

Leevi Haapala

Bodily exercises

Nina Rantala takes my hand to show how she has drawn directly on people's skin in a number of her works. The situations and places have changed; the flow of black and red lines on the arm of a lady in Hamburg, the metamorphosis of a butterfly on the back of a friend, tattoo motifs on sailors aboard a Norwegian ferry. The body gives scale to the drawings; the relationship with the person imparts the motif. The lines follow the folds of the skin, skirt sinews and moles, race down veins and reach up with arteries. Power lines, veins, fragmentary body maps; interspersed with words about time, dream, fears. The artist herself states: 'One cannot draw closer to anyone than on his or her skin.' The colour will gradually fade away and yet the skin remembers – the presence and touch.

The British artist and theoretician Yve Lomax considers the body, temporalness and photograph and asks: 'When the fragrance of a body beckons we may ask, 'well then, what is a body?'' Her reply combines various fields of science, transcends categories and limits of artistic endeavors:

'A body can be anything – an animal, an idea, a body of sounds, a mountain, a linguistic corpus, a child, a photographic body of images or a wind. A body, we might say, is never separable from its relations with the world.'

We can ask where did the question about body enter Rantala's works? The most obvious answer is her past as a sculptor and the implied close relationship with the physicality and characteristics of materials as well as a feeling of the weight of matter. A more insightful question would be how is the body present in Rantala's works? In her early Structures sculptures the body is implied in the scale of the buildings and spaces, observations and experiences on partitioned and shared city spaces, taken into private use and represented as simplified structures. Small details articulate the personal border in relation to the observed space.

In the two works about the arson of the Porvoo Cathedral the body is a place for collective remembrance. It is a congregational body, people and turning points in life. The church building as a body is a place for mourning as well as for rebuilding, an attempt at resurrection and facing the future. In her sculpture Room the sculptural body is a metaphor for sacral space with no access to the holiest of the holy. It is like an idea of a religion that one can feel sharing as long as it is being lived but which is never put into words. It keeps its innermost secret.

A scent of tar permeates Rantala's works. It attaches to various strata of meaning like in tarred shingles of a church roof and images of the sides of the wooden ships of a bygone age. The memory traces attach to the layers of cultural nostalgia: a tarred wooden boat and skin sticking to the sun-warmed back thwart; the tarry humid air in a dusky sauna; or the stories of previous generations about the snow sticking under recently tarred skis.

The question of presence is central in Rantala's work. It is not translated into the metaphysics of presence but rather to a question of the body as a part of a community and human interaction. The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman states in his studies on the relationship between exchange and gift: 'even if the personal context cannot accommodate the whole business of life, it still remains an indispensable ingredient of interaction.' In True Romance Rantala examines the separation and transcendence of private and public, intimate and hierarchic. In the drawings made on the skin of the crew of a Norwegian ferry crossing a fjord, M/F Stryn, the fragmentary and probing line of Rantala's previous works transforms during bilateral conversations with the crew into personal pictorial symbols of the important things in life: work, hobbies, love. To the engineer it is the ferry's eight-cylinder engine; to the captain it is a series of nautical knots on his back; to the ticket-seller it is a view of the fjord, anchors and lines of flowers. In return, the engineer drew a Norwegian fishing boat on Rantala's arm as a souvenir. The personal nature of these images avoids the clichéd shoals of traditional sailor tattoos.

Through these drawings the body becomes a scene, not only for nostalgic remembrance but also for pictorial presentation of the borders of self. The role of the photographs in True Romance emerges as one of its main functions as a practice of late photography and a form of presentation in contemporary art: to leave a visible sign of a past event. The photographs of the drawings sail permanently with the ferry and its crew. They

remind of those quiet pensive drawing sessions, of the strange closeness on the deck, in the mess hall, in the engine room. A community can be built and strengthened by sharing personal memories and making them visible. It is a question of daring to approach another human; or as Yve Lomax condenses it when contemplating the relation of photograph to the human body:

'It is the affects that bodies have upon one another which come to constitute the photographic image or indeed make the child. It is the relations entered into which come to define a body.

'Nothing but relations', we may reply.'

Text by Leevi Haapala

translation Jaakko Koskentola

Yve Lomax, "The photograph and les temps", *Writing the Image, An Adventure With Art and Theory*. I.B.Tauris Publishers, London, New York, 2000, 121.

Zygmunt Bauman, *Sosiologinen ajattelu*, suom. Jyrki Vainonen. Vastapaino, Tampere 1997, 122. *Alkuteos Thinking Sociologically*, Blackwell 1990.