

Heli Rekula

At the Boundary of the Body

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Where is the body that is inscribed through the lens of the camera onto the image? Is there a gap between the work presented and the process whereby it is made? Should that gap be explored and mapped out, or should artistic practice and the work of art be considered two different and separate events?

The title of my PhD project is *Absent Body*. It charts out the relationship between the working process and the representational art work in lens-based media. My research is an attempt to explore and go deeper into these questions by describing my own artistic process with regard to related studies and art works performed by others. The focus is on one area in particular: staged photographic works and thematically related work involving moving images.

I think of my staged and constructed photographic and video works, and the process behind them, as “Private Performances for the Camera”. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes examines the status of photography in the field of art from a historical perspective: “It is not by Painting that Photography touches art, but by Theater.”¹ The image recorded via the lens of the camera is like the inscription of reality produced in the camera obscura, which is essentially theatrical in nature. Recalling the original relationship between the theatre and the cult of the dead, Barthes concludes: “Photography is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of *Tableau Vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead.”²

In this article I focus on works of art presented in the *exhibition TALKIN’ LOUD AND SAYIN’ SOMETHING - Four Perspectives of Artistic Research*, opening at Gothenburg Museum of Art in September 2008. My presentation is a compilation of my most recent photographic works under the title *Stage*, with earlier staged works together with three videos edited as a loop and projected from the ceiling onto a hanging rear-projection screen.

1. Barthes 1993, 31.
2. *ibid*, 32.

Stage III
2006,
c-print diasec
120 x 160 cm



Stage II
Exhibition view: Heli Rekula, Stage |
Näyttämö
4.5-8.6.2008 at Gallery Kalhama &
Piiippo Contemporary, Helsinki.
In the front of the image is video
installation Room II (2008).



Stage is a series of images, which are like recordings of performances carried out in varying states and settings. The first works in this series were produced in 2006. In these images we see a naked woman in different positions in an empty padded room. The soft, beige background can be seen as the walls of an asylum or as an enormous piece of furniture, a bed end, bringing to mind Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.³ The padded wall implies that the room is intimate and private. While the name suggests the opposite; a raised floor or platform where a performance for the audience takes place. These works ask questions not only about the boundaries of the body, self and the world, but also about the margins of corporeal existence.

The solo exhibition that opened in Helsinki in May got its title from these pieces.⁴ Thus, it was called *Stage*, referring to the gallery space and field of contemporary art as a stage, as a place for presenting things. Every work of art is in itself its own stage or staged event.

In *Stage V* and *VI* completed this year you can see the black tape that was used to mark off and frame the space being photographed. Thus, what goes on in the image goes beyond the framed area. The process of making an image, i.e. the working process and the media, the representation and display of an artwork are under study here, with an awareness of the importance of the works' personal starting points and origins.

My latest videos are composed of a single, static, photograph-like image. At the same time, they are time-based representations, but without the traditional dramaturgical narrative. They are situated on the border between a photograph and a moving image by being both frozen and advancing in time. They are at once photographs that give the impression of being a moving image, and moving images that give the impression of being a photograph.

The *Overflow I* video consists of a single, static image of a white flow, slowly covering the whole area of the framed picture. In *Opening I* there are two images, of which the first again shows a white flow, after which a woman wipes the surface with white paper. She slowly cleans the image, clearing up an area in it through which we see her. The act of staging is about making something unseen visible by covering or concealing it. These videos are a continuation of my "flow" photographs. *Fat* (1993), the first work on this theme shows a woman covered with yellow, melting margarine. Since that time, the working process has changed, the roles have swapped round: I am no longer speaking through the work, but the work is telling me things that I have not thought about during the working process, the astonishment of being faced with something strange and unfamiliar. These works originate in a feeling about something that refuses to stay in the confines of the body, something that is either an excess or flows over its given limitations.

The videos under the title *Room* deal with the space of a two-dimensional image, mapping out its borderlines, limits and possibilities. *Room I* shows an open space, the only visible construction being a raised platform, a white stage where the performance takes place. Common to the second video work of the *Room II* series is that the outlining of the image doesn't allow the performer to fit inside the space comfortably. The spaces in images are studied, mapped out and their borders are tested. At the end, the foremost feeling of both of these videos is contentment and acceptance. Videos present questions of presence and absence, themes of representation and being on display.

These works and their future versions have been presented in different combinations, contexts and spaces. My aim is to create a kind of moving,

3. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson
a.k.a. Lewis Carroll: *Alice's
Adventures in Wonderland*.
London, MacMillan, 1865

4. Heli Rekula: *Stage /
Näyttämö*, 4.5-8.6.2008 at
Gallery Kalhama & Piippo
Contemporary (www.kalhamaapiippo.com)

flexible 'floating space' that allows random aspects of the presentation (the size and character of the presentation space, accessories, etc.) to influence the interpretation and experience of the work.

The world we live in and the history that we use to interpret our experiences can be regarded as the field of everyday life, of the *studium*⁵. Sometimes an event or some detail cuts into the sphere of our experience, disturbs us, stirs up emotions in our consciousness, irrevocably altering our experience of the world. It rises up and derails our sense of the safe and familiar. Georges Bataille speaks of something similar when he discusses the relationship of eroticism – of sexuality, pleasure and love – to our awareness of the finiteness of life and death. Laughter or tears are evoked when something pierces us. The act of piercing can be compared to an act of violence, which interrupts or disturbs the regular order of things.⁶ The *Studium* in a picture may be punctured by the *punctum*, a partial object or a detail that wounds the viewer's experience. Barthes writes: "A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."⁷

This is how the staged photographs and video works that I examine in this essay came about. An inexplicable, vague feeling, a skein of thoughts and associations takes shape in my mind as an image, an image which plagues me until I record it in the form of a note or a visual work. Thereafter, it can be examined as an object separate from the body. It can be taken out, put aside, torn into pieces or saved and maybe shared with others. The interpretations of the image change over time, the things it depicts seek new directions and meanings.

References

Literature:

Barthes, Roland, *Valoisa huone*. Trans. Martti Lintunen, Esa Sironen and Leevi Lehto. Helsinki: Kansankulttuuri and Suomen valokuvataiteen museon säätiö, 1985

Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. London: Vintage, 1993

Bataille, Georges, *The Tears of Eros*. Trans. Peter Connor. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1990

Other sources:

I have edited parts of the text from my article "The Unnamed Space of Experience", published in *Here Then. The Photograph as Work of Art and as Research*, edited by Mika Elo, 110-133. Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, and the publication series of University of Art and Design Helsinki B 83.

Conversation with Mika Hannula, April 5 2008

5. Barthes 1993, 25-27.

6. Bataille 1990, 32-33.

7. Barthes 1993, 27.

The following artworks:

No 01 Stage IV, 2008

c-print diasec, 150 x 160 cm

No 02 Stage V, 2008

c-print diasec, 150 x 127 cm

No 03 Surplus II, 2006

c-print diasec, 135 x 100 cm

No 04 Surplus I, 2006

c-print diasec, 135 x 100 cm

No 05 Passing, 2004

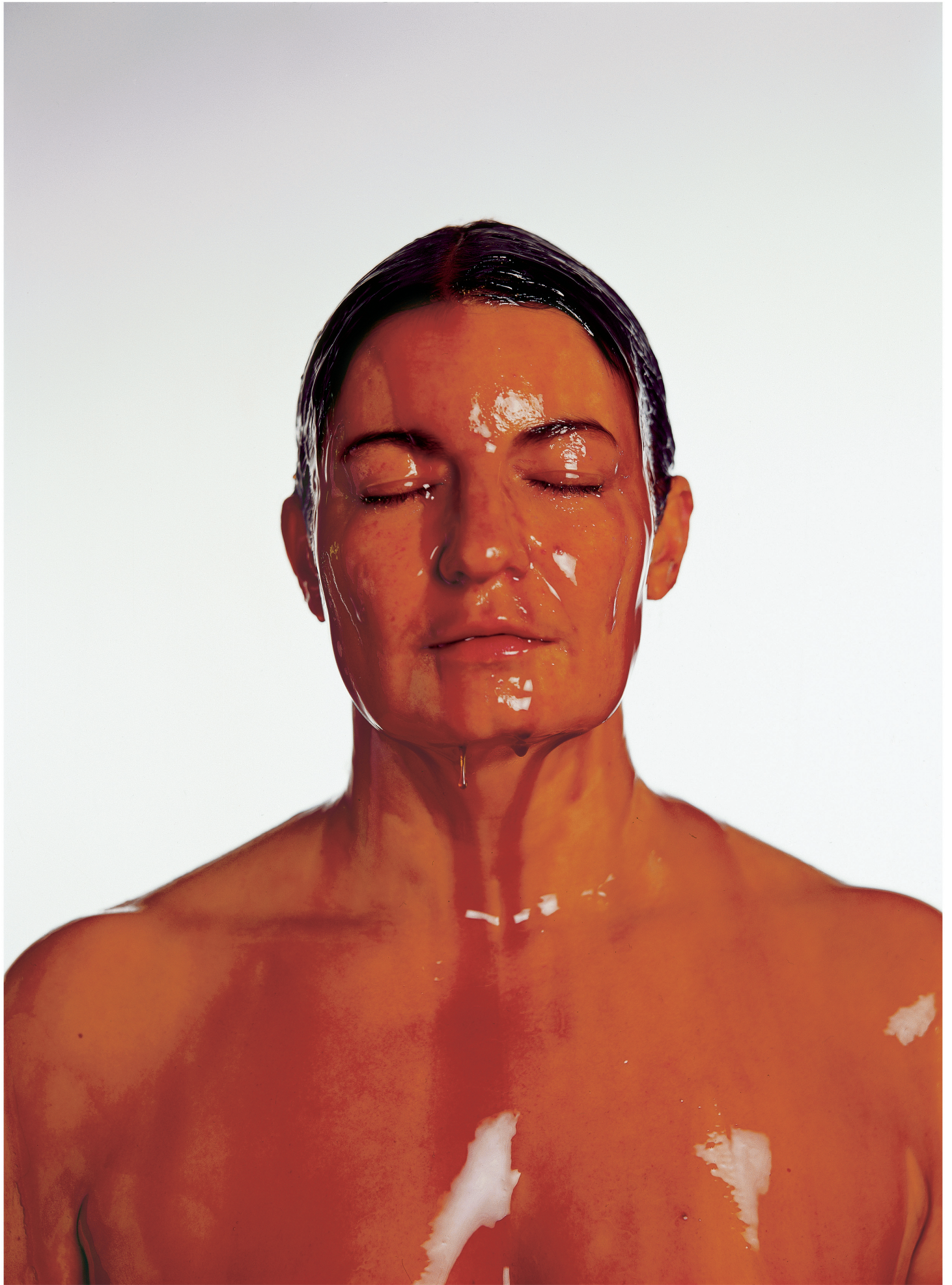
diptych, c-print diasec, 100 x 75 cm; 100 x 75 cm













Interview

Mika Hannula: Let's start with the basics. You use as a working title on your research: *Absent Body*. When I think about this, in contrast, it is remarkable how strongly the notion of the body is, in fact, present in your works. Why this title?

Heli Rekula: The title is a challenge. Through it I can study the different perspectives on the relation between the working process and a representational work of art. My work often arises from an overwhelming physical and emotional experience, which opens up a skein of thoughts and questions that I then slowly unravel and work through. I work with lens-based media, photography and moving images, and therefore I am interested in what the recorded image tells the viewer about the origin of the work. Where is the body inscribed via the lens of the camera onto the image?

A photograph is characteristically two-dimensional, sterile and clinical, i.e. a technical product. You cannot read time-based physiological levels or traces in it, as you can, for example, in drawings and paintings. David Hockney has written well about how the surface of a photograph is all about one and the same time.

MH: But there is also a difference in the meaning of time and the nature of photography as a technical act in comparison with the content of a given photograph. If we focus on the content, we see and recognize, for example, in your works that these works of art already have very many levels in terms of where the work started from and what it ended up looking like.

HR: In a painting we can see the trace of the hand of the painter, we can possibly experience the movements of the artist's body in the brushstrokes, yet the time-based experience of a photograph is not present as a haptic experience, but rather through a cultural and technical understanding and imagination.

The "unheimlich" or uncanny in a photograph lies in the reality that it represents; something that has happened somewhere, very likely somewhere else, and always in past time. A photograph represents something that has factually happened, never mind that it is a constructed or staged photograph. It is not possible to experience the working process of a photograph in the same way as you can that of a painting.

MH: Yes, sure, there is no doubt about that, but as regards the medium, in this case photography, can it also be viewed more broadly, not just as a technical performance? What I am trying to say is that, while the technical trace might not be visible, the content-driven traces can be very vividly present in a photograph. In this case the "unheimlich" and the challenge in a photograph is simply just a different type or version of the way we can confront something that is not common, not known, and that this acquires a different model and momentum from one medium to another. My claim is that, regardless of the

medium of expression, when we talk about the content of a work, it is always possible to recognize these traces – where the work comes from etc. But let's us get back to this challenge. When describing it, you have used the term 'floating space'. Can you say something more about this?

HR: As an artist I want to challenge and question myself and try to make works that can function in different formats and projections, and in various constellations. I have never produced series, but worked with themes to maintain an openness in the artistic process. I often work on the same themes in both media.

I tend to make varying compilations of works in both media for different exhibition spaces and events; showing older works and the most recent ones together, combining works with different origins and themes, as an example, combining staged photography with landscape, and so on.

My photographs have, so far, been mounted classically on the wall, not on the floor or leaning against a wall. With my videos the aim of a floating space is essential, since it is often very difficult to show videos, and you always have to come to terms with each set of circumstances. And in this situation precise, preset plans do not necessarily work. I do have to admit that, so far, I have always found an optimal way of presenting each work, which I seem to strive for unconsciously.

MH: Another main term that you use is "the unnamed space of experience". What do you mean by that?

HR: The term relates to both of the media I work with, but is perhaps more easily recognizable in the photographs. My themes recur, seek new directions, evolve. They often return to the place of their origin, to something that cannot be named, and always to questions for which I do not have clear answers. This phrase you quote refers to Roland Barthes' idea of the *punctum*; in which something punctures and disrupts familiar, everyday experience. A *punctum* changes our experience of the world and of life.

And this applies to all my works. It is the impulse behind all my works. It is also the main thing that I want to share with other people.

And this "puncturing" communication that does not leave you in peace goes on between me and my works. One example of this is the photograph called *Passing* (2004), a diptych, which was originally supposed to be a single image. But, for some reason, the work would not leave me in peace, but continued to disturb me until I gave in to the original plan. It might sound funny, but in a sense I just have to follow up the task that the work gives me to do.

MH: Can you be more precise. What was it in this particular work that did not give in?

HR: For some reason this work, *Passing*, challenged me to think about the question of time. And because of that, instead of one piece, the work consists of two photographs of the same subject next to each other. For me photography is a moment for which the experience of looking at it often occurs in the depth direction in terms of time – if the work allows that. The two-dimensional surface of a photograph makes possible a temporal experience in the depth-direction, as a reflection of the viewer in relation to the work.

As a work, *Passing* requires time, temporality. In the picture on the left-hand side of the diptych the model's eyes are closed, but in the one on the right the eyes are open, looking to the right, as though looking at somewhere outside the picture. *Passing* signifies an actual transition, but in this work also a temporal transition. The transition takes place from left to right, representing for me hope for the future and also an expectation that things will not get stuck in one place, but remain in motion. For me the *punctum* in this work is somewhere in the combination of these two images, in the space between them and, through that, outside of them.

I am not a Barthes expert, but I do recognize when something punctures, pierces or cuts into my sphere of experience and disturbs my sense of the safe and the familiar.

MH: Is the punctum and the idea of breaking down a familiar pattern for you mainly a chain of thought that you associate with hope, or does it also include the crude opposite of hope, namely despair, so that the breakdown and fragmentation of the everyday hurts and is unpleasant?

HR: Breaking down is movement, transition from one state to another, and it is precisely in that movement that I find hope. The fact that things break down and fragment is part of life, not of despair. For me, it is not solely a destructive force, but also one that takes us forwards.

MH: We are getting to quite a fundamental and difficult question. How personal are your works?

HR: They do stem from personal experience. They are extremely personal, but I don't want to explain their origins to the viewer. That is not interesting for me as an artist, and I don't find it interesting as a viewer either. With time, the meanings and interpretations of a work of art can change. You have to allow that to happen to the work and also to the viewer. Once a working process is completed and the work is put on display, it takes on a life of its own. After that, my task is to take care of it, or destroy it, as has sometimes happened. I believe an emphasis on autobiographical elements in explanations of a work is wrong both for the viewer and for the art work.

MH: Being able to deal with difficult issues also requires distance.

HR: You achieve that distance specifically by processing and working on a piece, although it may not always succeed. I mentioned earlier that I have sometimes destroyed works. I have made works that I have, as it were, withdrawn after showing them once or twice. In these cases, I feel I have failed with the works. Something has gone wrong, perhaps I have not been able to take the work far enough from its original starting point, an insufficient distance has developed between the work and me, or something? Holding exhibitions and showing

works serves for me as a kind of test laboratory where I can investigate these aspects in peace or in horror. I suppose at this point I should apologize to the exhibition public for the nature of my working process.

Neither in my own works nor in other artist's works am I interested in the promotion of the artist's persona or personal history. My aim is for the themes that I deal with to be detached from myself and capable of being shared collectively.

MH: What are these issues and themes?

HR: As an example, I can refer here to the working process behind the photographic work *Fat* (1993). You can read lots of overlapping and stratified themes in the work. The way the picture is produced follows that of a commercial product image. The white background behind the model does not refer to any specific time or place, so the "product" shown in the picture can easily be taken out of this environment and placed in any other. The work started from my own feeling of not fitting in with the model of the ideal human being or woman purveyed by the commercial media.

In other words, the starting point for the work was very personal, and in realizing it I constructed and shaped my own identity. Through this work I looked for my own place in society, and thought about the influence of the surrounding world and culture on the construction of identity.

MH: What if we compare the years 1993 and 2008?

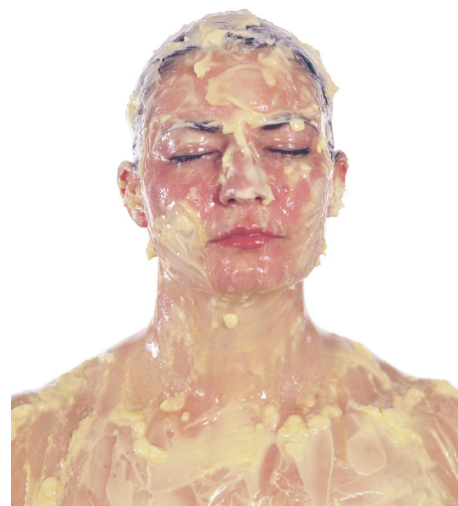
HR: There has been a clear change in the way I work. In 2004, I put together and worked on a retrospective exhibition for Kiasma. At that time, I went through old material and notes.

I decided to try out what the same working process would feel like after ten years. The photographing of *Fat* in 1993 has remained vividly in my memory, also in my bodily memory. It was interesting to notice the change in the way I work. Even if *Fat* as an art work can be interpreted in many ways, I had a clear idea of the basis for doing it. The new, similar works, such as *Overflow* (2004) and the *Passing* diptych (2004) became clear to me only once they were completed. They were more about the astonishment of being faced with something strange and unfamiliar.

It felt like the roles had swapped round: I was no longer speaking through the work, but the work was telling me things that I had not thought about during the working process. 'Overflow' literally means something flowing over its limited edges. It is as though there were something, not able to stay within the bounds of the body. *Overflow* gave visible expression to my marvelling at physical changes and aging. *Passing*, meanwhile, addresses the questions of transition and time. Through it I have also had to think about different aspects and meanings of time in the context of photography.

MH: Does art matter?

HR: Art is still a free territory, a possibility for independent thinking, experience and expression. Making and showing art is always connected with a desire to share and communicate things. Art can also bring joy, like just now, when I saw the exhibition by Anna and Berhard Blume at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin.



Fat, 1993
c-print on aluminium, 100 x 75 cm

MH: How is that hope doing right now?

HR: It's doin' alright. I actually think it is doing well because I am getting older. I have become much more tolerant and mellow, and I think that is also evident in my works.

MH: Artistic research. What does it mean to you?

HR: Artistic research is conversation. It is about adding my own link to the continuing discussion within the field of contemporary art. It challenges my reasoning and stimulates my work. Our group's seminars at KUVA, the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, have been important and innovative forums for discussion for me.

MH: In Gothenburg, you will be showing, among a series of photographs (two from the Stage series and three from the Passing series), two video works from 2007. These are *Overflow I* and *Opening I*. Can you say something about these?

HR: I am actually showing three videos all together. The third video will be *Room I (Tila I)* also from 2007. The idea is to edit them and to show them one after another as a loop, projected from the ceiling onto a hanging rear-projection screen. This will be the first time I show them together like this. In the *Overflow* video, flowing white slowly covers the whole area of the image. In *Opening*, this flowing white covers the image, after which a woman wipes the surface with white paper, and kind of opens up a spot in it through which we see her. *Room* shows a woman who is kind of trying to get the measure of the space outlined and cropped by the camera lens.

When making these videos, I was thinking about the questions of presence and absence, themes of representation and being on display. *Room I* deals with the same themes as the *Stage* series, the framed image being a platform where a performance takes place. While with *Overflow* and *Opening* it is interesting to see how, by covering something over, we can make something else visible. These two videos are a continuation of my "Flow" photographs.

MH: But let's go back to the beginning. Couldn't the working process be visible in the completed work other than as a concrete trace of the way the work has been made, or of the way it has developed? What I am after is that, once we know the artist's background, and we have had an opportunity to see what they do over the years, I would claim that it is possible to see solely on that photographic surface the changes and developments, the traces of the working process, although they appear very subtly and intuitively.

And this brings me back to the gap and the opening. The absent body, how could I phrase this, is it for you photographically absent precisely because of the extreme presence of the visible body in the pictures? What I am after is the way that absence and presence support and bounce off each other.

HR: Oh yes, exactly. That's the paradox of the photograph, its gorgeousness and its horror. A photograph always represents a past time and being somewhere else, both of which in themselves are enough to awaken in me a sense of sorrow, of wistfulness, of melancholy. The works are then like writing things down so as to remember them.

MH: How do you understand melancholy?

HR: For me melancholy is a dejection that is caused by the tragedy of being human, or an awareness of transience and death. Finnish tango is about that, it is the perfection of it.

MH: So it is forgiving, but can it also be more captivating, a sort of black hole in which we can get stuck, and even fall into it?

HR: For me, melancholy is a mellow acceptance of the transience of life. I always tend to approach things positively. I don't want to be terribly gloomy.

MH: But if I go on a bit, and say that in your works there is a strong presence, not just in their physicality, but also through the themes being dealt with in them, themes connected to the more grotesque, more brutish, darker sides of life, the ones that hurt, too. They have a multi-layeredness that makes me want to look at them more than once, a presence that carries them and makes them powerful from one time and place to the next.

HR: Are you asking me how I deal with and represent difficult issues? I am not afraid of dealing with the darker sides of life, as you would put it. I've had my share, I would say. The point is that even if I confront grotesque, brutish themes, I try to deal with them and bring them out in a gentle way. I don't want to shout and scream, nor am I interested in shock effects. Art can also be seen as a sophisticated and civilized way of dealing with these issues and emotions.

Representation is about the art of seduction, about luring the viewer to the work, to share things with me. Learning this art of seduction has played a highly fundamental role in my work throughout my career. It is about representing difficult, unpleasant, painful and sad things so that they do not prompt immediate rejection from the viewer. On the other hand, *Hyperventilation* cannot be described as seductive, hahahahaha, but that's actually from 1993. Nevertheless, I view it with great tenderness and empathy.

In any case, this seduction, the song of the sirens, is essential. And for me this means I have a readiness and a position, the freedom to experiment and to play freely with themes and media.

MH: Yes, talking about freedom, I guess what is going in your head is always much more important than how many zeroes you have after your bank balance, if we look at it from a long-term perspective.

HR: Absolutely, and the point is that it is specifically through working systematically and from a long-term perspective that you gain the freedom to work in a way that feels right for you. It is also about credibility and, for example, about the fact that I have 16-17 years of professional work behind me.



Hyperventilation, 1993
cibachrome on aluminium
100 x 135 cm

MH: Let's go back to the idea of failing. I see it as a very central aspect of the credibility of any qualitative research process. If research is set up so that it excludes mistakes and failure, it is neither credible nor meaningful. Not everything we do can be great in itself. All our actions involve mistakes and distortions. Maintaining a squeaky clean front does not help anyone.

HR: Yes, exactly. Most often we gain something new and unexpected from mistakes and failures. Like going trekking, it's important to have a map with you, but stepping off the marked paths opens up the world to our senses in quite a new way.

MH: Let's speculate a bit. In a while, you will graduate as a doctor in arts. What will the final work look like – in terms of exhibitions and the written element?

HR: I am aiming to graduate at the latest by 2010. I will not be holding a "final exhibition". Instead, I am collecting for the final review the works and exhibitions included in my studies in the form of documentation. The official reviewers have been worked with me over the years, and come to see the works and exhibitions wherever they have been shown. I will be making a written component, probably in the form of a published book.

MH: Ok, let's finish off with a deliberately silly question. What do you think, after this whole PhD process, will you be a better artist?

HR: Your question and my answer belong to the same category as something that an artist colleague of mine once said: "Psychoanalysis kills creativity." He unfortunately defined creativity as something that comes from a fragmented mind and a neurotic emotional life. We could think the same about artistic research that it is destructive or deflating for the creative working process. Well, this colleague graduated as a doctor of art a couple of years ago and seems to be functioning quite fully in the visual arts.

So, I will return to your question, which is not at all silly. I don't believe I will be a better artist through doing artistic research, but I hope I won't be a worse one.