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INTERVIEWS MAR. 28, 2014

Vanished Past, Fictional Present: An Interview with Henna-Riikka Halonen

by Jason Farago



Henna-Riikka Halonen,
Moderate Manipulations, 2012
(video still), HD video,
6 minutes. Courtesy the
artist. Photo Minttu
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After years when its gaze has been turned to Asia, the Biennale of Sydney has taken a decidedly northern turn for its 19th edition (through June 9), organized by the Melbourne-based curator Juliana Engberg. Glasgow and Oslo, which despite their frigid climates are very probably the two most exciting cities for contemporary art in Europe today, count between them more than a dozen participants in this biennial. There are also notable contributions from Lithuania, Denmark and Finland—the last including the artist Henna-Riikka Halonen, who is presenting three videos at Artspace, a small venue facing the picturesque Woolloomooloo Wharf.

Halonen, 38, was born in the succinctly named Finnish city of Ii and spent a decade in Britain before moving to Helsinki recently. In films such as *The Bath House* (2009), *Strange Place for Snow* (2010) and *Moderate Manipulations* (2012), all on view at Artspace, she employs jarring narrative elements, from repetition and simulation to parody and absurdity, to explore the ambiguity inherent in social relations. While set in the present, her videos are imbued with settings or dialogue that wed them to the recent past. *Moderate Manipulations* is shot in front of a Futuro house, a round prefab home with an entrance like an airplane hatch, while *The Bath House* reimagines a Constructivist play by Vladimir Mayakovsky in a Scottish pool.

Halonen spoke to *A.i.A.* at Artspace about the appeal of obsolescent architecture, the rise of Nordic contemporary art and the controversy surrounding this biennial's former lead sponsor.

JASON FARAGO Your three videos in the Biennale are individual works, but they speak to one another.

HENNA-RIIKKA HALONEN Yeah. I like to create stories within

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FARAGO It looks similar to what Buckminster Fuller was doing at the same time in the 1950s and '60s.

HALONEN Exactly. For Finnish design, Suuronen's house was supposed to be this groundbreaking invention. But it sort of failed. There are some in Australia, actually—you could lift them with a helicopter, put them on a mountain or an island.

FARAGO Between the attention you pay to Suuronen in one of the films and to Mayakovsky in another, you seem to have an interest in utopian dreams, and the failure of those dreams. But then there's an element of science fiction as well.

HALONEN It's mostly to revisit these unfulfilled projects. Like Communism, in a sense: the Communist society in Mayakovsky's play was a critique of Soviet bureaucracy. And in *Strange Place for Snow* I borrow dialogue from H.G. Wells. There's something really beautiful about science fiction in the way it gives you a surreal reality. So I want to bring these unrealized projects to a contemporary situation, but I have to do it via a fiction.

FARAGO There seems to be a lot of narrative video that's come out of Helsinki, most famously from Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Salla Tykkä.

HALONEN It's true, though I have to say that I didn't study there [Halonon graduated from Goldsmiths College in London]. The narratives in my works are always fragmented. There's not one single image that can represent the whole story—it's more like a collage. Visually, I consciously use that collage quality, a kind of clumsiness. The costumes, for example, might be a bit too big. Or the performers are pushed to a limit between acting and non-acting.

FARAGO You were one of the artists who signed an open letter questioning the funding of the biennial; Transfield Holdings, the exhibition's founding sponsor, is indirectly linked to the Australian government's immigrant detention centers. Has the debate affected you?

HALONEN Of course it has. All of the artists in the show discussed it a lot before coming to Australia: not just the biennial but the whole situation with asylum seekers, which I find really horrible. But I think Juliana's curatorial view is based on the idea that art can have some sort of effect, maybe not as direct as activism, but as another, more poetic vision.

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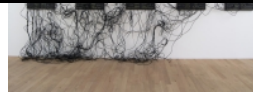
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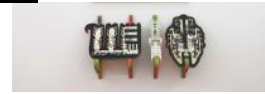
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