

Meet You In Finland Angel

East meets West

You go to Finland and can't stop thinking about Russia. It turns out this is probably because Finland doubled as Soviet Russia in so many Hollywood films made during the Cold War, including *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *The Eagle Has Landed* (1976), *Reds* (1981) and *Gorky Park* (1983). Finland, the only country to share a major border with Russia and not undertake a communist regime during the Cold War, functioned as a kind of Western simulation of the impenetrable East. In fact Finland was a cause for considerable anxiety for the West through the early years of the Cold War – the country was closely monitored by Britain and the US who were concerned that Finland might at any moment 'fall' to the East.

But Finland has had a long history of bobbing back and forth between East and West, buffeted geographically between Sweden and Russia, and conquered by both countries on and off for most of the last Millennium. Now independent, Finland maintains an impressive social welfare system, like other Scandinavian countries, and is a leading competitor in the communication technology market primarily through Finnish company Nokia. Everyone has cell phones.

Popular

In Amsterdam in late July I visited the exhibition *Populism* at the Stedelijk Museum. Sprawling and ambitious, *Populism* simultaneously exhibited in four venues across Europe – CAC, Vilnius; the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo; the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; and the Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt am Main; and (following on from recent 'multiple platform' projects such as the last *Documenta*) additional debates around the topic were held in Berlin, Reykjavik, Oslo, Copenhagen and Malmo. There were also publications including a free exhibition tabloid, a reader, and a catalogue.

Populism aimed to ask how forms of populism 'promote themselves and their quest for mass appeal through a stylistic and aesthetic consciousness'. It was a show which happily meandered down various divergent paths. Some works operated as forms of theatrical spectacle in their own right, while others engaged in more direct critiques of propaganda and 'groundswell' movements within capitalism, politics and entertainment.

Jeremy Deller's film *Memory Bucket*, filmed in Texas, George W. Bush country, demonstrated conflicting local views; from the fawning waitress at a local diner who describes the



Jaakko Rustanius, *Ensimmäinen Kirja: Suijikt / The First Book: Inüts*, Gallery Huuto, Helsinki, 2005, p18.

president's visits to the diner to eat (his favourite burger... the Secret Service have to disconnect the nearby petrol pumps prior to his visits), to members of the Quaker community at an anti-Bush protest discussing the problems with the Bush administration. It was a more abstracted work than Deller's usual style, with large chunks of footage dedicated to Gothic shots of bats flying slowly against the dusk.

Mathieu Laurette's ongoing project exploring exchange commodities documents his successful attempt to eat for free through buying food with a money back guarantee for 'customer satisfaction', and then applying to the company for his cash refund as he wasn't '100% satisfied' with the product. Incredibly, he lived off this method for a considerable time. Of course, it's a system which relies on customer laziness in returning goods to remain financially sustainable, and Laurette's project makes a nonsense of



the seeming transparency and generosity of the brands. Documentation of appearances on talk shows and in the media by Laurette promoting his strategy for others to take up feed back into the work, notching up the surreal aspect to this project.

The exhibition was housed in the temporary Stedelijk building in Amsterdam's old post office building on the waterfront while the usual Stedelijk Museum is closed for renovations for four years. This was fortuitous, because I just couldn't imagine *Populism* being shown in the rigid modernist museological framework of the old Stedelijk: all barriers, plinths and hushed tones. Within this more industrial environment the terms of display could be renegotiated, allowing the exhibition to be fluidly installed.

But it seemed that not all the gallery staff agreed with the changes to the Stedelijk, as the woman at Front of House advised us when buying our tickets, 'you might not want to come in, we don't have any of the well known artworks on show'. We indicated we were still keen to visit the Museum, and thinking we hadn't understood she repeated 'no Kandinsky, no Warhol, no Chagall'. We had noticed that several people ahead of us in the queue left without entering, so her technique of dissuasion was obviously working.

I was intrigued to see *Populism*, not just because it was a thoughtful show, but because it was curated and managed

Tanja Koistila, *Ensimmäinen Kirja: Sujijkt / The First Book: Inüits*, Gallery Huuto, Helsinki, 2005, p12.

by NIFCA, the Nordic Institute of Contemporary Art, based on the island of Suomenlinna in the Helsinki harbour, where I was about to travel to take up a research residency for a month. A former Russian fortress, the converted army barracks on Suomenlinna have been converted into housing for the NIFCA offices, and studios and apartments for an artists and curators residency programme. It's an impressively open programme, supporting creative exchange between Nordic countries and the rest of the world with a view to the long-term promotion of Nordic art, beyond specific shows or immediate results. (www.nifca.org)

Man without a past

He thought, "it's dead. All the world has died while I slept. This world belongs to somebody else whom I don't know." (Tove Jansson, *Moominland Midwinter*, 1992)

Finland is bookended for me by two worlds: the Moomintrolls of Moomin Valley, from the children's books by Tove Jansson, and the slightly darker films of Aki Kaurismaki. The magical environment of Moomin Valley is filled with oddball characters, in stories which are gentle, wistful and surreal.

In *Moominland Winter* Moomintroll accidentally wakes up while the rest of his family and friends are hibernating through the winter, and discovers a new, alien world of whiteness and emptiness. It's scary, but then it becomes exciting when he makes new winter friends and realises the limitless possibilities of a winter world without the guidance of Moominpapa and Moominmama. Kaurismaki films (*The Man Without A Past*, *Leningrad Cowboys Go America*, *Drifting Clouds*) bear the same kind of quirky humour and the ability drift off into unexpectedly strange terrain.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that all this beautiful weirdness might be a Finnish thing. Helsinki-based artist Veli Grano's films and installations are marked with a similar interest in characters who fall somewhere outside the mainstream. His work at the Sydney Biennale 2002, (*The World May Be*) *Fantastic*, was called *Star Dweller*, a documentary installation which, along with the later documentary film *Meet You in Finland Angel*, told the story of Anne Pajuluoma, a Finnish woman who has had many encounters with the planet Sirius, and believes her miscarried daughter now lives among the Sirian people. Fantasy and heartache are mixed up together in Anne's story, her belief in a magical world allowing her to transcend the material hardship of her physical world.

These are works which could be glib or patronising were it not for Grano's quiet compassion in recording, and the fact that he and Anne have clearly developed a relationship of mutual trust. In *Meet You in Finland Angel* Anne tells her incredible story and reenacts her first trip to Sirius to meet her daughter, using a neighbour's child as a stand-in, dressed in a shiny white outer-space outfit. I felt gob-smacked the first time I saw this, it had such emotional punch. Clearly the film is cathartic for Anne; in an interview in *Framework* magazine between Veli Grano and Anne Pajuluoma and her husband Jarmo Ylänen (who channels the spirit of Van Gogh to paint reproductions of his paintings), Anne says that: 'the photos and film will endure, they have made my Sirius real. Now I can be what one really ought to be on this Earth: an earthly creature, a human being'.

Huuto means shout in Finnish

Helsinki has a long history of artists' associations, and a more recent history of artist-run initiatives. I went to an opening at Huuto, one of a core of artist-run spaces, run collectively by an artists association or trust. The space was so tiny that everyone had spilled onto the street, drinking bad wine and talking in a mixture of Finnish, Swedish and English. I asked someone what they liked about Huuto openings and they said 'the wine is shocking, but it lasts for ages, and everyone always comes here'.

Huuto have recently opened their second gallery space several streets over from their original space, a slightly bigger, slicker white cube. Despite this, Jaakko Rustinas, the Chairperson of Huuto, (also the Director of HIAP, another artists and curators residency programme) is emphatic that Huuto

needs to resist becoming too big or too institutionalised.

'What I've found in Huuto is a safe haven... in creating our own space we've set us free. When you step out from your studio, it's a wilderness, you have no control over anything. You have to be careful of what you say and to whom. You have to be humble, and if you are going to be rebellious, you better be it in a calculated way. It's not your world, it's the art world... So when you create your own realm, with other people in the same situation, you set yourself free, at least temporarily, from the old rotten oligarchy of the art world.'

Huuto does have an immediacy and a rawness, there's a sense that something is happening right now in front of you, unmediated by too much analysis or long-term strategising. The board have made a decision not to have paid workers in the gallery, and all major decisions are made collectively. With no regular external funding the gallery, like other artist-run spaces in Helsinki, charge artists a fee to show, which covers the rent and other building costs. Artists manage the space during their exhibition, and only association members usually exhibit.

Huuto means 'shout' in Finnish. The story goes that the initiating artists behind Huuto, Vesa Vehviläinen and Tiina Mielonen, went to Norway for their honeymoon and returned with a souvenir balloon shaped like Munch's 'Shout' figure, which became the gallery's first mascot. As Rustainius says 'we try to shout loud to be heard'.

'We also call ourselves 'huutulaiset', which translates to something like 'Huuto People'. But there's a special meaning to the word. Before the welfare state was created in Finland, the orphans from poor families were sold in the markets. The municipalities had the legal responsibility to take care of the children who had lost their parents, and the officials often outsourced the job to private families, mostly to farmers and landowners. They held these public auctions, where the kids were on display, and whoever bid the lowest price for the municipality to pay for the care of the children, would get the kids. The winning bidders would receive an allowance from the municipality and they would, naturally, exploit the labour of the kids as much as they had the nerve to.'

'These kids were called 'huutulaiset', as they were bought by shouting in the auctions. And that I guess is something most of the Huuto people can associate with. Most of the young artists today are really struggling for survival, and we've thought it's better to get together, to create a space of your own, when you are motherless and fatherless in the art world.'

Emma Bugden travelled to Helsinki with the assistance of the Nordic Institute of Contemporary Art and the City Gallery Wellington.