

Letter from Helsinki

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Heli Konttinen: *It's a man's world*, 2009, C-print, 72 x 85 cm; courtesy the artist

Located midway between St. Petersburg and Stockholm on the Gulf of Finland, Helsinki has often been cited as offering a blend of east and west. Having been dominated by Sweden for close to half a millennium and Tsarist Russia for an additional century, the past informs the present through its bilingual character and historical architecture. The city also unites land and sea by incorporating areas of woodland and an archipelago

of 300 islands into its urban fabric. Traditionally its cultural life has been ruled by a small, but affluent, Swedish-speaking population, but the face of the city continues to change. An influx of new residents is altering its make up. Of foreign-born residents, Russians form the largest minority and Somalis, Chinese and Thais out rank Brits and Germans.¹ While Finns now struggle with the idea of diversity, Finland's national institutions adapt to the new

reality. The Finnish National Gallery, for instance, has instituted a Community Relations and Development programme office where the outspoken former journalist Umayya Abu-Hanna, a Palestinian educated at Christian schools in Israel, currently holds the post of Cultural Diversity Adviser, and in early 2009 the Arts Council of Finland established a grant for art projects supporting multiculturalism. Open to immigrants, national ethnic minori-

ties and projects involving intercultural interaction, this initiative has the potential to enrich a continually expanding cultural scene.

Helsinki's Museum of Contemporary Art, Kiasma, has steadily fuelled this openness toward 'other' cultures. Eight years ago the museum's curators delved into cultural hybridisation and globalisation through the major international survey exhibition *ARS01: Unfolding perspectives*. And in recent years a vibrant series of group exhibitions highlighting contemporary-art activity in several of Asia's regions took place. Upcoming exhibitions in the schedule prove that Kiasma will continue to respond to the changes in the local scene as well as examine the practice of contemporary art outside Finland's borders. February 2010 sees work by Adel Abidin, an Iraqi-born artist who lives and works in Helsinki, being highlighted in the museum. In 2011, a comprehensive overview of Africa will take over the entire building for the eighth edition of the *ARS* exhibition series. Curator Jari-Pekka Vanhala notes that the aims of the Africa exhibition, which for practicality will be limited to sub-Saharan Africa, include raising awareness and changing perceptions. He finds the idea that African art must be craft-based – that it cannot, for example, involve the use of video – far too common. The projected tripartite focus aims to include artists working within Africa and outside it, as well as non-African artists that have used Africa as their subject.²

While Kiasma stands as the premier showcase for groundbreaking artistic activity, Helsinki offers an abundance of museum, commercial and alternative spaces, several of which operate multiple venues. The Helsinki City Art Museum comprises two museums plus the Kluuvi Gallery. Though Kluuvi dedicates itself to the presentation of experimental and non-commercial art, it stepped out of this role in 2006 to mount Finland's first survey of the life and work of Touko Laaksonen (1920 – 1991), an illustrator of homoerotic better known as Tom of Finland. The Finnish Arts Academy runs three galleries and Galleria Huuto, an adventurous artist-run organization born out

of discontent with existing options, programmes innovative work in two locations. The nearby suburb of Espoo boasts the largest exhibition space in Finland. Humorously tagged Karisma before its launch in late 2006, the Espoo Museum of Modern Art splits its focus between modern and contemporary art.

The advent of pluralism has made it as difficult to categorise contemporary practice here as anywhere else, but themes relating to the human psyche and the natural environment do ricochet through the artscape. Frequently, they overlap. While the troubling stories told by Eija-Liisa Ahtila form the most prominent exponent of the psyche theme, artists flesh out the topic in all types of media. Evident in Heikki Marila's grotesque portraits *Oh, so Shameful 1 & 2* (both 2008), it also informs Markus Copper's complex kinetic sculptures that recount personal experience and delve into the horror of the *Kursk* and *Estonia* sea disasters. Heli Kontinen, on the other hand, works in a more clinical vein. The visual expressions she derives from her research into the moral intelligence of ordinary people force us to question the idea of normalcy.

More widely prevalent as a subject is nature. Of the twenty-eight artists taking part in the Finnish Painters' Union's eightieth-anniversary exhibition in the summer of 2009, the conceptual approach to this theme by Tapani Hyypiä's mesa structures, Petri Ala-Maunus' sunsets and Vaula Siiskonen's racks of landscapes stood out. Supporting the notion that the woods reside deep within the Finnish mindset are *Forest*, a summer group show at the Arts Academy's Galleria Fafa that explored the concept in the broadest terms, and the book *Sähkömetsä* ('electric forest'), which covers the history of video art and experimental film in Finland. Then you have Antti Laitinen, an artist whose videos, photographs and performances intimate a relationship with the earth's surface that borders on perversity. Seppo Salminen's performance *Moonwatcher* (2009) at Forum Box lends a poetic air to the subject and even foreign artists doing residencies in the city can get in

on the act. Witness New York artist Blake Carrington's *Suomenlinna Ornithological Society* (2009); his new bird species' sounds were featured in Artists' Association Muu's *Audio autographs* series.

Less common are artists pursuing social and political issues, an architectural critique or, like the photographer Raimo Lång, an investigation into urban upheaval. Known for architecture, design, and an extensive social safety net, Finnish people appreciate innovation and community-serving programmes. Helsinki supports an international cultural centre, skateboard parks and a 100-metre-long graffiti wall, a temporary version of which was erected this past summer. Last spring the independent and all-new Pro Arte Foundation added a new dimension to the local scene with Antony Gormley's *Clay* and *The Collective body* (2009), the first of an annual series of community-based art events.³ With more than 1,300 individuals producing sculptural objects, it resulted in one massive group exhibition. As popular as these initiatives may be, considering them under a critical light raises a host of issues. For one, it points to a philosophy linking the cultural centre, skateboard parks, graffiti wall and massive art event. It also engenders questions that apply to all. Do they celebrate the specific activities or – albeit unintentionally – circumscribe them? Does sanctioning them help them thrive or induce mediocrity? And, by broadening or legitimising their scope, do these initiatives foster talent and refine experience, or dilute it? This malaise of contradictory qualities exemplifies one of the predicaments of contemporary Finnish life, but seeping through it is a tempered vivacity embodying openness, participation and discovery.

1 Statistics Finland (www.stat.fi/tup/suoluk/suoluk_vaesto_en.html) accessed 28 August 2009

2 Personal communication, 10 July 2009

3 Berlin-based Scottish artist Susan Philipsz has been selected for the 2010 programme.