else could we notice such a glass if it weren't for

the defile? Simultaneously, the mark, rupture, shows us a point where we cannot see. In a way, it seems to me that Suhonen is playing with the traditional idea of trompe l'œil where the spectator is lured into thinking that he or she could simply reach out their hand and join in the world of painting. Here the isolation from the world out there is being underlined in a way that easily makes one feel uncomfortable and unsheltered - maybe it is us that the bullet has been heading at. Here, the rupture nails us into our places, turning the image upside down, placing us as the targets. And from another viewpoint, we could say that the fissure marks our own seeing: It is actually our own blind spot, the area eye cannot or does not want to reach, like the backs of our necks, our very own seeing, or perhaps our darkest fantasies. It is all a question of point of view.

At this very moment - in anticipation of the opening of the exhibition taking place within a few weeks - the connotations of Suhonen's *Shooting people* also extend towards a deed of violence that took place in a school in Western Finland, taking the lives of eleven people. Once again, the community is horrified, as there seems to be no way to understand what happened, and moreover, what is more haunting, perhaps no guarantee for us that we ourselves would not be responsible for what took place. From this particular point of view, also another series by Suhonen titled *Camouflage* (2006) seems to raise important questions. *Camouflage* shows a series of photographs where a green bell pepper turns orange, to fit the environment - a fruit basket of oranges. Is this a peaceful acclimatisation, a voluntary blending into one's surrounding or are we actually watching an act of mental violence, of forced unification? The title "camouflage" would hint at there not being real accommodation, but simple adjustment of the surface in order to fit in. Is the bell pepper At heart still at war with the world ?

Perhaps in a slightly parallel way, Hamm & Kamanger's *Colonial Grocery Store* (2008), brings forth issues of adjustment. *Colonial Grocery Store* seems to trace the footsteps of the colonisers, but in an altered form: The store gathers evidence of all those who have moved half the world away from home, but still want the food stuffs and other specialities as they "should be" or as they used to be back home. In this showcase of a shop the artists have collected one product from every country in the world – as far as they were able to find them in Rotterdam. There are 193 countries that are with a general international acknowledgement. The version made this summer in Helsinki had 96 products. The *Colonial Grocery Store* asks the questions of accommodation, as well as underlines the logic of global economics and its desire for certain products, leaving others in the marginal as unwanted, outside the trade routes ordered by big corporations.

Modulations of the Mundane

To begin with the Art of inhabitation -project wished to bring forth the invisible or somehow transparent in our everyday living. The subtitle of the exhibition, "modulations" refers to, among other things, adaptation and alteration. It incorporates an ambivalence: For instance, within music, modulation can serve as a vehicle of change, so that through modulation music becomes established in a new key. Likewise, Art of inhabitation exhibition is taking after some of the early thoughts - questions concerning inhabitation -, but is also turning towards something that was not so much articulated as we began - namely questions on history and ethics. In that sense, the experience of this exhibition is very much the chore of modulation: it is impossible to see, whether things simply continue, or whether they have already shifted away from what first set the phase. Has there been adaption or has the original been invaded entirely by something new? In a sense Modulations - exhibition and its historical and political references touch matters that could be thought more important than just the "transparent everyday". And yet, as an Irish ambassador reflected in a seminar on reconciliation, sometimes when reaching understanding in the "big issues" is found impossible, the only way to go further is to start from the small and the mundane to build up trust and understanding.