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Jacob Dahlgren, *Signes d'abstraction*, performance with 300 people dressed in striped T-shirt in a shoppingmall in Stockholm, 2005. Photos by Jacob Dahlgren.

Lolita Jablonskienė on Anu Pennanen

Political Refractions: Cities, Societies, and Spectacles

Anu Pennanen is a socially-engaged media artist who uses the images she produces as political tools. I met the artist for the first time a couple of years ago while preparing an exhibition project for *The Second Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art* (2007) – by which time she had made her international mark with the video *A Monument for the Invisible* (2003). That work tracks the travails of a blind protagonist and the otherworldly quotidian experience of negotiating a city without sight – and the amplification of different aural and spatial characteristic this entails. The city, Helsinki, is re-envisioned in the work; its familiar appearance being subsumed by hard surfaces, harsher sounds, and alienating structural logics. When we met, Pennanen was already engaged in another project – an investigation into the everyday functioning and changes in the symbolic meaning of public spaces in Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia, based on collaboration with local teenagers from different Estonian and Russian social groups.

Urban[ism] and strategies of collaboration have lately become 'focus topics' for both artists and curators. The seemingly structural and apparently socially inclusive lines-of-enquiry may represent a shift away from identity based discourses that endlessly rehearse the search for the new or latest 'Other'; commensurate with 'discovering' contemporary art in 'new', previously peripheral or marginalized locations; and institute a myriad of new spaces for contemporary art in dozens of old and new biennials. Instead these topics are indicative of a shift towards an exploration of community (dare I say communism?) under aggressive pressure of globalization. Like many arts-after-modernism these 'focus topics' rapidly became reflexive and shifted perceptibly – especially in the work of a younger generation of artists – towards a new mode of critical examination of contemporary art and its contexts. While continuing to expose the hidden conditions of social (urban) life, various collaborative actions begin to lose

their aura of urgency, innovation, and the spirit of avant-garde and become common, legitimate – even casual – devices among other suggestive aspects of contemporary art practice. Irit Rogoff has characterized this turn, thus: "...criticality while building on critique wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, and allocating blames."⁽¹⁾

Pennanen is equally fascinated with the terrain of urbanism and social interactivity but she has outstripped art-system reflexivity and its topical theoretical and curatorial pre-packaging practice – by honing on the visuality and visual correspondences of the media tools she works with; and by 'marrying' the critical analysis of a cultural-social context with the experience of a specific situation (both in physical urban space and in an installation – at the intersection of the real and illusory). The heightened sensorial experience – alloyed to that of the blind

protagonist 'Johanna' in *A Monument for the Invisible* – is case-and-point.

Cities are ideal objects for the roving, and critical, artist's eye: as their form and functioning is myriad and evolutionary. The city's inhabitants are challenged – as is the artist – by the constantly changing material structure and a psycho-geographical milieu to find their proper place in the order (or chaos). The city plays back on its self, like an art work, in a state of constant actualization. And the production of Pennanen's art works mirrors the city with its images, sounds, narrative drift, and collaborative/social mode of production. The artist is in a constant search for scenarios that will play out alternative, and location specific, socio-political aspects of the urban experience.

As a rule, Pennanen realizes this scenario progressively, in several stages, choosing one or another form of project presentation at each way station. The resulting art works range from hard-edged yet otherworldly pho-



Jacob Dahlgren, *Signes d'abstraction*, performance with 300 people dressed in striped T-shirt in a shoppingmall in Stockholm, 2005. Photos by Jacob Dahlgren.



tographs, to interactive workshops that are documented textually or on video, spatially sensitive videos integrating elements of 'sound art' made in collaboration with sound artists or composers, and their eventual architectural display in an exhibition setting. These diverse representations are tempered for different audiences, including: a 'local' constituency comprised by their site, then the cosmopolitan audience that attends contemporary art exhibitions, and in terms of the publicly situated works casual passers-by. This open-for-

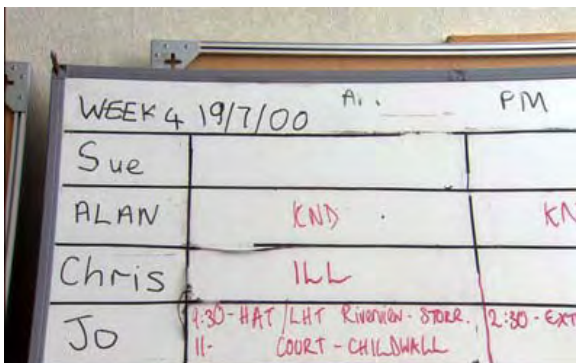
anyone(2) form is equally inscribed in the openness of interpretation and meaning (remember, cities are familiar phenomenon and their visual representation is repeatedly embodied).

Pennanen doesn't rehearse 'stock' identification – the stuff that 'conventional city photography' is made of – she trades in politically adept images. Her recent photographic projects about Buenos Aires and Frankfurt aM hone on bank buildings – the power base of those cities. Photographing banks, the artist applies fragmental composi-

tions, often flattening spatial structures so that 'reality' becomes subaltern: the contemporary architecture's reflective, hard-edged, and shiny surfaces brutalize depth perception. This visual affect rejects automatic ocular processing of the photographs and acts like the sort of veil. The physicality and symbolical power of the built environment melt in the photographs' visual logic and extreme close-ups: so it is difficult for the viewer to develop a rational and emotional relationship to the imagined city. Banks seem, therefore, an appo-

site subject with which to excavate the problematic relationship that all camera based art has with materiality and, dare I say it, *truth*. The city is equally unknowable and cannot be represented in its totality and the images of the banks are like the views of Leibniz's 'monadic city' comprised of a series of windows out of which no visual *gestalt* of the city is ever experienced. This repelling – of sight and of knowing – evokes a sense of anxiety and hints at the alienating and uncontrollable nature of the city and its tendency towards entropy.

Jacob Dahlgren, *Signes d'abstraction*, performance with 300 people dressed in striped T-shirt in a shoppingmall in Stockholm, 2005. Photos by Jacob Dahlgren.



Anonymity infers avoidance and is a type of 'invisibility'; which are strong currents within Pennanen's work. She turns her camera away from typical views of the city; avoiding recognizable images and decisive moments. The people that inhabit her images are shadowy, their movement keeps them indistinct, and they are like the extras in films whose fate is to lie in the spools of film littering the cutting-room floor. In this way Pennanen steps into discussion about what is visible and invisible in the contemporary image saturated

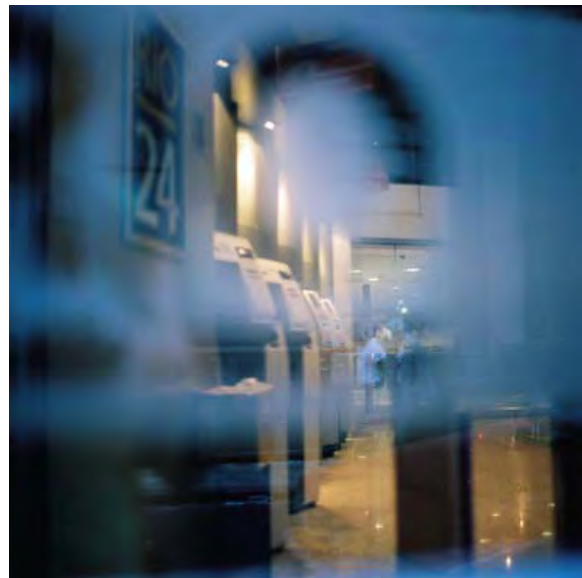
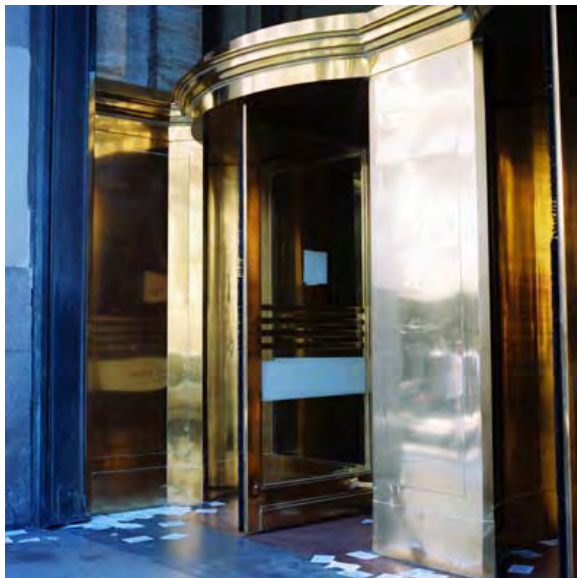
world. "The problem of the crisis of images, of this permanent, continual flux is that the price is that of invisibility; as soon as you are in an image in a permanent way and without articulation, you risk finding yourself face to face with images which lose their meaning and become practically invisible."⁽³⁾ Pennanen refuses to multiply invisible images; instead – she constructs monuments to the invisible reality. There is a sense in which her works, photographs and especially multi-media installations, produce a body of knowledge

that is inaccessible using rational tools of analysis; to paraphrase Jeff Wall, it's more "about experiencing the pictures than understanding them".⁽⁴⁾

The video work *A Day in the Office* (2006) made for the Liverpool Biennial was projected at night on a wall of an art centre situated in central Liverpool; so that Pennanen's spectacle – of the city under demolition and reconstruction – merged with the flux and roar of its metropolitan referent. The rituals conducted within the city's commercial interior spaces look trivial

and meaningless when set amongst the chaotic exterior action. And the soundtrack of interviews with office workers about life and work in the city, (temporary) inconveniences caused by its renovation and concomitant hopes disappears in the bang-and-clatter of the city streets. The juxtaposition of the visible, though seemingly autonomous, and uncontrolled, forces of reconstruction and the somnolent mundanity of office life reveals the utopian nature of all reconstruction projects – delivering expedient changes to an oblivious society and

Left: Jacob Dahlgren, *Untitled endless column*, 2006, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre, cloth hangers, height 420 cm. Photo by David Yellen.



environment. The Russian philosopher and critic of post-communist countries' transition to capitalism, Boris Kagarlitsky, observed that: "What seems so intolerable today is the realization that there will be no awakening, that this is not a dream but reality, that there is no future except endless repetition of the present. In the final analysis, the horrors of the transitional period turned out to be far less frightening than the nightmare of the bourgeois quotidian."⁽⁵⁾ It could as easily be applied to the routine of revanchist capitalism being experi-

enced in Liverpool. *A Day in the Office* assumes a specific role in the urban fabric – enabling a heightened experience of its surroundings that might stimulate, a delayed, and, heterogeneous set of judgments and actions.

Pennanen's project *Friendship* was certainly a 'time-based' work taking two years, between 2004 and 2006, to complete. She immersed herself in the youth culture of Tallinn the capital of Estonia and devised a scenario about the city in collaboration with Estonian and Russo-Estonian youngsters. Tallinn

is one of the fastest developing cities in the EU and the corresponding cultural transformations are palpable. The final outcome of the artist's multipartite work is an impressive three-channel video installation that addresses the viewer with more than a textual narration about the attempts of communication of the conflicting ethnic groups. It spatializes the themes found in the project – producing a sensation close to that of vertigo. The work's title *Friendship* (in Estonian *Sõprus*, Russian – *Druzhiba*) is worthy of analysis and should be read dialectically – as it symbolically describes its

principal theme, and, is the name of an old Soviet era cinema located at the very centre of Tallinn (that inspired the artist's line of enquiry). A collision of narrative and cinematic axes is embodied in this concept of "friendship". As cornball as the cinema's name might seem to the Western ear (preferring the sleeker "Odeon", "Paradise", and "Hollywood") it was actually a common name, or typology, for cinemas in the USSR – as cinema was the people's art and where better to indoctrinate them?

Left: Jacob Dahlgren, *Untitled endless column*, 2006, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre, cloth hang-ers, height 420 cm. Photo by David Yellen.



(In my native Vilnius we had one too; in Lithuanian it is *Draugyste*).

In the work Pennanen mobilizes this time-warped concentrating on two symbolically opposite architectural monuments: a Soviet modernist monolith and a contemporary shopping mall. The former, designed as a majestic symbol of eternity, employing the structure and symbolics of gigantism and the language of abstract forms is too mute and alien to be friendly (think of a lunar-landscape). The latter, is manifest with vertiginous hustle, a miscellany of

shapes, and a multitude of forms, and surfaces – many of them reflective, thus producing more visual parallax – apparently implying an infinite field of individual possibility and becoming. Not much of what goes on in a shopping mall is as individuating as its legend, as it is designed for mass marketing and consumption [of commodities] and is inhabited by crowds. The price of the goods is a “chainstore” fixed and linked to external markers of value – the banter-and-barter of the traditional marketplace and the market stall ven-

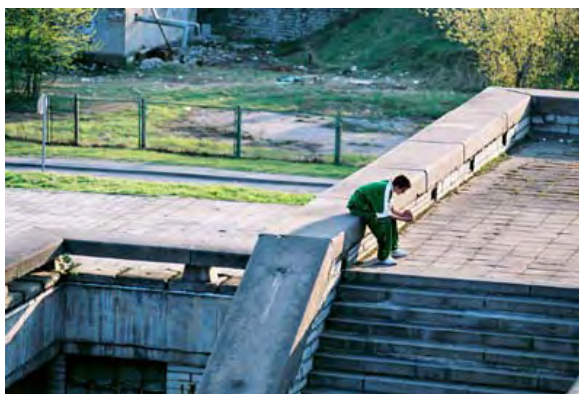
dor has been forsaken. To many of the *nouveau* consumers – conversely – the former is the appeal; an escape from the poverty-stricken and shadow economy-driven Soviet era “market” into the crowd and its concourse of invisibility. Walter Benjamin posited this as part of the birth of the “modern” city [of Paris] that Tallinn surely wants to become:

The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the flâneur. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room. And both of these

went into the construction of the department store, which made use of flânerie itself in order to sell goods. The department store was the flâneur's final coup. (6)

No wonder that the artist has chosen to work with teenagers for her film. Making their way in the city – an alien, intimidating and at the same time tempting cosmos – they attempt to enter it against the course of the crowd (and resist its subjective control) inventing idiomatic way-out rituals of their own. In an attempt to resist the hieratic logic

Next page, bottom: Jacob Dahlgren, *Heaven is a place on earth*, 2006, Bonniers Konsthall, Stockholm, bathroom scales and aluminium, 897 x 681,5 cm. Photo by Bonniers Konsthall.



Jacob Dahlgren, *Colour reading and contexture*, 2005, Malmö Konsthall, wood, tiles, chocolate, carpets, plastic, isolation and a lot more, 1100 x 1100 x 200 cm. Photo by Vegar Moen.



(1) Rogoff, Irit (2006). *'Smuggling' – An Embodied Criticality*. <http://transform.eicp.net>.
(2) I refer to the remark of Jeff Wall: 'I like to think that serious art is not at all exclusive, but it is not for

everyone; it's for anyone'. Wall, Jeff & Figgis, Mike. Campney, David ed. (2007). *'An Email Exchange'*. The Cinematic. Whitechapel & The MIT Press, 164.
(3) David, Catherine (2007). "Photography and

Cinema". The Cinematic, op cit., 148.
(4) Wall, Jeff & Figgis, Mike, op.cit., 158.
(5) Kagaritsky, Boris & Bienert, Dorothee ed. (2007). *'Of Fear and Change'*. Don't Worry – Be Curious. 4th Ars

Baltica Triennial of Photographic Art, cat., Revolver, 26.
(6) Benjamin, Walter (1968). "Paris – Capital of the Nineteenth Century". New Left Review. March–April, 84–85.

of each space, they use the monument and surrounds as a skateboard park, have dates in the 'arcades' and go joy-riding in shopping trolleys on the roof of the mall. Inadequate to the anticipated scenario, their actions betray the artificiality of the scenario itself. If the action feels proscribed we can hark back to the inspiration, and title, for the work: a movie theatre – a special place of cinematic hypnosis, immers-

ing a viewer into a visual atopia and the site of Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs". The city is equally resistant in Pennanen's films and photographs – visually attracting but alien and dangerous for the subject's body. Within the "Tallinn Project" installation the artist enacts a deconstruction of narrative video's linearity and the naturalism of single-channel documentary viewing. The three projections

make the viewer's eye wonder among the events taking place at different times and in different places. Complementing the three-channel installation are more videos on LCD screens (the script of the teenagers' discussions) and photographs of the video's characters that institute a specific 'here and now' dynamic, physically interrupting and producing a corporeal and spatiotemporal situation disrupting the illusory

cinematic continuum.

The viewer needs to construct their own trajectory through the narrative, the coda of identification, the syntax of recognition, and the delineation of the city. This audio-visual activation, extending beyond the documentary representation, is the ineluctable mark of Anu Pennanen's work: and a reflection of the experience of living in the global city. +