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HAVE YOU LOST THE UNDERGROUND?
LET THE AUTHOR OF ENGAGING,
IMMERSIVE MEDIA ART, **HANNA
HAASLAHTI**, HELP YOU TO FIND
IT IN THE IRRATIONAL. SHE HAS
A WORD OR TWO TO SAY ABOUT A
HYPER-RATIONALISED MODERN DAY,
WHERE SHADOWS OF OURSELVES
GUARD OUR ANONYMITY AND
PRIVACY.

TXT MATTI PENTIKÄINEN
IMG MIKKO RYHÄNEN



WHAT'S
YOUR
DOWN
UP TO?

FROM THE INITIAL INTRODUCTION and a hand-
is going to be one of those *ditch-your-ques-*
been equipped with a recorder even before
cussions in which the moment takes over.
strom covering work and family, past and present, ideas and accomplishments, and both physical and virtual
realms of life. So, even before our morning coffee has dripped, I'm well deep in discussion with media artist
Hanna Haaslahti.

Her works make her the right person to
give us the lowdown on where the world
is headed with all its digital going-ons. We
sit in the kitchen of her workspace-be-
come-office, a creative hub shared by a
sound design company and record manu-
facturer, situated in-between the historic
Olympic Village of the Helsinki 1952 Ol-
ympic Games and the Kumpula allotment
gardens. The space is raw, stripped to red
brick walls and bare con-
crete, but it is approach-
able, Finnish in an unfamiliar
way; a scene straight out of
the *Apartamento* magazine.

FOR A
SHADOW YOU
NEED A
BRIGHT LIGHT.

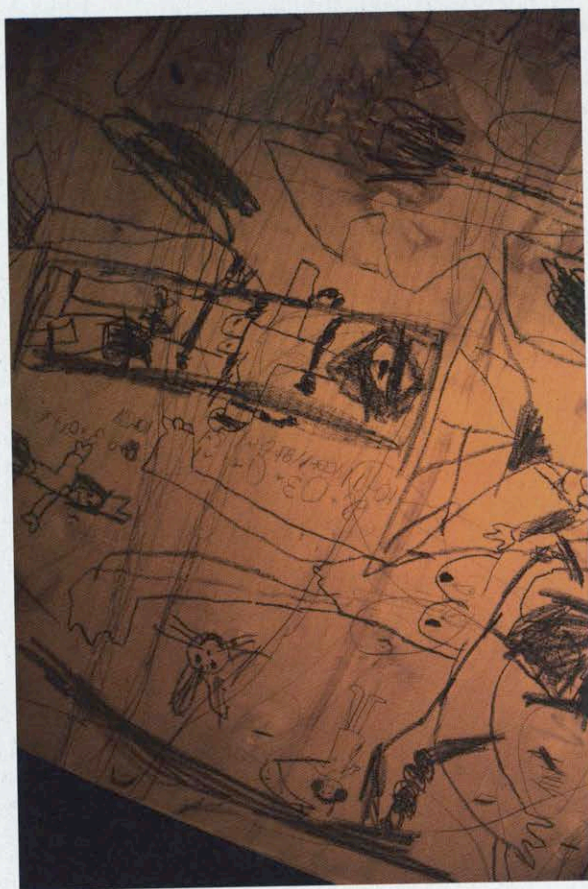
POISED, TEMPERATE Haaslahti takes time to
consider her thoughts, often referring to the
original question, bouncing the discussion
into loops. Rather than talking of herself,
she often refers to a collective us. Her work
engages audiences to a physical dialogue,
requiring involvement from the experiencer
with a pursuit to find themes that connect
rather than divide. "I use cliché characters
in order to pass the ball to the person ex-
periencing it, to write a starting point for a
story. I try to use means that everyone un-
derstands, to exclude the everyday politics
and reduce things to bare universals."

These easily understandable "clichés" have
included for example a child dressed in white
as well as the artist's trademark, the shadow.

F

shake over the threshold, it is clear that this
tions interviews for which one should have
he knocked on the door. One of those dis-
Topics are interrelated and twirl into a mael-
storm covering work and family, past and present, ideas and accomplishments, and both physical and virtual
realms of life. So, even before our morning coffee has dripped, I'm well deep in discussion with media artist
Hanna Haaslahti.

▶ HANNA HAASLAHTI: SPACE OF
TWO CATEGORIES, 2006. PART OF
THE INSTALLATION, DIMENSIONS
VARIABLE. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.



"Shadows are a universal phenomenon, a basic element. Everyone recognises a shadow, and the fact that it is open to so many interpretations makes it easy to work with. Shadows echo the double-identities we live with today, as we have extended our existence beyond our physical selves to virtual entities. I think it's important to remember that the two worlds are interconnected, that cyberspace is not just a mirror world. Things that happen in the bit-world influence the physical world."

For her own shadow cast in the computer world, she attempts to avoid the inevitable drift into the virtual, and for that reason you won't find her on Facebook. Rather than walking in the vanguard, she observes and studies. Haaslahti's relation to her means is instrumental. Like with her first video works the idea is the driver with focus on the thought rather than on an infatuation with the medium. "The idea behind my first shadow work was to use the shadow not just as a reflection, but also to suggest how things could be. To give additional feed for a common symbol and let one's reaction create the piece. The digital shadows I use suggest that our bodies continue constantly to some other dimension, be it historical or virtual. The continuums are not always under our control."

IT'S EASY TO STRAND DESERTED in a modern day airport. Modern public spaces are driven by dividing functionality, says Haaslahti. Born a bastard offspring of modernism, our surroundings have grown to promote hyper-rationalisation and individualism. Set in concrete, the world is pruned by ideals, rather than life. To cast a stark contrast, the time before modernism actively suggested ways for people to associate with one another

— coexistence, communality, or a collective handshake across the modernist threshold, if you will.

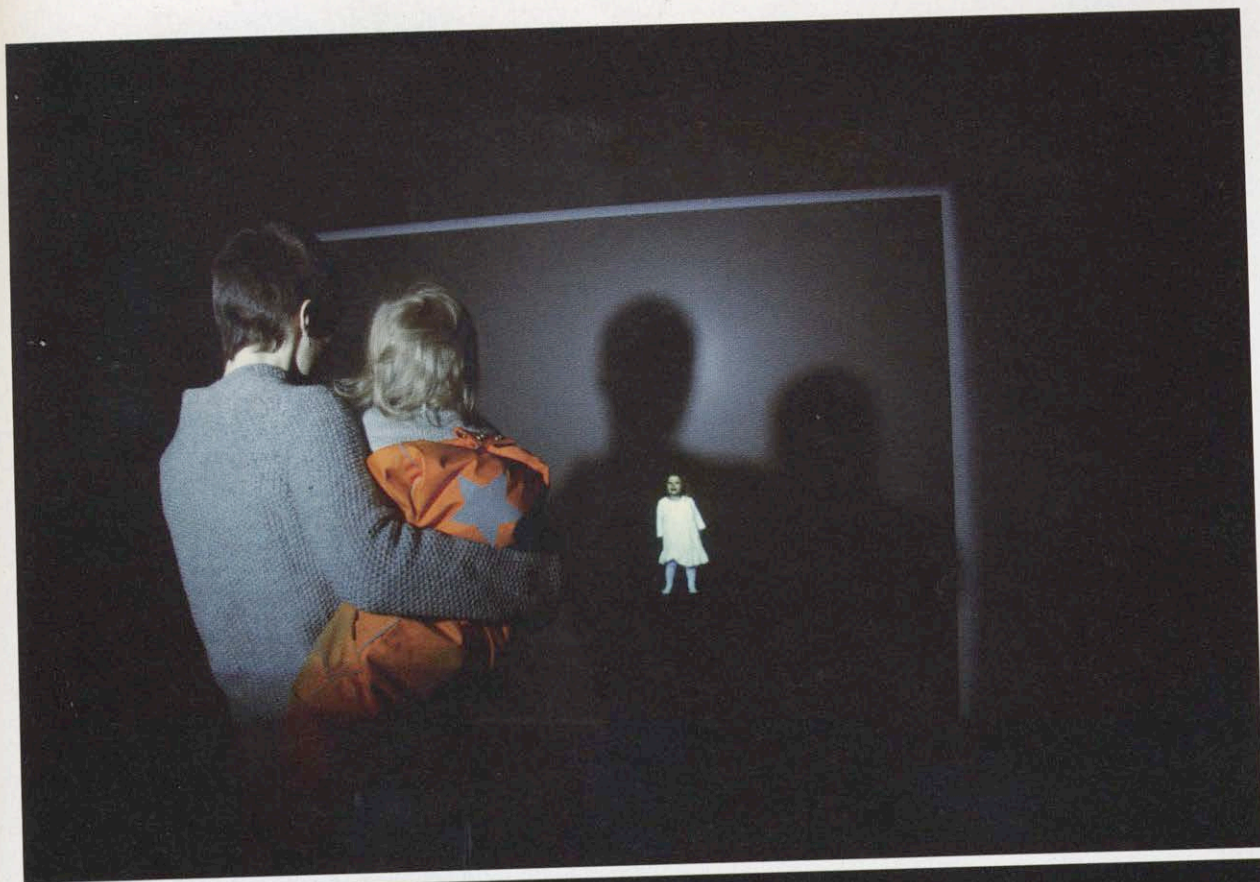
"I think that is something that we all miss, our empty spot. Nowadays we live in a society, which has taught people a life of loneliness with most modern structures designed to divide people, provide privacy and anonymity. I think that today the internet might actually be the venue for collective togetherness." In addition to the collective sense of *us*, she also contemplates on how we become part of society. Be it her 7-year-old's start of school and troubles conforming to the schedules of the shared everyday, the absence of a clear underground counterforce in modern popular culture, our shortening online memory or the business side of the art world, there is a distinguishable air of nonconformity.

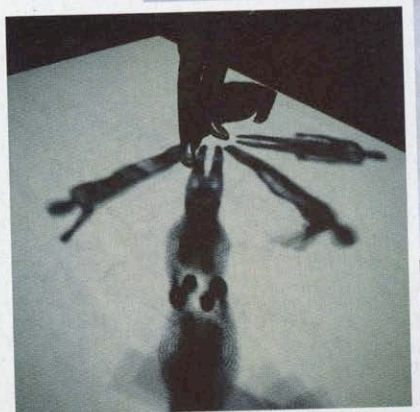
Talking of the otherworldly, she gets giddy, elated. "I read a lot of science fiction and para-sciences, which contain information that doesn't fit our categories of this world. It is unfitting, even preposterous, and at the same time filled with things we can feel instead of understand. That's why I try to attend all these alternative spiritual fairs. It might actually be that the irrational is the underground of today."

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→ HANNA
HAASLAHTI:
SPACE OF TWO
CATEGORIES, 2006.
INTERACTIVE
INSTALLATION.
DIMENSIONS
VARIABLE.
COURTESY OF
THE ARTIST.

→→ HANNA
HAASLAHTI: TIME
EXPERIMENT, 2007.
INTERACTIVE
INSTALLATION.
DIMENSIONS
VARIABLE.
COURTESY OF
THE ARTIST.





← HANNA HAASLAHTI:
BROWN UNITY, 2011.
LENTICULAR IMAGE,
84 X 56 CM. COURTESY
OF THE ARTIST.

✓ HANNA HAASLAHTI:
WHITE SQUARE, 2002.
INTERACTIVE INSTAL-
LATION, DIMENSIONS
VARIABLE. COURTESY
OF THE ARTIST.

➤ HANNA HAASLAHTI:
TROMPE L'OEIL, 2009.
PROJECTION IN SPACE,
DIMENSIONS VARIABLE.
COURTESY OF THE
ARTIST.



The layered, repetitive use of human figures, the space and time to explore, the immersive — they all trace back to the irrational underground. An exploration of different categories of space, as summarised in the title of the emblematic piece with the girl in white dancing in the experienter's shadow, Haaslahti's work ties together physical settings and underlying continuums. In a way she perceives herself creating miniature plays, too engaging to fit the definition of theatre, best built in a gallery.

Handily, she started off studying photography and set design, in the Lahti Institute of Design and the Verona Art University in Italy, respectfully. Her initial interest was in situations, scenes, spaces of action — and it's the way she still sees every exhibition, as a presentation or a show. Conveniently for her education, she talks of the theatrical side of exhibiting works, setting up scenes for the people to enter and interact with.

In the end, art should not be too conceptual, theoretical or rational, but instead intuitive, something to be felt with one's heart.

"I think my works are trying to perceive ways in which these modernistic, cold, glass and concrete spaces could be transformed into bringing people together. How to expand the exhibition experience from the relation of the person and the piece, to the person's relation with other people? In the end, art should not be too conceptual, theoretical or rational, but instead intuitive, something to be felt with one's heart." ■

PITKÄT
PÄÄLLE
PIMEÄSSÄ!