MEDIA ARTIST HANNA HAASLAHTI TALKS ABOUT HER WORK *SPACE OF TWO CATEGORIES* AND MORE GENERALLY ABOUT THE UNDERLYING IDEAS WITH CURATOR PAULA TOPPILA.

PAULA TOPPILA (PT): *Space of Two Categories* invites the viewer to step into a spotlight, and when the viewer's shadow falls on the screen, things start to happen. In other words, the piece is interactive like many of your earlier works. How would you describe the interactive function in this particular piece?

HANNA HAASLAHTI (HH): You could say that the work puts the audience in the driving seat provided they are willing to step into the spotlight and let their shadow be manipulated by the work. Stepping into a spotlight can be an embarrassing thing to do in an exhibition context. The interactivity is a property of the space itself, a feature activated by human presence. The possibilities of the user to affect the visual content have been minimised, the flow of images is predetermined and the viewer is at its centre. The viewer constitutes the 'z axis' of the image, a kind of timeline whose starting point he or she is. I wanted to create a static, quiet mood that would allow viewers to remain in it, without demanding any sort of action from them.

PT: The time axis is a very interesting element, especially when it is emphasised by the changing size of the child or distance from her, and the child's gaze meeting the viewer's from time to time. This makes the time axis very concrete, expanding upon the thematic of the work. But, in reference to the idea of silence you mentioned, the child's presence in the work is in the form of rapid dashes in a continuous, natural, rhythmic movement, a kind of dance within the space of the work (or the viewer's soul). And this in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that the work is silent. Silence actually seems an atypical feature in media art today – I am thinking also about computer games, which rely on sound effects quite a lot. Nearly all visual entertainment has an aural dimension which keeps us in its thrall and steers the viewing experience. The silence in your work, is it perhaps a message? What does it tell us about the intentions of its author?

HH: Sound has always seemed a superfluous element in my work, and I have quite consciously avoided making total works of art with their superficial catering to all the senses. There is something automatic about the association of the moving image with sound, even silent films had an accompaniment in lieu of dialogue. The soundscape sets the mood of the image, and that is something I expressly wish to avoid in my work in order to let viewers come up with their own accompaniment to the space. The soundscapes of spaces tend to be very dominating in terms of both the body and the mood. The human body somehow tunes itself into an emotional or rhythmic state that corresponds to the soundscape. I think the hermetic aural space of the gallery itself is a great background for my work. The dialogue between the image and the physical space would otherwise be inevitably overshadowed by the sounds.

PT: The story in your work is triggered by and unfolds within the shadow cast by the viewer. In semiotic terms, a shadow is indexical, because it stands in a direct causal relationship to its source. In this particular work, you have evidently been interested in this aspect of the shadow. It emphasises the viewer's role in a very approachable way, making every encounter between the work and a viewer a visually unique event, and makes a gift of the story to the viewer. However, you have also used shadows as the starting point in your earlier works *Scramble Suit* (2004) and *White Square* (2002). How do you see the potential of shadow as the driving force in your work?

HH: The most important function of shadows in my work is perhaps the fact that the shadow individualises the work for each viewer by incorporating their

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physical presence into the world of the piece. I'm not talking about some kind of an individualistic experience, I try instead to discover things that unite people and spaces where it's possible to have an experience of equality. The world of the work is a kind of reduced real-time version of reality. The shadow has been used in art in all sorts of ways, and today the computer adds a new element to the equation. Although technology is a structural component in my work, it is not forefronted in any way, not even the viewer's relationship to it. I have tried to remove all narrative and personal elements from my work and all emotional gimmicks. I am interested in the phenomenological human body and the incorporation of the physical person into the process of understanding and meaning attribution.

PT: The stories in the work seen in the exhibition unravel into an experience of the child's presence. The experience seems at once physical, poetic, emotional and mundane. The shared presence evokes memories of the viewer's own childhood, relationship to his or her parents, the viewer's own parenthood or child. Do these things possibly embody broader issues about the attitude of society to children, to the family or authority? These are the kind of questions the work seems to pose on the individual level.

HH: The work began as an investigation of the physical relationship between adult and child, how a child is in some way always a victim of the world of adults, and how our life is circumscribed by authority. I was fascinated by how, throughout their lives, people have a need to find authorities and somehow surrender to them. People do not rely enough on their own personal experience of the world. As the work progressed, I realised that the real authorities today are entirely

external to private human relations, and represent the technological and scientific views of the world. Computers are used today to model all spheres of human existence, producing parameters for the good life. The answers generated by these machines are taken as absolutes, and people believe blindly in the realities of the technological world. Virtual reality has expanded from monitors into our real environment, distorting and paralysing people's sense of reality. There are examples of this, from modern warfare to urban architecture.

PT: I agree. In a world of information overload and multiple truths, people easily find it difficult to believe in anything or to dedicate themselves to any cause for a longer period of time, or very seriously. One might ask: do the people who outwardly seem to have power actually possess it, or does power reside in some invisible system ultimately uncontrollable by anyone? What kind of an ethic does such an unstable world-view generate? It would be interesting if you could give an example from, say, urban architecture you mentioned.

HH: The clearest example of urban architecture is perhaps shopping malls, where there are endless nooks and crannies between the shops, waste spaces. Such spaces are difficult to see, because the plethora of ads that surround them commands our attention, and there is really nothing to see in these interstitial spaces. They are like small black holes where the eye loses itself. You can find a disconnected blank info kiosk there, or a lonely plastic chair sitting next to an emergency exit. These spaces show us what happens when a computer model is transposed into real, physical space. Such wasted spaces come about

when the building is modelled on a computer and the builder's relationship to the end result has become disjointed. The drawing looks fine on the screen, but the real world is much more complex than that. The designers cannot grasp the whole, everyone works on their own little piece of a giant construction. People's direct contact with their environment has become blurred.

PT: It's fascinating to hear about the starting points of your work, especially about the phenomenological body and its incorporation into the process of understanding and meaning attribution. With its silence and static mood, the piece at Galleria Heino seems to me to be particularly successful in weaving the viewer's body into the meanings of the work. The viewer's body was important also in your earlier works, but in them it seemed more of an instrument than an integral part of the visual arena of communication. Or perhaps this particular work merely allows me to reflect upon itself and its theme, because I am not expected to be the one who uses it. You said before how you try to remove all narrative and personal messages and emotional gimmicks from your works. But is that not also a way to elicit stories from the viewer's body and emotions, to emphasise the personal dimension, not in relation to you as the author, but to the viewer as the recipient?

HH: This is an extremely interesting area. What I said was indeed a bit vague, perhaps I should elaborate on it. I was thinking about cinematic effects, storyline narrative, shocking images and characters you can identify with, effects that are used to create escapism and which make viewers lose themselves in a media candy-land. In my work, I try to create a reduced situation where viewers would encounter something natural, something that would seem to emanate from themselves. The use of computer software adds a certain automatism to the piece, a machine logic, which I try to offset by introducing random elements, such as the child's movements in this case. I use imagery in an effort to break and question the objective and emotionless functions of the machine.

I wanted to leave the viewer with the child and blot out my own presence as the maker of the piece. The child can mean many things for different viewers, and can give rise to all sorts of personal associations. I am convinced our past and childhood are present in the layers of our ageing body, and it is possible to return to childhood through bodily experiences. It is important to remember your own childhood and to respect and preserve that area in yourself.
Perhaps it also has to do with the way the visual material in the piece was produced. The child was not directed in any way in the video sessions. I just videoed whatever she would do and examined the material later on the editing table. I then began putting together a few episodes that would contain similar types of movements. I was thinking: this is what a child's movements look like. The episodes consist of a few video clips that keep on looping until the next viewer comes along.

PT: The child in the work is a little girl. Why did you choose a girl? The choice inevitably puts the discussion on an entirely different level than if it were a boy, which might be a more neutral "generic child" than a girl, who is more obviously an object for the gaze, a kind of child-adult with her ringlets and all. Displaying an image of a girl or a woman raises all sorts of questions about the conventions of representation and viewing, which remain culturally quite fixed to this day.

HH: Girls must from a very early age get used to being judged by their looks. It is one of the most agonising truths of being a woman, one that every woman has to face and come to terms with one way or another. It is a sore spot for all women, and maintaining it is a business interest for all sorts of industries today. Even a very young child knows how important it feels to be beautiful and the centre of admiring attention. Or as the girl in the work said to her mother when she was looking at the pictures of herself:

"Mom, I want to be always beautiful or naked." It's only from the mouths of children you can hear something as mystically innocent as that.

It is true that a boy would have been a more universal image of childhood and using a girl puts the emphasis clearly on the life of a female child. That's how it is: there are artists and women artists, doctors and women doctors, and so on. Women's agency is not universal.

PT: In conclusion, I would like to ask you about your relationship to the medium of your interactive computer-assisted works. Computers, and technology in general, programming and all kinds of technical devices – which are all vital to your work – you seem to be taking them quite naturally as nothing but tools that can be used or misused, that can have good or bad effects. But the technology in your works is very much under control, concealed. The only thing that's needed is a person, a body who encounters the work. No mice, no computer screens, no joysticks, headphones, wires or wearable virtual reality devices. On the visual plane, your works resemble human encounters, they do not give rise to pixel aches or any other such discomfort. What I'm trying to say, they are easy to approach, they do not stun the viewer with an excess of information, you need no manual to operate them. What were your reasons for choosing this particular medium? Has your relationship to it changed over the years?

HH: I think I'm only beginning to understand what I'm actually doing, it's all a series of coincidences. I studied scenography and photography before I got interested in media art. At the time I thought that people working with computers gradually turn into mummies, and I still think so. It's disquieting how readily people are prepared to objectify their own bodily being and to switch it off, as it were, by sitting for hours motionless in front of a computer screen. When I spent a year at the Arts and Technology Department of the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, I realised that computers can be used for much more than just stiffly punching the keyboard. Today computers can be used in so many ways in so many contexts that the current keyboard-based interface seems nothing so much as a precursor of the straitjacket. This remains to be seen.

It is true that technology is a vital ingredient in my works, and their functionality is entirely dependent on computers. They are prone to error and work properly only in a carefully controlled environment. IT systems are super-efficient and fragile at the same time: given certain conditions they can perform unbelievable calculations, whereas the tiniest error in code can cause the entire system to crash. I personally feel this is a very productive state of affairs for my work. Using technology is like gardening for me. You have to create proper "growth and living conditions" for the work, otherwise the software will crash and the functionality of the work be destroyed. This is also why the interface in my works is always the human body without any additional devices. Devices are easily broken in an exhibition, and they intrude unnecessarily between the work and the user. I try to make the reception of my works as effortless as looking at a painting or a sculpture. I also believe that this is the way technology is going: devices will be either integrated with garments or the body, or the environment. Keyboards and mice will make way for more intelligent and human-friendly interfaces. I am convinced that using technological applications will require no special skills in the future, the software will synchronise itself with the human body and thus expand its capabilities.

My works are made in collaboration with a programmer, which introduces an additional element to the process. It's like a film director working with a cinematographer. The final outcome reflects the creative input of both. The performance aspect in my work probably stems from my interest in experimental theatre, which sought to disrupt the boundary between the audience and the stage. I remember being extremely impressed by the works of the Vienna actionist Rudolf Schwartzkogler. He remains an important artist for me to this day.