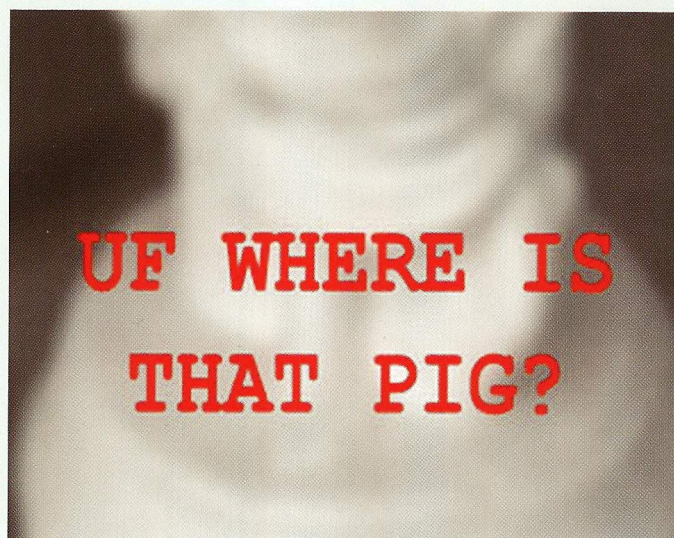
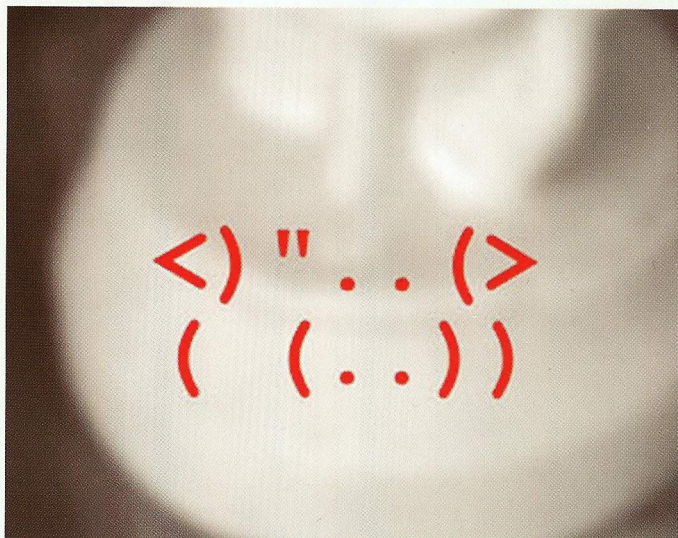


The Act of Generosity

John Gayer interviews sociologist turned multimedia artist Gun Holmström



Since she quit her Master's thesis in sociology 12 years ago, Gun has been making subtly sociological photographs, sculpture, videos, and light and sound works. Holmström's most recent solo exhibition took place at Optica in Montreal earlier this year. Her latest public commission, *Omphalomine*, was unveiled in the Vesala suburb of Helsinki during the summer. And her work will be featured in *Huuma*, a group exhibition touring Sweden in 2006. Gun and I exchanged a few emails in June this year.

John Gayer: Having originally studied sociology, what made you decide to become an artist?

Gun Holmström: I come from a small village in the Finnish archipelago and visual art was not a part of my environment. Then, while working in London at the age of 20, I tried to see as many exhibitions as possible, the more experimental the better. Five years later I was preparing to write my thesis in sociology when I suddenly realized I should be an artist and left university for art school.

JG: Growing up in the islands between Finland and Sweden must have had some influence on your work.

GH: I have made several works that are connected to my background, but it is difficult for me to say exactly how it affects my art. Swedish is my mother tongue and I only learned to speak Finnish properly as an adult. In Finland I am often considered a Swede and elsewhere a Finn. This provides a sense of otherness as well as an awareness of the attitudes inherent to a culture. Another factor is that in a small community the regulating norms are clearly stated.

JG: *Vitamin Power*, from 1996, is the earliest work of yours that I have seen. Those cute little porcelain figurines covered in vitamins have a sweet presence, but something more serious lurks behind this impression.

Gun Holmström, *Where's that pig?*, 2005. DVD single channel, 1 min. (from the "1-minute Postcards" series).

GH: *Vitamin Power* was made for my exhibition "Performings" at Helsinki's Kluuvi Gallery. The exhibition was about performing and failing, about the growing expectations directed toward individuals by society. Today, artificial nutrients enhance life at the same time that there are so many questions regarding the quality of food. I see it as a critique of the welfare state and Western food production.

JG: To me, the title of your video *A Womb of One's Own* (1999) first suggested the issue of abortion in the U.S. But this piece deals with surrogate mothers, gay fathers, and prejudices about the notion of what constitutes a family.

GH: This was my first documentary video and I could not be sure if it was art. I knew the person who I wanted to be the focus of the video and she agreed to make it because she thought the issue was important politically. It received much attention, both positive and negative, and made me very aware about the ethical issues when making a documentary work, especially how it can impact the subjects' lives. I do not allow it to be shown outside art film festivals or gallery settings.

JG: In some small non-Western societies acts of generosity include the provision of a baby to an infertile couple by relatives. The photo-work *Womb* (1999) sometimes accompanies *A Womb of One's Own*. What is its purpose?

GH: The enlargement of this ultrasound image shown together with the video acts as a reminder that the discussion is about something real, about a person that exists, although at that time only in the womb of the birth mother. I am happy that you mentioned "the act of generosity" in this context, because the video is actually about giving. Many people cannot grasp that fact. They find the topic overwhelms them.

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JG: The still images from two of your video installations have a painterly quality. In *Cleaning Woman* (2001), a black and white animation accompanying the documentary portion removes the subject from her context. To me it suggests a form of abstraction.

GH: I filmed the cleaning woman who cleaned the stairs where I was living in Helsinki. One channel is a documentary; the other channel is an animation. The abstraction brings something new to the subject, changes it. Like if you make a landscape drawing – I wanted to exhibit the “landscape” as well as the drawing. It is also a political landscape, of course. It comments on the social status of people engaged in repetitive work in our society.

JG: The work *Living Paintings* (2005), on the other hand, suggests Photo-Realist scenes of the store windows – complex layered images of objects and reflections – that synthesize elements of Finnish life architecturally, socially and culturally.

GH: Considering what I have done before, this work is not typical. Being asked to comment on the role of the Turku Art Museum I decided to walk in four directions from the museum and film everything I saw. I then chose some well-known Finnish paintings from the permanent collection and placed my footage over them.

JG: Works such as *Vitamin Power*, *I am unknowing* (2004) and your recent series of video postcards all exist in or imply a diminutive scale. Is this a reaction to large installations?



Gun Holmström, *Vitamin power*, 1996. Photo: Hanna Rikkonen, Helsinki City Art Museum

GH: The scale varies and depends on many factors: the gallery space, the context. The video postcards allow me to experiment and play. I make anything I like without thinking too much about themes or visuals. Regarding the *I am unknowing* series, this was composed together as part of the group exhibition “Parameters of Fear.” Because of the scary and violent nature of these images, I believed they worked best on a small scale.

JG: On the surface the sound and light pieces *Caleidoscope* (2002) and *Omphalomine* (2005) move away from the social and moral content evident in other work. Their primary focus seems to be on visual and aural experience.

GH: Yes. These two pieces are public commissions that offer an altogether different context. The budget allows me to experiment with other techniques, which I enjoy. As you have noticed, in my video works I have been moving away from “super realism” towards a more strictly visual form of expression. *Caleidoscope* was produced for a health center. The patterns of light are intended to provide an effect related to healing. *Omphalomine* is similar. This sound sculpture, an outdoor instrument, can be played by both young and old. For so many years I have been working with themes related to illness and the difficult sides of life that I now want and need to concentrate on more positive things. The Finnish outlook tends to be a bit heavy: one should be extremely realistic about life. On a personal level I became frustrated and started to think that I was stressing the intellectual content too much, or in the wrong way. The work did not seem to be my own anymore. I started to think that the spiritual is the basis of all art.