

Published in *Laura Horelli*, edited by Kathrin Becker and Sophie Goltz, Berlin: Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, 2011: 20-23.

Proximity in Public: Laura Horelli's Video Work

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Reflecting upon the development of her work¹, Laura Horelli identifies a number of deliberate changes in her practice, partly informed by the experience of making *Helsinki Shipyard/Port San Juan* (2003). This work is a two-channel installation with a total running time of about 32 minutes, focusing on two groups of workers linked by the economy of the cruise ship; the designers and builders at a Helsinki shipyard and the officers and crew of a ship docked at Port San Juan. Consisting mainly of interviews conducted at both locations, interspersed with factual statements displayed as onscreen text, the finished work was edited from over forty hours of video. Although Horelli's interest in the cruise ship industry was partly informed by her childhood experience of living near a shipyard, the video does not reveal this personal connection. Nor does it address the fact that Horelli appears to have a greater degree of mobility than many of her interviewees in Helsinki and San Juan. But in many of her later single screen videos, Horelli focuses directly upon the histories of work and travel found in her own family and, in contrast to the assertions of objectivity and detachment traditionally associated with documentary journalism, all of these works highlight the critical potential of subjectivity and proximity.

You Go Where You're Sent (2003) made immediately after *Helsinki Shipyard/Port San Juan*, traces Horelli's Grandmother's journeys around the world, first as athlete and dancer and subsequently as a diplomat's wife and doctor. This video consists entirely of images derived from family photo

¹ See Horelli, 'Personal Stories Addressing Structures in Society: Interview by Marius Babias' *Laura Horelli: Interviews, Diaries and Reports*, ed. Jacob Fabricius, Copenhagen: Pork Salad Press, 2006, 79.

albums, accompanied by audio commentary in which Horelli explores the various roles played by her Grandmother in producing images of 'Finnishness'. *Haukka-Pala (A-Bit-to-Bite)* (2009) continues this focus on female family members but introduces a more explicit concern with the activity of interpretation. *Haukka-Pala* takes its title from a children's television programme broadcast in 1984 and 1986 on the Finnish channel TV2. Focusing on the theme of healthy eating and incorporating references to Finnish customs and traditions, it was written and presented by Horelli's mother (a nutritionist) during the two years before her death. The voice-over consists of two parts: Horelli's own narration and excerpts from her mother's diaries, with the latter subtitled in yellow text.

Horelli draws attention to children's television as a form of broadcasting defined by continuity, noting that her mother's co-presenter ('Ransu' the puppet dog) recently celebrated his 30th year on Finnish television. Her narration also emphasises the role of television in asserting national and familial norms; so when her mother explains to the viewers that it is good to eat with friends once a day, she notes that her own family always ate dinner together at 5 pm. At other points, she hints at possible differences between the worldview articulated in *Haukka-Pala* and her mother's own personal views or values. For example, when a Finnish board game depicting the African continent (in which players must compete to find a diamond) is played on screen, she expresses surprise, noting that her mother had once worked with women's groups in Kenya.

In *The Terrace* (2011) Horelli explores the relationship between her family, Finland and Kenya more closely, by reflecting upon her own childhood experience of Nairobi. She revisits the vaguely modernist compound where her family lived in the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with a number of Kenyan Indian families and three expatriate families. Shots of the buildings and grounds are interspersed with sequences in which a woman sifts through a series of photographic prints and, although only her hands (and brightly-painted fingernails) are visible,

the content of the voiceover – delivered in accented English – indicates that this figure is Horelli. She reflects upon the social and physical environment of the compound, focusing on the terrace opening into the gardens and her memories of Esther, a Kenyan woman employed to help with domestic work who lived with her own children in an area of the compound hidden from view.

As the commentary unfolds, attention is drawn to the formal and material peculiarity of the photographs themselves. The prints are much larger than would be typical for 1970s family snapshots and their authorship is uncertain. While her mother probably took most of them, Horelli wonders if she herself might be responsible for strange images of Esther cleaning. This interplay between voiceover and photography recalls Hollis Frampton's quasi-autobiographical film *Nostalgia* (1971) but ultimately the trajectory of Horelli's work is very different. While the voiceover in *Nostalgia* veers unexpectedly towards dramatic suspense, Horelli maintains a steady focus on the spatial dynamics of the compound, returning repeatedly to the private and public spaces of the compound, navigated differently by children, 'Nairobi Finns' and Kenyan workers.

Both *Haukka-Pala* and *The Terrace* seem to share an emphasis on proximity – Horelli is emotionally connected to the people and places depicted in the moving and still images that she examines and she is also visibly engaged in the act of looking closely – pausing the video at a crucial moment, or dwelling upon a specific photograph. This conscious shift in choice and treatment of subject matter is paralleled by changes in her approach to installation and exhibition. *Haukka-Pala* was commissioned for the exhibition *The Collectors*, curated by the artists Elmgreen and Dragset for the Danish and Nordic pavilions at the 2009 Venice Biennale. Overtly theatrical in tone, this exhibition deliberately exploited the biennale's resemblance to a commercial trade show; the two pavilions were framed as desirable residences with fictional occupants, with the Danish one presented as a family home supposedly 'for sale'. In keeping with this narrative, *Haukka-Pala* was displayed on a monitor in an area arranged (by the curators)

to resemble a living room. After its initial presentation at *The Collectors*, however, the work was shown without the set-like environment and has even been screened at the Copenhagen International Documentary Film Festival.

The installation design of *Helsinki Shipyard/Port San Juan*, seems far more integral to the logic of the work, as it always shown on two conventional CRT monitors, each with headphones attached. The placement of the monitors on separate plinths underscores the physical distance between the two groups of workers and invites a distinctly spatial mode of viewing, not possible in a broadcast or festival context. This approach to installation also frames the work partly as *documentation* – a term integral to Horelli’s practice and choice of media. In the 2006 interview with Babias, Horelli notes her interest in the media of ‘performance, video, and documentation’, which were favoured by Suzanne Lacy, Martha Rosler, Yvonne Rainer, and Adrian Piper, and others associated with ‘second wave feminism’.² While these artists have exhibited in a variety of contexts, they recognised the significance of art museums and galleries as prominent public sites for the critique – and production – of art histories and social histories.

Rosler’s practice seems especially relevant for its sustained concern with power relations, its deployment of both spatial and narrative strategies and (in video works) its use of modes of direct address that are historically associated with television. In *The Bowerly in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-75) Rosler critiques the aesthetic conventions of documentary, requiring the viewer to both read and physically move past a succession of image/text juxtapositions but her video works, such as *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* (1983) – a performance devised for broadcast on the cable TV channel Paper Tiger – are less reliant upon spatialised modes of display and more self-conscious in their exploration of image production, consumption and interpretation.

² See Horelli, interviewed by Babias, 81.

Several commentators have noted a renewed interest in documentary aesthetics and strategies within contemporary art since the early 1990s,³ while others have called attention to a more explicitly nostalgic ‘cinematic turn’, noting that some artists were drawn towards cinema precisely at the point when it seemed to be ‘in crisis’.⁴ Perhaps these two trends are in some way connected, however, because it now seems that artists and curators are turning (or perhaps returning) their attention to *television*, mining its history to explore the ideals, achievements and unrealised potential of broadcasting in the formation of the public sphere. These concerns are evident in ‘Are You Ready For TV?’ (at MACBA, from November 2010 to April 2011) one of several recent exhibitions focusing on television.⁵ In addition to presenting a number of critical and experimental works devised for broadcast, this show asserted the importance of the public museum as a pedagogical space, suggesting a possible parallel between the role of the museum and the historical mandate of public service broadcasting – to educate and inform as well as entertain.

‘Are You Ready For TV?’ drew attention to the history of interventions in European national broadcast contexts (by David Hall, Alexander Kluge, Harun Farocki and Ian Breakwell among others) but featured only a small number of works engaging with television in the ‘post-broadcast’ era. They include Christian Jankowski’s *Telemistica* (1999) in which the artist seeks guidance about his work from various ‘psychics’ on Italian TV. Although he highlights the continued importance of ‘liveness’ (or its illusion) in television, Jankowski focuses on a commercially-driven form that is clearly at odds with the authoritative and state-regulated model evident in *Haukka-Pala*. In other contexts, numerous artists (including Pierre Huyghe, Katya

³ See Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (eds) *The Greenroom: Reconsidering the Documentary and Contemporary Art*, New York: Sternberg Press and Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, 2008.

⁴ See Chrissie Iles, cited in Maeve Connolly, *The Place of Artists’ Cinema: Space, Site and Screen*, Bristol and Chicago: Intellect Books and Chicago University Press, 2009, 10.

⁵ ‘Are You Ready For TV?’ was curated by Chus Martinez. Other recent examples include ‘Changing Channels’ curated by Matthias Michalka at MUMOK in Vienna (March 5 — June 6, 2010), and ‘Channel TV’, a collaboration in 2010-2011 between Kunstverein Harburger Bahnhof, Hamburg; Centre des Arts cneai, Chatou near Paris, and the Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg.

Sander and Gillian Wearing) have explored the changing form and role of public service broadcasting. For example, Sander's multi-channel installation *Televised I: the Anchor, the I, and the Studio* (2006) uses interviews with three Romanian television news anchors to explore the production and performance of journalistic authority by state, public and commercial broadcasters.

While Sander frames her questions through reference to memories of watching Danish television, during a period of transition in the 1980s, she is interested in television as a medium that is both 'live' and living, because its form (while circumscribed by often unwritten conventions) is subject to change. In *Haukka-Pala*, however, Horelli approaches television primarily as an archive, treating the video recording – sourced by her grandmother many years after the broadcast – as a document that can be viewed and re-viewed. Yet even though *Haukka-Pala* is structured around the voice and image of Horelli's mother, it does not communicate a sense of nostalgia for public service television. Nor does it position the medium securely within either the 'public' or the 'private' domain.

Instead, it is part of an ongoing inquiry into the formation of these public and private realms, a concern already apparent in Horelli's earlier *Reconfiguration Of The Herald Tribune/ 03.06.00* (2000) which is redone every time it is exhibited. In this work, by 'reconfiguring' newspapers and TV news broadcasts from a specific day and presenting her version in the gallery, Horelli both offers a personal and subjective counterpoint to the public sphere and engages with the temporal flow of print and broadcast media. Ultimately, this suggests that Horelli's interest in television should be considered as part of a much larger project – an ongoing examination of the spatial and temporal production and reproduction of power relations. By ostensibly narrowing the scope of her analysis, she has found a way to examine the historical and geopolitical processes that structure these relations. The resulting videos, *Haukka-Pala* and *The Terrace*, which document the

activity of viewing and re-viewing the familiar, assert the critical potential of proximity as a counterpoint to documentary objectivity, exploring the interconnections between personal, familial and national histories, and reflecting upon the practices of media production and reception through which these histories continued to be formed.