

Eija Aarnio

Visual and Narrational Encounters

In Veli Granö's *Saaret* ("Islands"), an elderly lady reminisces about how she was required to help her mother and do hard physical work already as a young child. Her hands became numb from washing laundry in an icy lake in winter, something she could recall vividly even in her old age. In her story, the woman wondered if her present state of paralysis and the washing in the ice-cold water could be related. Can paralysis be a "trace"?

The touching memories of the elderly people, a young woman's description of her own urban environment and dramatic news photographs of terrorism form different starting points for narrational works about the relationship between the body and memory. The stories are built up from both visual and auditive elements: one image after another, an image between another image, and a connection of image and sound. Man includes himself in history's continuum through his memories. Recollections remain as traces in our bodies as reminiscences of the emotional states of the mind. The body may also be a twisted state.

Different kinds of traces can be discerned in the works of Veli Granö, Jani Ruscica and Charlotte Gyllenhammar, traces that we can also find in the surrounding world and inside ourselves. If we are brave enough to follow these traces, we open up a possibility for new visual and narrational encounters.

"Do you remember the kinds of winters we have had?"¹

Veli Granö's *Saaret, 2004* ("Islands") is an installation situated in space. A model train that goes around the space forms a miniature world with winter scenes built on the tables and a movie theatre. Coloured lights invite the viewer to walk into the theatre. On the ceiling there is a porous steel plate. The small holes in the plate allow light to enter the exhibition space. The narrators of different stories are present only through their voices. In addition to the narration, you can hear the sound of the train, flowing water, soft singing and music. The winter scenery that opens up from the locomotive on the railway is projected on canvas. In transition places where the narrator changes, the viewer enters a dark tunnel, while on other times he is heading towards a bright light at the end of the tunnel. Different elements create intermediary spaces, transitions from one story to another.

Eija Aarnio: Why did you choose winter as your theme?

Veli Granö: Winter was an interesting theme for me because many of my childhood memories are about winter. My mother's and my father's stories in the work have influenced the whole family, and I have heard these stories many times when I was a child. I began working on the installation when I was in Pori, where we held a workshop on clay with Tuovi Hippeläinen called "Minuuden puutarha" ("A Garden of Self"). The elderly people who participated in the workshop started to think about their childhood quite naturally while working the clay. It was all about moving to another level of consciousness, into the basics of human existence. I realized that art is a channel into another way of being. At first, the stories formed a chaotic ensemble. Recording them into the stories we have here was very much like working on a jigsaw puzzle.

EA: How did the installation get its shape?

VG: There are many rocky islands near Pori that we used to visit when I was a child. In this way, I experienced snow and cold as well as the restrictions of man in the wintry surroundings already as a child. At times, I regarded it as a hostile environment. The island formed a safe haven in all this, a place where you were able to construct your own way of being, while the surrounding sea and ice formed an undefined space. In my installation, tables form different kinds of islands, bringing everyday life into the work in a very concrete way. The stories are personal, real stories, and the table islands form "real", small forests. Instead of snow, I am using sodium chloride to refer to an arctic environment. I also wanted to present the idea of playing with your food. Each table leg is shaped differently, with their unique round and spiral shapes. The main rhythm in the work is created by the sound of the train, and this is reflected in the table legs in its own way.

EA: This is not the first time you have shown interest in the world of models.

VG: I became acquainted with train enthusiasts while I was working on the Master series, and after that I have visited their meetings. The model builders have the ability to fantasize. They are able to move into the world of the model, to live in another world and fulfil their dreams inside it. Usually, you just cannot keep your hands off the models. With the model, you are able grasp the sensation that you are holding the whole world in your hands, to control the entire idea of the train. The model itself makes people react to it differently from another reality, either in an excited or a protective way. You also use models in movies.

EA: What things did you take into account when you were planning a movie theatre as a part of the installation?

VG: The idea of the movie theatre stems from two real buildings: the metal-plated building near the Suvilahti power plant, and the brick buildings in the Pasila train yard. I pass by both buildings on my way to work. The installation is like a decayed, crumbling building. The coloured, carnival-like lights lure the viewer to step in and enter another dimension, the world of films and dreams. Other elements associated with a movie theatre, such as neon lights or posters, were left out during the process.

EA: What is the basis of your works?

VG: I always start from the idea that there is a person with a story, a big one or a small one. I talk to people, and ideas and entire worlds are created in my mind. You must not use the stories against the storyteller, however. I hope that the storyteller will also get something out of the collaboration and that the stories will promote self-understanding. The stories are about the storyteller's life, and they do not refer to anything else but the personal reality of the teller. The reality still exists.

EA: Why did you take the storytellers' authentic voices as elements in your work *Islands*, but still not show their images or illustrate the stories?

VG: The emotion and visuality are so strong in the stories that images of people and places are created practically spontaneously. The images and sounds are cut separately, as is done when filming a movie. In effect, the work is a sound work. The video image and sound have not been synchronized, but the entirety is created in the viewing situation. The train will move around its track and make random stops according to the clock machinery. On the screen you can see what is seen from the train, which is a fragmentary, blurry picture that is not altogether informative. The scarce visual stimulus invites the viewers to picture their "own cottages" and "own horses" in the story. As the viewer goes beneath the surface and makes an effort, he can create connections to his own stories and in this way make his own world easier to understand and more whole.

EA: What kind of viewing experience do you believe the work will create?

VG: I was thinking about Leo Tolstoy's (1828-1910) *The Kreutzer Sonata*,² where two complete strangers meet in a train and one of them tells his story to the other. The passengers detach from their normal, everyday surroundings. The train moves on and the scenery changes. Something is happening without their personal input. They are going towards something new without making an effort. This makes you feel creative. As an invention, the train has also affected the way we think; it was a great revolution in its own time. A film will produce a similar, dreamlike sensation of letting go to the train. In a train or a film, you are able to move on to another level of consciousness, which does not emerge from our everyday consciousness.

The stories the elderly people are telling from their personal experience form the starting point of Veli Granö's installation *Saaret (Islands)*. How do stories relate to space and time? What does the story leave unsaid? What does it reveal about its teller? The story and the people in it are very important and significant in the storyteller's life. At the same time, the stories open up a picture of change in the society, a past world now lost in time. The storytellers view their stories as distant and separate from it, and occasionally they recount their experiences through a child's eyes. Some things, such as the touching quality of the story or the similarity of the hearer's personal experiences, bring the storyteller and the hearer closer to each other. On the other hand, certain things in the way the storyteller speaks may be distancing due to the generation gap, different national identities or socio-economic status.

The visual and auditive layers in Granö's work open up a possibility for the viewer to participate by creating intermediary spaces. At the same time the work moves between different concepts of time, both past and real time, as well as the present. The storytellers' speech is touching, and it can be sensed, thus forming a shared moment between the storyteller and the listener. Every storyteller is recounting a story about himself through the way he understands it. The stories resonate our own stories. A picture between pictures invites the viewer to take part in a dialogue, just as the train trip in Tolstoy's story makes the passengers talk to each other.

***"Every street corner has thousands of stories to tell"*⁶**

In his earlier works, Jani Ruscica has studied the significance and function of the musical tradition as a shaper and maintainer of the cultural identity. In his videos, temporal layers and different periods are reflected on the modern times and the present moment, creating new meanings. In his video works *Batbox, take one*, 2007 and *Beatbox, alternate take*, 2007⁴ Ruscica studies the production of sound and movement. The former work approaches the interpretation of meanings by mapping the way bats navigate and scan their surroundings using echolocation. The starting points for the latter work include the most recent forms of expression in the urban culture, hip hop and beatboxing. The two works form a counter pair to each other.

Eija Aarnio: How did you start working on *Batbox* after you had the initial idea?

Jani Ruscica: I was interested in the way animals used echolocation. When I noticed that the Batbox websites on the Internet had drum machine rhythms constructed from the sounds bat made, the idea of the connection between this material and beatboxing became even stronger. Animals that use echolocation are usually found in the seas, not on ground. It was important for me that the species lived in an environment that would be familiar to man as well. The bats were studied in their natural habitat in Dorset, England. The research facility measured the sounds of echolocation, and they have recorded plenty of bat sounds. I also used digitally produced measurements of the navigation and flight paths of the bats made by a German researcher. First the researcher placed a set of microphones on the ground. When the bats flew between the microphones, he could measure the distance between the bat and the microphone, and in this way calculate the trajectories of the bats and present them in diagrams.

EA: Structurally, *Batbox* is divided into three parts. What is the meaning of these parts?

JR: The beginning of *Batbox* is filmed as a documentary. I focused on filming the research situation and the bat, the focus of the research. The takes were filmed as densely restricted images. The viewer is unable to perceive where the shot is actually made. In the second part, the limitations of man's vision and hearing are emphasized. I am shooting a bat, its flight and movement in its own environment. It is difficult for the human eye, however, to see the flight, and our ears cannot hear the sounds the bat is making. At the end, the video reminds you of an optic film. I am using diagrams made from the bats' flight paths, which were then digitally animated into the scenery. I wanted to build an arch with three parts for my work, starting from a documentary and moving towards a more abstract end. In the video, I am studying the way of presentation both from a documentary and a more abstract and interpretative perspective.

EA: How did you process the images and the sound?

JR: The sounds were constructed separately in a recording studio. We cannot hear the sounds of echolocation, which the bats use for navigation and scanning their habitat as well as social interaction. The recorded sounds can be changed into a frequency where the human ear can hear them. These sounds were recorded during the filming and used in the documentary part of the video.

EA: How did you come up with the idea for *Beatbox*?

JR: I became interested in the hip hop culture and beatboxing because abstract sounds are produced in these arts. There is an interesting connection between beatboxing and Afroamerican cultural heritage. The experimental and surprising levels connected to different things fascinate me, and beatboxing is an extremely fascinating art form because you can simulate sound in many different ways. The relationship between what is real and what is performed remains. Every sound includes a focal point, such as an industrially produced machine or device, which is related to the real world. Besides beatboxing, other hip hop

genres have also produced fresh innovations, through dance and movement for example. My research for this part of the video led me deep into Queens, New York.

EA: What kinds of phases are included in *Beatbox*?

JR: Similarly to *Batbox*, three different scenes form the frame of this work. The video starts with a verbal element, the show of a spoken word artist. We filmed the artist very close-up, emphasizing the movement of the hands and the eyes. I asked the artist to discuss the relationship of man to city space, what the city looks like, what it tells us and what it sounds like. I was interested in the way the artist portrayed her own subculture and environment through her own instrument, her voice.

*“Instead of reading the Sunday paper, I can read people’s life stories on their faces,
from the grooves on their skin and the traces of life.*

Every street corner has thousands of stories to tell.

Every cigarette butt or bubble gum has a story of its own...¹⁶

EA: How do picture and sound merge into a whole towards the end?

JR: Also in *Beatbox*, the forms of expression become more interpretable and theatre-like after the beginning. In the end, I use spotlights and a rising crane, which creates a flattening angle. The focal points remain unchanged, although there is movement in the picture. The filming concentrated on the way sound is related to the body and movement. The searchlight changes into a spotlight, which moves around the young people’s environment. The dancers were free to express their habitat with their movements. Two beatboxers took turns in improvising different sounds spontaneously. In the final version, the sound producer and myself used both interpretations one on top of the other.

Batbox and *Beatbox* deal with the basic questions about performance and interpretation. The videos are placed on adjacent walls, and they are played in turns. The similarities in their inner structures make them mirrors to each other. First, the viewer is left with a memory trace of the one he sees first, and this trace is intensified through repetition when he sees the second video.⁶ The repetitive experience sharpens the trace.

Ruscica studies the meanings of the production of sounds and movement both in nature and in the city. From the perspective of their content, what are the similarities and the differences between *Batbox* and *Beatbox*? Echolocation is a way for the bats to perceive their surroundings. In *Beatbox* Ruscica studies the way young artists perceive their own neighbourhood through sound and movement. What kinds of meanings are raised by the hip hoppers and beatboxers from the perspective of their own subculture? How do they perceive and read traces and signs in their own environment? How do they change their surroundings? In what way does their environment affect their lives?

At the beginning of *Batbox*, Ruscica presents the viewer with a bat, which is studied from the perspective of natural sciences. The picture is precise and categorizing. However, the object moves out of the viewer’s reach in the following parts. In *Beatbox*, the performer is able to express herself in her own words. The viewer is able to identify her messages and move according to the coordinates she provides the viewer with. Identifiable focal points are created by the small observations the artist makes, from the details in the street or grooves on people’s faces. In both videos, the documentary approach changes into a more interpretative one towards the end. In the final pictures, the flaps of wings and the movements of the dancers are merged into visual and auditive abstractions.

“Sometimes I start with what I find beautiful sometimes I start with fear”⁷

For the Swedish artist Charlotte Gyllenhammar, video is only one element in her three-dimensional works. Gyllenhammar may be best compared to the American video artist Tony Oursler. Central themes in her works include safety, vulnerability, threat and fear.

The works include a touch of surrealism, and they move at the boundaries of the private and the political, the inside and the outside. The pictures Gyllenhammar saw in newspapers and on television in the early 1970s raised her interest in dramatic occurrences. *Blindbock*, 2004 is made of two elements: a sitting female figure with a blindfold covering her eyes. A video with Gyllenhammar performing the German radical left-wing terrorist, Ulrike Meinhof, is projected on the plaster sculpture.

Eija Aarnio: Which news images affected your consciousness in particular?

Charlotte Gyllenhammar: I grew up with European terrorism: ETA, IRA, Action Directe Brigade Rosso and Baader Meinhof. The post-war terrorism in Europe is a part of my fundamental awareness, a part of my world, just as the Second World War and the Holocaust.

EA: What makes you discuss situations that are taken to such extremes?

CG: The poles, personal-political I find interesting. In the so called terrorist actions where the victim is sacrificed for the cause, situation is taken to its limits. The sacrificed stands face to face with the one who makes the decision whether she/he is worth living or not. In a kidnapping situation it is even more obvious; the victim, face to face with the perpetrator, captured in an absurdly intimate situation. The victim is used as a lethal weapon. The human value is being traded.

EA: What is the origin of the name *Blindbock*?

CG: *Blindbock* means "Blind mans buff" or in German "blinde Kuh" which means blind cow. The word in Swedish is interesting because it has many meanings. First it is a game where usually children blindfold one child/person and the blindfolded chases and tries to catch someone in the circle around them. It consists of two words; blind and goat, like in scapegoat. The one who is blamed and sacrificed, the one who all evil is projected on.

Blindbock is a double portrait of the artist. The sculpture is made according to the artist's own body, and in the black-and-white video, she herself portrays Ulrike Meinhof.⁸ We see a victim with the picture of her torturer projected on her. The sculpture combines both extremes, the victim of the kidnapping and the kidnapper, the terrorist.⁹ The picture projected on the sculpture changes the nature of the work. The picture distorts the body, which becomes mere background matter for the projected picture and its meaning. You can also describe *Blindbock* as a tortured self-portrait.

Gyllenhammar has put the viewer in a situation where he must simultaneously move from one extreme picture to another. Different perspectives and values are set against each other at the same time. The artist creates spaces of impossibility, extreme spaces. Contrary meanings are brought forth as graphic and thematic elements. Pairs of this kind, such as play-terrorism, victim-torturer, can be seen in the work.¹⁰

The public and the political lead into the private and the personal. Since the 1960s, television has brought news images and kidnapping cases to the common consciousness. Images jumped directly into everybody's private space, the living room. Complex images convey a sense of threat and are a source of insecurity. For example, the American pop artist, Andy Warhol, was interested in portraying images of car accidents. He used a method of repetition, where the transfer of emotions created by traumatizing images was faded by the use of repetition and serial methods. In *Blindbock*, Gyllenhammar has solved the matter so that the sculptural self-portrait and the image projected on it create layered images. Between the images, a meaningful intermediary space is born where the viewer staggers between two interpretations that belong to two opposite extremes. The focal points of the opposing pairs start to merge with each other, and the differences in their meanings, which were initially so clear, become blurred and faded, thus opening up a new space for the formation of meaning.

¹ Veli Granö interviewed elderly people in Pori and recorded their stories on tape. He asked them to tell stories about winter. “Do you remember the kinds of winters we have had?” Interview with Veli Granö 9/12/2008, EA. See also Veli Granö & Tuovi Hippeläinen, *Rien – siinäkö kaikki?* Ed. Hannele Kolsio, Porin taidemuseon julkaisuja 70, Salpausselän Kirjapaino Oy, Hollola, 2004.

² Leo Tolstoi, *The Kreutzer Sonata* (a novella, 1891).

³ In the interview Jani Ruscica reminisces about the way the vocal artist D’Janau “Vocab” Morales describes her own environment. Interview with Jani Ruscica 10/12/2009, EA.

⁴ On a quick glance the names *Batbox* and *Beatbox* appear almost similar. The device used for measuring bats and the artificial man-made nest box for bats in urban areas are called batboxes. Beatbox, on the other hand, is a way of performing music. The subtopics emphasize the connection between the two video works. *Take one* refers to the first take. When the same song is performed in a different way (in a different tempo, for example), the term used is *alternate take*.

⁵ See reference 3.

⁶ See reference 4.

⁷ Interview with Charlotte Gyllenhammar 22/12/2008, EA.

⁸ The character portrayed by the artist, with exactly similar clothing, reminds us of a picture taken of Ulrike Meinhof from the time she still was a young journalist in 1964.

⁹ Compare with the psychological state known as “the Stockholm Syndrome”, where the victim starts to express signs of loyalty towards his capturer.

¹⁰ Håkan Nilsson, “Charlotte Gyllenhammar”, *Charlotte Gyllenhammar*, Carlsson Bokförlag, Kristianstad, Boktryckeri, Kristianstad, Sverige, 2004.