

Laura Horelli

Galerie Barbara Weiss and NBK, Berlin, Germany



The Terrace, 2011, DVD still

Is identity contingent upon memory, or can it subsist without a narrative of the past? For artists, the coincidence of personal identity and artistic persona complicates the question. Finnish artist Laura Horelli's films plot the past on a spectrum that begins in personal recollection, diversifies into literary narrative, and telescopes outwards to adumbrate major historical events. *You Go Where You're Sent* (2003) – an interview with the artist's grandmother – was the single work in her exhibition at the NBK; across town at Galerie Barbara Weiss, Horelli showed *Haukka-Pala (A Bit to Bite)*, (2009) and *The Terrace* (2011), in both of which her mother, who died in 1988, is the central presence and absence.

Horelli's method of biography calls into question the format's reliance on the exceptional nature of the lives it records; conversely, it intimates how every family would be exceptional given the appropriate scrutiny. The artist's grandmother, the subject of *You Go Where You're Sent*, indeed led an exceptional life as a surgeon as well as the wife of an itinerant Finnish diplomat. The film is divided into the periods of her husband's postings, which coincided with some of the great traumas of the 20th century. We overhear Horelli interviewing her grandmother in English, while watching a sequence of precisely cropped family photographs – an appellation that seems too modest for images that are as likely to show Konrad Adenauer as the girl next door. The interface of the intimate interview with photographic evidence of the one-directional march of history is emblematic of the way Horelli polarizes and superimposes sociological distance and anecdotal proximity.

In *Haukka-Pala* and *The Terrace*, Horelli makes private revelation indistinguishable from its public performance. Both works feature the artist's halting, cautious voice, commenting on images while interjecting anecdotal asides. While this format aestheticizes an autobiographical (and biographical) interrogation of the past, it also incorporates the artist's own wariness of publicizing private emotion. *Haukka-Pala* adapts footage of a 1980s Finnish children's television programme in which Horelli's mother, a nutritionist, imparts eating tips to a puppet. Her Finnish is contrasted with her daughter's accented English, the lingua franca of internationally viewed art films, serving to cast her mother as a character in her art work.

The Terrace documents a four-year period Horelli's family spent in Kenya in the late 1970s and early '80s. Stills of old photographs cede to moving footage Horelli shot on her recent return, as though reanimating the original locations – a bracing indication that life does, indeed, go on. Horelli's varnished red fingernails signal the formality of the occasion, as well as highlighting the gender of the speaker. Shuffling through the prints, she evokes what used to be called 'women's accomplishments' – sewing, knitting, playing the piano. This is the specific gravity of the film's retrospection: as in W.G. Sebald's novels, which recall the horrors of the 20th century through a prose that adopts 19th-century intonations, local memory opens to encompass far-reaching historical associations. Horelli's films liberate her from the confines of those associations, and dynamically reinvent them.

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Terrace of European Single Person in Kileleshwa (2011) is a sequence of six framed photographs shown alongside *The Terrace*, the first reproducing an image of Horelli's house in Nairobi taken from an academic study of living conditions in Kenya. The last image, taken from indoors, shows the book's author, a friend of Horelli's mother, sitting on the same terrace. These complementary renditions of one location – symbolically contrasting the private and the publicly appropriated – were placed on either side of textual and diagrammatic reproductions from the book, intimating a hinterland of social history lurking beyond a singular personal viewpoint. It also made clear that 'objective' research cannot be separated from the personal losses it encompasses.

The question of whether Horelli's films ought rather be viewed on Channel 4 or Arte is pertinent. The artist consciously assumes the generic format of the television documentary – combining evidential photographic illustration with an explanatory voiceover – while deviating from it with abrupt silences and tangents of solipsistic reverie. The enlarged scale at which she projects these images in the gallery manifests an awareness of the materiality of the photographic medium. The deliquescent grain of the enlarged snapshots is commensurate with the responsible exposition of history. This empirical, structuralist dimension frees her work from the negative connotations of 'nostalgia'. By restricting *You Go Where You're Sent* to still photography, she maintains a scrupulous distance from her subject, just as the interview format is implicitly intolerant of the presumption of omniscience associated with the third-person documentary narrator. Correspondingly, the found footage of *Haukka-Pala* is shown on a monitor, where 1980s television is presented as hidebound by absurd conventions which Horelli trawls for facts, contrasting the theatre of TV with the 'truth' of her own commentary. But what is 'truth' here; and who is reconstituting whom? Points of view multiply: we have Horelli's voice, that of her mother, and the 'private' testimony of her mother's diary as related by the artist. Horelli arranges this spectrum of selves like a series of screens protecting and selectively exposing the fact of a loved one's death.

Mark Prince