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Describing the Indescribable

Gun Holmström and the Art of Perception

Gun Holmström's video work has received increasing international attention in recent years. Never afraid to experiment, her deft approach and strong visual sensibility informs a body of work that includes photography, sculpture, and projects incorporating sound and light. This article traces some of the currents that run through her work.

Reality – that world around us which we experience through perception and which continues to be redefined by art – can be understood in so many different ways. But social and cultural conventions, coincidences of time and place, force of habit, and parallel needs and desires all work to condition one's outlook. This process mitigates heterogeneity by compelling individuals to follow seemingly standardized patterns. The rituals and routines comprising the haze of day-to-day life not only dull the senses, but also reduce one's ability to recognize the unique or unusual characteristics of one's surroundings. While many find comfort in following social and cultural directives, others witness an environment marked by constraint, an observation leading them to question the influences guiding society.

Constraint may be identified as the most significant experience comprising Gun Holmström's youth. Growing up in a small Swedish-speak-

ing village in the Finnish archipelago, she lived outside mainstream Finnish society in an environment where one received little or no exposure to contemporary art. Her exposure to more experimental art forms only came at the age of twenty while working as an au-pair in London. There she spent her free time trying to see as many exhibitions as possible. Five or six years later, her ambition to be an artist suddenly took hold and she immediately abandoned her sociology thesis to take up sculpture studies at the Turku Art Academy.

"Coming from a small community one becomes very aware of the regulating norms... It's always interesting to think about the reasons why certain things are condemned as bad..." Holmström has said.⁽¹⁾ While such measures help control negative influences, a sense of 'otherness' brought about by physical and linguistic isolation are inherent features of this situation. Learning to speak Finnish properly only as an adult, Holmström finds that being considered a Swede within Finland and a Finn outside her homeland presents few drawbacks. The fact that "it gives an awareness of different ways of thinking that are built into a culture" forms one important by-product of this context.

Many individuals remain critical, even bitter, about such parochial beginnings, but recourse to diatribe is

not part of Holmström's style. Driven by a desire to understand rather than deride, her questioning gaze aims to reveal the complex nature of the world around her. As a result, her creations encourage viewers to assess her findings and draw their own conclusions from them.

A Womb of One's Own (1999), perhaps the artist's best-known work, stands out as exemplary of her approach. Like many of her works, its source lies in personal experience. Clouded by my North American perspective, I believed the title referred to the abortion issue that has been so controversial in the United States. What a surprise it was to have the expected scenario turn out to be an elucidating monologue dealing frankly with surrogate mothers, gay fathers, and the widely held prejudices surrounding the notion of a family – subject matter to which any person faced with infertility could also relate.

Looking back on the experience, Holmström remarked, "When I made it, I didn't know if it was 'art' or not, the issue just seemed important... The video got much attention when it was exhibited for the first time. Much was positive, but also negative. Many people can't grasp it because the whole thing feels too serious... After this I became very aware about the ethical issues when making a documentary work..."

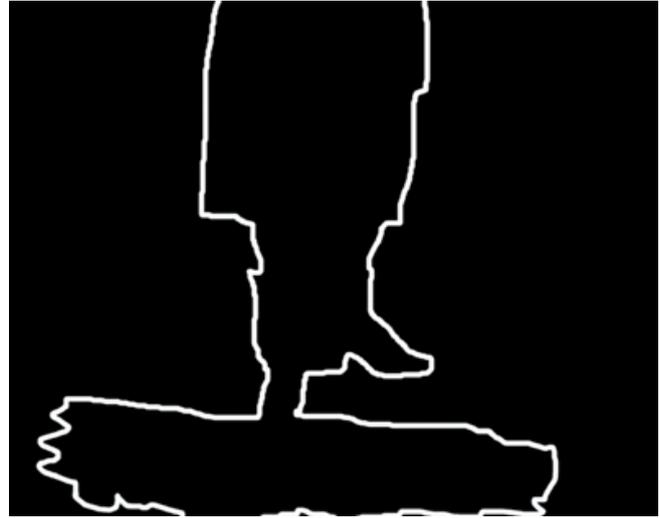
The video stands as a potent work, and like much art that is experimental or that appears ugly when it is new, it requires time for evaluation. While the idea of giving a child to persons who cannot produce their own passes as an act of generosity in many small non-Western societies, it challenges the social, moral and legal frameworks set out by church and state in Western ones. Reaction to this notion is bound to be strong. As a portrait, the simple, straightforward presentation of the subject and the conviction with which she speaks about her project bears an intensity that cannot easily be forgotten. With regard to artistic precedent, Holmström's unadorned treatment of socially significant subject matter brings the work of Courbet and Kollwitz to mind.

Other works that delve into the predicaments of certain individuals and their place in society include *Sermon* (2002), *Cosmos* (2001) and *The Cleaning Woman* (2001). Whether depicting the situation of a church minister, childhood acquaintance, or domestic worker, the artist's camera captures the poetic qualities or inherent contradictions that invest these people's lives. In most cases, these videos are accompanied by a second element that allows viewers to cross-reference what they are witnessing. Accompanying *A Womb of One's Own* is an enlargement of an ultrasound scan show-

Top: Gun Holmström, *Living Paintings*, 2005, DVD, site-specific installation (five videos), loop, 5'00 each. Commissioned by the Turku Art Museum.

Bottom: Gun Holmström, *Sermon*, 2002, DVD, 3'30. Commissioned by the Showroom Gallery, London.





ing a foetus, the triptych *Sunday I–III* (*Cross, Death, Resurrection*) (2002) join *Sermon*, and a black and white animation forms part of *Cleaning Woman*. In each of these pairings, Holmström pairs reality with something more abstract – a meditative component consisting of related imagery modulated by colour, movement or scale; a new perspective causing the topic to resonate and illuminate it more fully. The image of the foetus, for example, dwarfs the video image, bringing the child's future into question; scenes showing a city intersection, a ferry crossing water, and a congregation rising to its feet evoke the foundations of Christianity; and a simple, animated line drawing recasts the cleaner's motions as a kind of dance.

In the catalogue essay accompanying the London exhibition of *Sermon* and *Sunday I–III*, Harri Kalha has made some similar observations. “To the persuasive sound of church bells, viewers are offered a passage from concrete to abstract, from unique to universal.”⁽²⁾ With regard to *Cleaning Woman*, Holmström has expressed it somewhat differently: “Like if you make a landscape drawing – I wanted to exhibit the ‘landscape’ as well as the drawing.”

More recently, Holmström has been moving away from incorporating obvious documentary footage into her work. Becoming personally frustrated

with the technique, she began to sense that she “was stressing the intellectual content too much... or in the wrong way.” Having dealt with themes involving illness, low social status, and other negative aspects of life, she felt it was time to look toward more positive things, investigate the spiritual side of art, and place more emphasis on visual expression.

One could argue that Holmström's interest in the spiritual side of art and emphasis on visual sensibility have informed all her production, imbuing it with a richness that would otherwise make it much less gripping. Implying that which is immaterial, the term spiritual can be understood in many ways. It may refer to a religious belief, forms of energy, a mood or feeling, suggested psychological aspects, and so on. People attending one of Holmström's presentations admired the subtle spirituality in her work as well its humour.⁽³⁾ Her training in sculpture, web design experience, and inherent pictorial abilities also inform her approach by aiding in the synthesis of concept, form, materials and technique that result in works of art.

Her work *Vitamin Power* (1996) stands as a perfect example bearing this duality. This work consists of a dozen small porcelain animal figures with various types of vitamins adhered to them. For Holmström the vitamins have two purposes. On one hand, vi-

tamins ensure that animals are healthier. On the other, they offer insurance against poor quality foodstuffs and, as such, represent a critique of contemporary society. One of my first reactions to the work was the wish to hold the animals. Their enticing tactile quality reminds one of Aarikka sheep figures made from smooth balls of wood. Despite their cuteness, though, something sinister lurks behind their diminutive scale and colourful appearance. They reminded me of the steroid use scandals in Olympic sports and the oversize AZT capsules used by the artist group General Idea in their installations dealing with Aids. By coating tiny animal bodies with vitamin pills, Holmström has created a startling image out of modest means.

The paired works *Moving I* (1999) and *Moving II* (2000) operate in a similar way. The first video shows an apartment repeatedly being filled with and emptied of furniture. In the second, a female figure stands by a roadway while a sequence of residential buildings block out her face. Juxtaposed with the physical process of moving is the mental one. Resembling an elevated storage shed, the work addresses the concept of home in an open-ended way. The home is a repository for one's belongings, but the idea of home – its meaning – resides in the mind. The donning of architectural masks externalizes and generalizes the psycholog-

ical and social impact that moving has on one's life. Repetitive movement and the literal, even primitive, act of placing a house over one's head contribute a ritualistic air to the process. This humorous expression of reorientation makes an impact on both the visual and emotional planes.

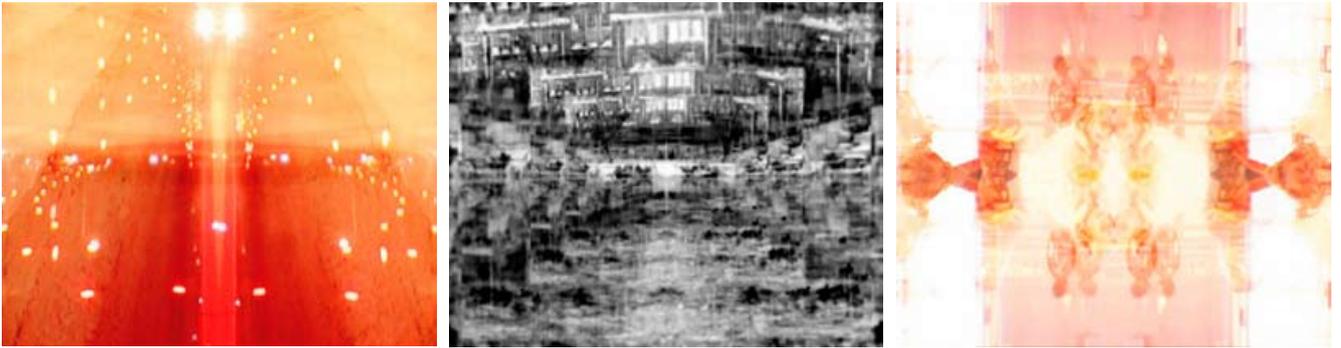
In recent years Holmström's move away from a signature documentary style has been much more obvious. In her sound and light pieces, videos, and curatorial projects, general situations and conditions have supplanted specific ones. Instead of focusing on a specific illness, she has emphasized healing, another multifaceted term. Her documentation of persons with poor social standing has evolved into an examination of the paralyzing effect of fear.⁽⁴⁾ The dryness of earlier exposés has given way to the lively video postcards through which the artist freely experiments; and through the group exhibition *äga:rum*,⁽⁵⁾ she has expressed the diverse nature of time and place as witnessed through the work of several Scandinavian artists.

The process seems to be one of refinement, of learning how to better communicate the ideas and areas of interest lodged in her brain. Finding certain formats restrictive, Holmström seeks out other means to realize her goals. Interestingly, some recent projects are also more easily described using terms more common-

Previous page: Gun Holmström, *The Cleaning Woman*, 2001, DVD, two channel installation, loop, (stills from the animation part).

Top: Gun Holmström, *Sunday I-III (Cross, Death, Resurrection)*, 2002, DVD, loop, three channel video installation. Commissioned by the Showroom Gallery, London.

Bottom: Gun Holmström, *Moving II*, 2000, video-animation, DVD, loop.



Gun Holmström, *A Womb of One's Own*, 1999, DVD and an enlargement of an ultrascan picture of the baby, 12'45", Collection of Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki.

"I already knew quite well before I got pregnant what the problems would be, whether I can do this or not. And my views haven't changed during the pregnancy. It's about being able to know about your feelings beforehand. You can know yourself and to some extent break away from the mold you think you'd fit."

"What really hurts me is the people who think that I can't know whether I'll be able to give up the baby, while they are implying that if I do, it somehow makes me a bad mother, uncaring or something... like having a limb cut off or losing a part. A mother's love is something everyone

thinks they know, even someone else's mother's love, it always has to be something so grand and all-encompassing."

"... I at least explain it to myself as the way people hang on to such things... it must feel like the world would collapse if we had to admit to ourselves that a child gets by with anyone who looks after it. Of course it's safer to believe in home and country and a specific household arrangement before all's good for the child."

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ly associated with two-dimensional forms of art. For example, the video postcards suggest a form of sketching, a process that lets her escape from the traditional narrative and structures of filmmaking. The artist also likens *In the Raw* (2004), another recent video installation, to a collage. With regard to producing three-dimensional work, Holmström does not make drawings. Like the architect Frank Gehry, she develops ideas through a model-building process. This directness of her approach infuses the work with a candor that can also be likened to the spontaneous manner with which some painters apply media to bare canvas.

Holmström's shift in focus has resulted in light and sound works such as *Caleidoscope* (2002) and *Omphalomine* (2005), pieces that take the artist's ideas outside the gallery circuit. Offering Holmström the opportunity to expand her technical range, these public commissions engage viewers in an entirely different way. As the name suggests, *Caleidoscope's* RGB LEDs mimic the prismatic effects seen through such objects. Placed in a health centre, the work provides an alternative and purely visual experience for patients in an austere, clinical environment. Similar-

ly, the intended location for *Omphalomine* is in a public park. Noting that this "sound sculpture and outdoor instrument can be played by the local residents, young and old," the artist's democratic program enables the site to be experienced on at least three levels. As an environmental component, the sculpture's sound would cast the immediate surroundings in a new light. The work's interactive capability not only enables each individual to explore his or her creative potential, but also encourages people of various ages and walks of life to interact around the piece, thus enhancing the shared nature of the public space.

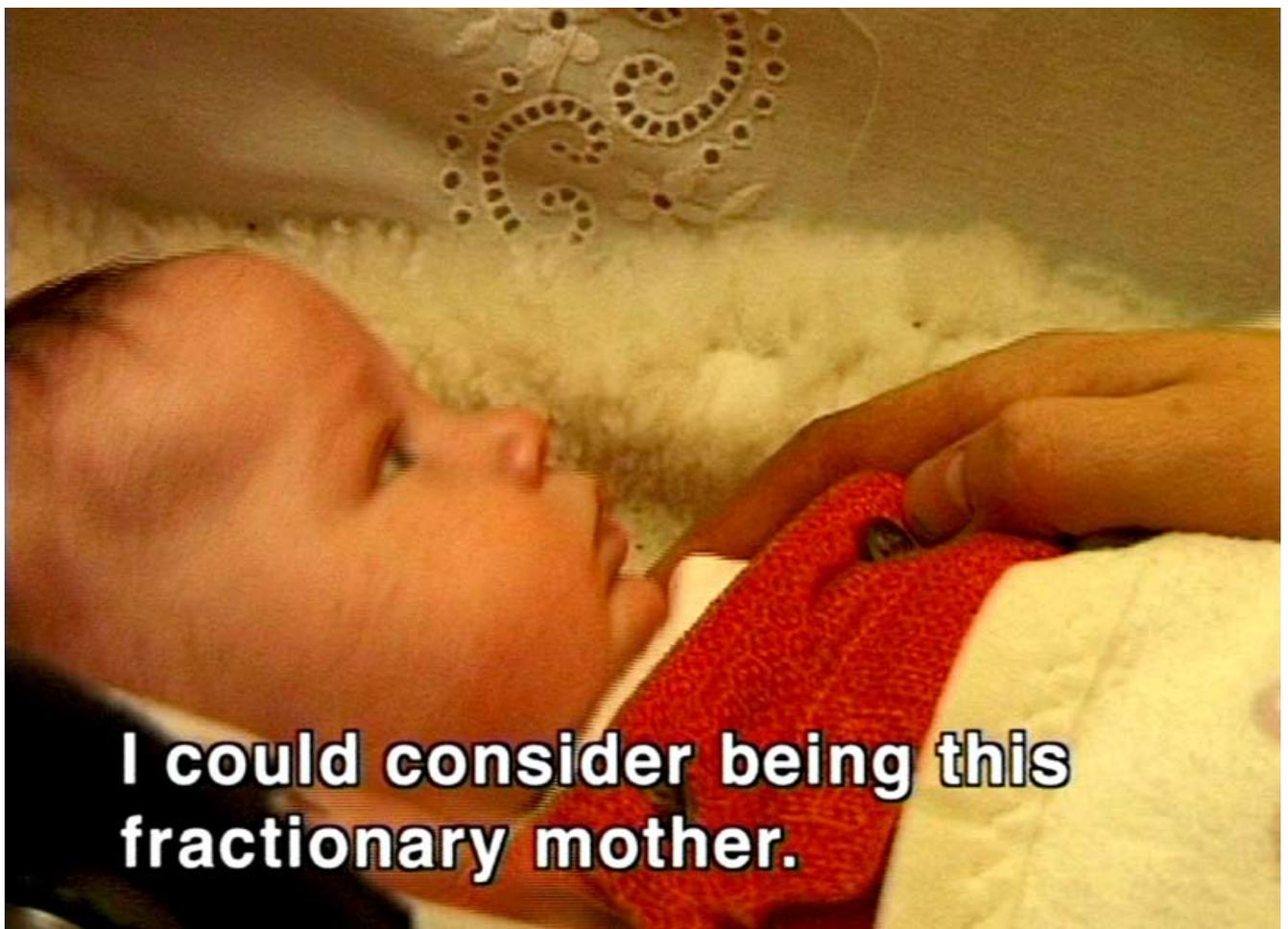
Other tangents include *Disco Tonight?* (2005) and *Where's That Pig?* (2005), both from the video postcard series, and *Living Paintings* (2005) that formed part of the *Sediments* exhibition at the Turku Art Museum. Whereas the artist incorporates humour and layers SMS messages over imagery to produce enticing visual puzzles in the former two pieces, she took to layering footage of street activity and window reflections over images of historically significant Finnish paintings from the museum's collection in the latter. In both cases, viewers must parse what it

is they are seeing by watching the videos over and over again. The deciphering process not only dispels one's initial confusion but frees the eye to seek out other relationships deriving from the superimposition of various kinds of imagery and motion.

Taru Elfving, curator of *Sediments*, has noted that the *Living Paintings* series "literally brought the museum's treasures, which are part of the collective visual and highly symbolically charged memory or even subconscious of the inhabitants of Turku, in contact with the city and its contemporary landscape."⁽⁶⁾ Situated in the museum, a KappAhl shop window and a market hall café, these complex images presented a momentous architectural, social and cultural synthesis that offered a compression of current and historical elements of Finnish life for gallery goers and casual spectators on the street. Stressing the inalienable interrelation of past and present, the inherent subtleties and visual richness created through the superimposition process induce further contemplation.

The intersection of past and present from an autobiographical perspective forms the basis for Holmström's two-channel video installation *In the Raw*.

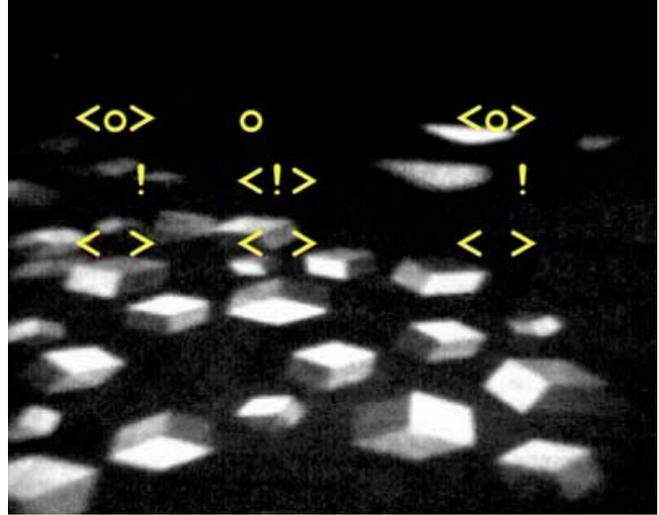
The work sequences images and text that carry no obvious relationship to one another. Memories, real or imagined conversations between friends, pictures of childhood surroundings, and natural phenomena coalesce into a story devoid of a clear plot: a child pictured in absence; the comments of a little devil; images shifting from colour to black and white, all united by a meditative musical score bring about a range of thoughts and feelings. Holmström describes this work as "a saga... that would allow for both the viewers' own associations and possibilities for new stories to evolve."⁽⁷⁾ Another view describes this exploration of social constraints and the complexity of contradicting emotions as fable, the moral of which is the passage of time. Despite the fact that the work's basis lies in reality, the tale Holmström relates through this sequence of unrelated events and fragmented memories makes no literal sense.⁽⁸⁾ A booklet accompanying the work's Montreal exhibition extends the project's scope by presenting a pared-down version of images and text for personal use. Here, archetypal juxtapositions that include both turbulent and calm views, man and woman, and texts in French and



Gun Holmström, *Where's That Pig?*, 2005, DVD, single channel, 1'00.

Gun Holmström, *Disco Tonight?*, 2005, DVD, single channel, 1'00.

Next page: Gun Holmström, *In The Raw*, 2004, DVD, two channel, 10'45. Music by Tuuli Helve.



(1) Unless noted otherwise, all of Holmström's comments, whether paraphrased or directly quoted, come from an interview the writer held with artist in June 2005. *The Act of Generosity*, an edited version of this interview, appeared in the September/October issue of NY Arts Magazine. (2) Harri Kalha, *Gloomy Sunday? Non-Destructive*

Laughter and the Nature of the Sacred, Showroom Gallery, London, UK, 2003. (3) Anne Golden, Groupe Intervention Vidéo, Montreal, Canada. Personal communication, September 20, 2005. (4) *I am unknowing* (2004) was included in the travelling group exhibition *Parameters of Fear*.

(5) *äga:rum/loma:tila/take:place*, Gallery Elverket, Ekenäs/Tammisaari, 19.5.-4.9.2005, exhibition catalogue. (6) Personal communication, September 19, 2005. (7) Press release for the exhibition *In the Raw*, Optica, Montreal, Canada, 22.4.-28.5.2005. (8) Réjean-Bernard Cormier, *Fables et émotions*

ineffables, ETC, no. 70, June, July, August 2005, Montreal, Canada, pp. 8-9. (9) Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. (10) Blake Gopnik, *The Keen Art Insight of Svetlana Alpers: It's All on the Surface*, *The Washington Post*, Sunday, October 9, 2005, p. 6.

English not only delineate life's contrapositive diversity, but also reflect the local context.

The inspiration for *In the Raw* came from a lecture the artist once attended where the visual materials bore no relation to each other or to the topic of discussion. Nevertheless, the absurd narrative presented an experience that was processed by the audience and transmitted to others by way of anecdote or complaint. This is an example of fact being stranger than fiction; where one could say, as Holmström has noted when considering reactions to *A Womb of One's Own*, "since I know the people involved, I know it's true." More important-

ly, though, the significance and, for Holmström fortuitousness of the lecture experience lies in the way the lecture disrupted the audience's expectations. The traditional presentation format had been subverted, thus giving image, word and context a new set of relationships. Minds drifted off. Eyes likely refocused on the speaker's shoes, on the texture of a wall, or on the patterns in the floor.

The effects of both the lecture and Holmström's video installation suggest a type of space that primarily exists within graphic work and paintings, as well as a way of looking at our surroundings that is called simultaneous perception.⁽⁹⁾ In the former, un-

related images arranged on the same plane present a non-linear narrative, the reading of which frequently remains open-ended and allows viewers to establish individual conclusions from the visual clues. The latter process involves de-focusing the eye and mind in order to perceive everything within one's range of view. This mode of perception reorders what has always seemed familiar by revealing the overriding character of a place. Previously unnoticed features attain new status, and interrelationships deriving from the site's organization and its effect on people's behaviour are delineated. This is what much of Holmström's art, not only her videos, encourages viewers to

do. Attempting to describe the indescribable, her work returns again and again to the rich complexity of day-to-day reality to show us what we take for granted. Spirited as well as spiritual, her sound and light pieces, multi-channel projections and use of abstracted and layered images document the simultaneity of experience. The art historian Svetlana Alpers has claimed that Rembrandt's painting was not about portraying reality as it is found outside, but "about using its artificial 'vexing' of reality to gain insights into both humanity and art."⁽¹⁰⁾ This motivation also underlies Holmström's visual constructions. +

