

Henna-Riikka Halonen: Some Potential Scenarios

Berwick Gymnasium gallery, Berwick-Upon-Tweed 14.08.2010

By Rosalie Doubal

(a review of an exhibition that hasn't happened yet)

Often it's the simplest of images that belies its own complexity, and it's an unassuming photograph of a female figure facing a television screen that proves central to an understanding of this new body of work by Henna Riikka Halonen. Solitary and strangely out of our time, the photograph depicts a longhaired woman - later discernable as the wondering figure in film work 'A Strange Place for Snow' - facing her own reversed reflection. Whether it's a film still or a live recording, this jarring double image toys with our expectations and casts aspersions over the work's photo-documentary status. The questioning of this industrious trompe d'oeil characterises this inquisitive display, and most significantly, the image comes to represent the artist's creative ability to produce a generative force from starting points of anxiety and doubt.

With 'Some Potential Scenarios', Halonen introduces a temporal and spatial confusion of the kind often likened to the single-sided surface of the Moebius Strip. An essential paradigm for our understanding of the coupling between the observer and the observed, the Strip reveals an indistinguishable inside and outside, and like the figure in the photograph, represents an observing system that can observe itself observing. Halonen's position as an artist can similarly be considered with respect to this idea, and it is a comparison that is encouraged by Halonen's open-ended and nomadic response to Berwick Futures' commission to engage with the community's opinions on the developmental plans for the town.

Occupying the assumed role of 'communicator' or 'translator', Halonen's response to this commission can be read as commentating on the wider role of contemporary artists in the public domain. Splicing together historical points of reference with contemporary concerns, Halonen's exhibition marries the viewpoints of young Berwick residents with tropes of futuristic literature. This body of work draws influence from Soviet poet and playwright Vladamir Mayakovsky and his 1930 work 'The Bed Bug', a play that imagines scenarios from a fictional journey, offering unique social observations and forecasts for the future.

Drawing on the theatrical lineage of the artist's literary inspiration for this docufictional exhibition, a sculptural form comprising lightweight metal rods roughly sketches the outline of a large U-shaped ramp and appears as an impromptu, makeshift stage. Referencing modernist environments, architectural maquettes and the 1930s structural stage sets of Meyerhold and Mayakovsky, this skeletal scaffold appears to have been constructed by numbers, as if via a flat pack. Look closer, however, and the numbers file out of order in quick succession - 1, 79, 237, 4619, 32,587 - and so it continues; an unbounded numerical system spiraling drastically out of control. Binding simple playground symmetry with spurious mathematics, Halonen's curious installation sits at an uncomfortable juncture. Childlike and waiting, this curiously charged stage seems poised for action – a performance, a happening or a transformation of sorts.

Proffering a series of similarly fractured, satellite narratives, Halonen's film work 'A Strange Place for Snow', returns us to the bizarrely dated, otherworldly aesthetic of her keystone photograph. The film is a portrait of a woman walking through Berwick's changing architectural spaces, both liminal – a disused supermarket, an unused office space – and situated – a wind farm and a housing estate. A soundtrack by anonymous ensemble Zoviet France sets droning textures against broken rhythms and offers no solace in the face of the film's endlessly unfolding points of reference. Framing, rearranging, diminishing and demolishing both the landscape and notions of a specific time, purpose and place, this meditative narrative casts creative confusions adrift.

Called upon to be an observer observing the town's observed, Halonen's artistic response to her time spent exploring the people of Berwick's 'plan for the future', represents scenarios which unusually embrace a multiplicity of voice. Deliberate attempts to confuse the idea of time and the separation between the past and future, although casting a profound sense of uncertainty, also work to charge an air of dynamism. Drawing together polar temporal planes at an interstice at which the boundaries between fiction and documentary have become blurred, 'Some Potential Scenarios' represents an endlessly imaginative projection of the future, and an intriguing model of role-play between a public and its artist.

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