

Stories from the edges

Finnish-English duo Minna Rainio and Mark Roberts have for the last ten years worked on a series of multi-screen video installations which examine people who, for one reason or another, are positioned outside the mainstream culture or exist at the geographical or social margins of society. The trilogy *If You Could See Me Now*, completed during the years 2004–2008, examines people's experiences of changing social position by drawing on the personal accounts of interviewees, while also taking into account the many different ways of perceiving reality.

The subject of the *Borderlands* installation (2004) which opens the trilogy is the borderland between Finland and Russia and its significance to the people living near it. The work emphasizes the blending of truth and fiction in people's everyday experience, where images of the neighbor – the nation the other side of the divide – are based more on fiction and fantasy than fact. In *Angles of Incidence* (2006), Rainio and Roberts examine immigrants' and refugees' experiences of arriving in Finland. The immigration process gone through by immigrants and refugees is visually portrayed through film footage of the different physical spaces in which the immigrant is dealt with during this process and in which decisions on his or her future are made. The final work of the installation trilogy, *Eight Rooms* (2008), uses minimal drama to portray the trafficking of women and forced prostitution as a social but often hidden problem. The themes of the trilogy also continue in Rainio's and Roberts's latest work *Some we kept, some we threw back*, completed in 2010, which reflects on the life of Finnish immigrants in Minnesota, United States, at the turn of the last century.

Poetic and performative documentary

The photographs and film footage used in the works of the installation trilogy *If You Could See Me Now* are essentially documentary, since each part of the trilogy deals with a social issue which is approached through the everyday experiences, memories and stories of individuals, using the interview as the central means of investigation and representation. For Rainio and Roberts, documentary is not a stylistic form through which the subject of the works is viewed, but rather a means of approaching the subject – a work method – with which the subject is examined. While the subjects and themes dealt with in the works are often fairly abstract and sometimes visually difficult to perceive, the artists have not set out to illustrate the themes in any easy way; the works are predominantly visually slow-moving and minimal.

The working method chosen by Rainio and Roberts, the examination of social and political subjects through the individual, can be paralleled quite naturally with the *subjective turn* in documentary film which proliferated in the 1970s; in the works of Rainio and Roberts, this means hearing the views presented by the people interviewed.¹ In terms of form, the works of Rainio and Roberts resemble “poetic” or “performative” documentaries in which the audio-visual expression of the work, which serves to animate the subject, is as important as the subject itself.²

The installation works of Rainio and Roberts seem to lack any structured attempt at explanation or generalization.³ This is apparent in the way in which the works do not try to build uniform spatio-temporal entities that proceed linearly, but instead are content to present a fragmentary vision of places, people, issues and events. Here the works resemble the performative documentary mode coined by film theoretician Bill Nichols⁴, in which the boundary between fiction and documentary is blurred and stylization and character construction substitute objectivity.⁵ The works do not clearly or precisely argue a specific notion or truth on which to convince the viewer to take a stand, because the works are based on subjectivity and experiential knowledge attained through empathetic insight, suggestion and association.

Essayistic documentary in the installation form

In the works of Rainio and Roberts, the question of documentary presentation is as important as the actual subject of the work, with relevance to reality being preserved but strongly subordinate to the expression of the work. Style and form are emphasized together with communication of information. On the other hand, in a somewhat similar manner to documentary “film essays”⁶, the works of Rainio and Roberts allow the chosen theme to actively influence the form of the work. This subject-driven form is particularly evident in *Borderlands* and *Angles of Incidence*. Due to the spatial form of the works, the emphasis switches from persuasive argumentation, conventionally associated with documentary film, to expressivity and the creation of an emotional point of contact, by means of which the artists appeal in their works to the viewer’s feelings, striving for experiential insight.

¹ Renov 2004, xxiv, 171-180.

² Renov 1993, 13, 21; Nichols 2001, 102–102.

³ Cf. Nichols 1994, 100.

⁴ Nichols 1991, 32–33, 56–68. Nichols 1994, 93–96. Nichols 2001, 115–116, 185.

⁵ Nichols 1994, 93–98.

⁶ E.g. Alter 2003, 13-14; Alter 2007, 49-52 and Wetzel 2004, passim.; Steyerl 2005, 53.

The open form of the documentary installations of Rainio and Roberts follows fairly closely the form of the written essay, in which a given topic is examined in a contemplative manner from either a single or diverse perspective. Instead of objective linear scientific thinking, the essay presents associatively organized claims that are based on personal experience. The essayist installation⁷ form chosen by Rainio and Roberts allows a more polyphonic exploration of the subject through the form of the work, without quashing the complexity of the subject. The essence of the so-called essayist installation can be understood through the concept of the film essay, a hybrid combining the categories of documentary and fiction.⁸ In the same way as its written counterpart, the essay film surpasses established category boundaries, breaks conceptual and formal rules, and leaves the more clear-cut, established genres behind, all the while gaining unity *“by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.”*⁹

The way in which Rainio and Roberts’ moving image installations work, offering several simultaneous images and different visual angles and sounds, corresponds closely with the way an essay functions. Compared to a single-screen installation, which offers the spectator a monocular view of the subject, a multi-screen essayist installation leaves the viewer freer to think, to interpret and to consider what he/she is seeing because more alternatives are offered.

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In *Angles of Incidence* (2006), Rainio and Roberts examine immigrants’ and refugees’ experiences of arrival and reception in Finland. The work comprises three large screen walls showing projected video images of empty rooms and building facades. Each of the three projections symbolically shows the points of control which the immigrant must pass through before being granted or denied residency. The images show the various spaces that the asylum-seeker encounters during the asylum application process, from passport control at the border to the red brick walls of the Immigration Service. In filming these spaces and buildings, the artists emphasize the meaning of these seemingly insignificant non-spaces as spaces of decision-making and power.¹⁰ Static video footage of the empty spaces is juxtaposed with audio takes from interviews with immigrants recounting why they left their home country and how they came to be in Finland. The interviews convey powerfully the anxiety experienced

⁷ Verwoert 2003, *passim*.

⁸ Alter 2007, 44; Alter 2003, 13.

⁹ *“It [an essay] thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.”* Adorno 1954-8/1984, 164.

¹⁰ Rainio & Roberts 2006, 70.

by the immigrant while awaiting, in complete uncertainty, decisions on their future “*life is entirely in a suspended state – both mentally and physically.*”¹¹

In the exhibition space, the spectator passes through the installation from screen to screen, “moving step by step with the refugee”, reflecting the drawn-out process which the immigrant goes through when arriving in Finland.¹² In describing the installation, the artists stated their intention for the form of the work to assist the viewer in identifying emotionally - at least to some extent – with the process that the immigrant goes through and with the feelings, based on uncertainty and waiting that this process evokes. Real, lived experiences contrastingly accompany the sterile empty public spaces which on first impression strike the onlooker as “any space whatever”¹³, but which, as the installation proceeds, transform into spaces of decision-making and power.¹⁴

The people interviewed for *Angles of Incidence* are never shown. This ensures that the viewer can neither evaluate nor define the interviewees based on external appearance, but only by what they tell and by the tone and words they use. The viewer’s interpretation of the persons, their nationality, appearance and age is reliant wholly on the speaker’s voice and the viewer’s imagination. The faceless anonymity¹⁵ of Rainio and Roberts which they maintain throughout the trilogy - is a conscious ethical choice. When considering how to deal with social and political issues ethically without sinking into “cliché, pompousness or self-indulgence” they took the decision to refrain from filming the people interviewed for the installation. This, despite their awareness that *empathic encounter* is often most easily achieved precisely through the use close-up of facial images.¹⁶ The elimination of excessive “faciality”¹⁷ means that the viewer’s ability to empathize and to identify with the protagonists of the work rests wholly on the contrast between the narrators’ voices, the filmed empty spaces, and the form of the installation. Therefore, the artwork imparts knowledge not only through its audio-visual material, but also through the viewing experience.

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¹¹ Rainio 2008, 71.

¹² Rainio 2007, passim.

¹³ In French ‘*espace quelconque*’. Deleuze 2004, 109.

¹⁴ Rainio & Roberts 2006, 70.

¹⁵ Nichols 1991, 232.

¹⁶ Hansen 2006, 134–137.

¹⁷ Rainio and Roberts’ decision to remain faceless resonates with Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s faciality concept (French *visagéité*) in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987/2004). Deleuze & Guattari 1987/2004, 185–211.

At the turn of the last century, Finns, along with hundreds of thousands of other Europeans, emigrated west en masse to America, “the promised land of endless opportunity and freedom” in pursuit of a better life.¹⁸ In their new video *Some we kept, some we threw back* (2010), Minna Rainio and Mark Roberts examine the parallel between the period of mass migration to the US more than a century ago and the ever-growing stream of people from the developing world to the West today. The work brings to light how little has changed since a century ago; global inequality in living conditions continues to drive people far from their homes and cultures in search of a better life.

Some we kept, some we threw back, depicts an elderly man preparing for a sauna in the backwoods of Northern Minnesota. As he chops the firewood and fetches the bathing water, a woman tells her story of emigrating to America over half a century earlier. Her story is a familiar account of hunger, unemployment and political persecution –the self-same drivers of the mass westward movement of Finns between the 1860s and the 1920s when some 400,000 Finns emigrated to America.¹⁹ The narrator recounts her shock at the treatment her family met with in the West, how Finns were widely treated as undesirable third-class citizens and called “Dirty Finns”.

The story of *Some we kept, some we threw back* resonates closely with the audio accounts of refugees and immigrants presented in Rainio and Roberts’ video installation *Angles of Incidence*. Through this work, the artists show how many of the self-same countries whose own people left in their hundreds of thousands in search of a better life a century ago, are today offering immigrants and refugees arriving in need of help and security the same closed, xenophobic reception.²⁰ Human tragedy and cries for help are pushed to the background by international immigration policy, where people in need are boxed into figures and quotas and bandied between countries, destined to live in constant uncertainty and at the mercy of others.

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¹⁸ E.g. Korkiasaari 2003, 3-4.

¹⁹ Korkiasaari 2003, 3.

²⁰ Rainio & Roberts 2010.

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