

OVERGADEN.

In this group exhibition Suzanna Asp, Maija Luutonen, Sini Pelkki and Pilvi Takala explore the relations between the private and the shared.

CONVERSATION

Privately Exposed

By Elina Suoyrjö

Suzanna Asp, Maija Luutonen, Sini Pelkki and Pilvi Takala are four artists who met about ten years ago, while studying at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki. The exhibition *Dimensions of Sharing* grew out of their mutual desire to collaborate and to create a new dialogue in the present. The multifaceted concepts of private and public bring their differing practices together by focusing on investigating the interfaces and structures of these divergent spheres. The act of sharing arises as a key concept, as it occurs between the artists and their individual works through the collaboration. Above all, however, sharing becomes the key thematic element that plays out between the art works and the exhibition's visitors. The works reach out to the viewer in different ways and enrich our ideas about the relationship between private and public, about communication through art as well as about discussing the role of art and the artist in society.

Elina Suoyrjö *Let's start with the basics. How do you define the private and the public? And what is it that interests you in the intersection between these spheres?*

Pilvi Takala One way that I have defined private and public is in terms of space. I've made a lot of works in semi-public spaces such as shopping malls, which are accessible and appear to be public, but which are owned and run by private companies or individuals. A more complex definition has to do with the often intangible line that exists between the individual and his/her surroundings. The line must be there, but it's fascinatingly hard to define, as we seem to exist only in relation to other people. My practice is very much about how we negotiate a shared space, how we behave in the public sphere and how strongly we are bound by routines. In my in-

terventions I've often posed as an individual who somehow misunderstands the unwritten rules, thereby highlighting the existence of those rules and allowing them to become renegotiable. When I began working on *Players* (2010), I was suddenly in a position where I felt like my rules and the rules of society were deeply challenged by the poker players I portray in the video. Their choice not to be affected by the pressures of society and their level of disconnection were radical. Their high income freed them from obligations like studying or getting a job. Even the way they made their money was a closed circle. So this community was actually very private, even secret, and I only got access to it through a personal connection, my brother, who was part of the group.

Maija Luutonen I define something as being private through the idea of boundaries and restrictions, or I see it as a space that exists inside one's territory or within an appropriate social distance. It's very connected to the personal. A shared space can then be defined as a public space. My work deals a lot with trying to paint a shift from private to public to private again. So I am actually looking for this definition in my work too. I find the overlap interesting, because as an artist I'm working within both of these spheres. It's multi-layered, the way ideas become public and one tries to find a common language. The most interesting part in this, for me, is deciding what to show, what to hide, and what only to suggest. Also, how to intrude beyond the appropriate social distance, in terms of painting.

Sini Pelkki The interiors of my photographic works are often very private. I'm always aiming at privacy, even if the space shown in the image appears to be public. The subjectivity of seeing is really at the core of my work. I'm interested in mental interiors, the invisible in the visible, turning things inside out, expanded and enlarged details. A work such as *Space (with Plant and Other Elements)* (2010) deals for instance with elements existing



Sini Pelkki, *Space (with Plant and Other Elements)*, 2010

alongside one another. There's a figure sitting on a sofa, looking towards an element on the wall that we are also looking at. There are living elements, elements imitating other elements and elements shifting their element. Frames and outlines of an image, especially of a photograph, intrigue me. In *Channel* (2011) I follow and go through the outlines of a slide image, a studio portrait of a nude woman. The image and the surface have suffered badly. What we see are the faded colours, the dirt and the scratches. The image becomes almost an empty picture. Another example is the work *Embarkation* (2011), which takes place in a suburb of Helsinki. The work is based on three earlier video works, which are all composed of still photographs. After scanning the negatives I cut up the images and rearranged them into narratives. They are both video works and photographic works at the same time. This was the starting-point for *Embarkation*, which is a moving image framed like a photograph. It is both static and in motion, divided into different narratives and landscapes through repetition. My tool is the camera, which is inherently a very blunt and straightforward instrument. I'm interested in the contrast it creates with the private aspect.

Suzanna Asp I associate the words 'public' and 'private' with issues that can be discussed in the open and those which have to remain behind closed doors. In the installation *Given; 1. Opening, 2. Closure ... 2006-12* (2012) I open up a private space and turn it inside out. The installation draws on personal experiences of surgeries and hospital stays and deals with themes of vulnerability, self-determination and change. In another work, *Spanish Door* (2012), the viewer is left outside. The door represents the en-

trance to a home, a private space, from which the visitor is excluded, while in *Spanish Door (with Light)* (2012) two holes have been drilled into the wooden boards, that allow the viewer to get closer and to peek in, but a strong light is blinding and the inside remains out of sight. If the public is the visible, the fixed image, then perhaps the private is the movable, the changing. The intersection between the two could be a place with no fixed boundaries, a place where the viewer becomes the actor, who becomes the victim, who becomes the villain and back again. A site of negotiation and uncertainty, a place that exists in constant flux.

ES *Negotiation between the private and public spheres goes on constantly within society. All of you also take active roles in actually creating this negotiation through your works. To me it seems like your works create ruptures in these boundaries. What is it that interests you in creating this negotiation, blurring the dichotomy between private and public?*

ML The question pretty much sums up the reason I work as an artist in the first place. For me it all stems from an overwhelming curiosity. I want to know more and see more. I like the role of the voyeur very much, but that's not all there is to it. The way I interpret the role of the artist is very much like you put it in the question: to create a process of negotiation through the works. If our works don't create ruptures in the boundaries between private and public, the space between the viewer and the work/artist, what else is there really to do as an artist ...? Blurring the boundaries is one of the things I am especially aware of when I think about the scale of my works. Sometimes it is important for me that the specta-

tor can imagine stepping into the work, for instance larger works are more confrontational and demand direct attention; other times it is important to draw the spectator close to the work by a smaller scale. I believe it's possible to engage the viewer by opening up the process and revealing the artist's body. I am very aware of the movements that are required to perform certain tasks in executing the works and how showing parts of these movements in the finished work can add an extra dimension to it.

PT Yes, this is precisely why we need art and artists in society. We need people and practices that have the motivation to dig down into the seemingly arbitrary aspects of our everyday lives, the things that everyone else discards as meaningless. The focus on small, even invisible things that often can't be communicated in words is essential. Art carries a lot of meaning that resonates with something very private within us. We show art publicly, as a means of communication, and when the viewer encounters the work, the moment of sharing is somehow also a very private experience for them. Through my practice I've come to notice how our surroundings shape and become part of us. It's often impossible to tell whether an intuition that seems to come from deep inside us is a product of social pressure or is our own idea. This was brought home to me in very physical terms while I was working on an earlier work *The Trainee* (2008), which is not included in this show. Enacting the idea behind the work, sitting for days doing nothing in an office environment, I felt an incredibly strong bodily urge to at least grab something in my hands, just to create some apparent activity. That would have been a relief for everyone. I did resist the urge, but it seri-



Suzanna Asp: *Given, 1. Opening, 2. Closure ... 2006-12*, 2012

ously felt like an endurance test. I hadn't expected the social pressure to be such a physical, bodily experience. The same happened when I spent a month in Bangkok with the poker players. I wanted to learn and live by their rules, but I really became exhausted by the need to resist my 'natural' social conventions and try to change my behaviour. It's surprisingly difficult to remember to literally gamble on every little favour you do. I hope the people who see my work feel puzzled or embarrassed, that something inside them is permanently moved. In my work I aim to reach something that communicates directly with something deeper within us. For example, people usually find *Players* funny. This is the first sign of surrender. When the viewers don't think I'm trying to convince them of something, they put their guard down and engage with the work. They might think it's all made up, funny and absurd, but hopefully they also walk away wondering about their own reactions.

ES *There's a lot of generosity in your practices. I think it's here that your roles both as artists and individuals come to play a central part in this discussion. It sounds like it is this exposure that in the end creates the link between the work and the viewer. How do you feel about the idea of exposing yourself in your work? What are the dimensions of sharing for you, personally?*

SA The act of sharing an experience is very much present in my latest work. My works deal most often with relationships between the space of the work and the viewer. I like the tension created between the thin surface of the painted pictorial space and the surrounding space inhabited by the viewer. It's obviously impossible to physically walk into the painted space, but you can enter it through your thoughts and feelings. It thus creates a rupture in the actual space. In the installation *Given; 1. Opening, 2. Closure ... 2006-12* I wanted to work with feelings of vulnerability and loss of control, as well as fear and anxiety caused by a crisis. As I've mentioned, I chose an autobiographical starting-point for the

piece. The installation can be seen as a stage set. The visitor knows s/he is walking through someone else's experience, looking at something not meant to be on display. Something private has turned public. The viewer becomes an intruder but is at the same time exposed to the gazes of other visitors and thus objectified, even victimized. The setting of the installation can be seen as a tool for communicating complex feelings in a state of crisis and as a way for the viewer to shift between different roles and positions.

ML I think I want to actively create these spaces for negotiation because intimacy with the viewer, or the lack of it, is such an important part of it all. The acceptance of limitations and failure and being able to draw from those experiences is something essential to my practice. I try to come to terms with the fact that I will never be satisfied, and that this is completely OK. Some of my works are creased, crumpled, folded, etc. Those actions are important for me for many reasons, but sharing my personal frustrations, limitations, failure and attitude is a central one. The same goes for some of the larger works that I have made, where the scale of the work is simply too much to handle for a person of my size. I try my best but sort of fail to do it perfectly: my arm starts shaking, or I have to move so that the line becomes broken. I make an effort to share as much as I can, but it's really a constant battle. I want to share more, have the references in the works available for everyone. I strive towards an openness, but it's difficult because I am a bit secretive by nature. In abstract or semi-abstract painting the sharing becomes quite intuitive, but it is there.

SP I think what Pilvi and Maija said about the physical experience is interesting. The act of putting oneself in a situation and seeing what happens is something I have done too, especially earlier, but the idea of it is still there. I see this exposure as one of the anchors for my working method. The model I use most often

is my sister. She's been my model for 15 years, ever since I began to explore photography as a medium. Otherwise I use myself as the model. The physicality is definitely there in my works: in the human figures, their movements and gestures. The spaces the works inhabit and the physical spaces between the works are also very important. My working method is very intuitive, and the works themselves are becoming more abstract at the moment. The photographic works at Overgaden were first shown at the Photographic Gallery Hippolyte in Helsinki in 2011. The title of the exhibition was *Echo for Two*. The title refers to the privacy between the viewer and the works, but also to an echo between the actual works, resonating one another. The echo is also inside the images, within the different elements. There isn't just one way of entering my work. My aim is to create layers, a space in which to move and communicate.

SA I have used my own body in several of my works, often as a tool to identify with the situation and the place. Quite contradictorily, the use of my body has also allowed me to create a distance between myself and the present time and location. I give myself a role and become a performer. I can look at the space and myself from another viewpoint, not knowing what is coming next.

PT Physicality and the body are very central in my work, as a lot of it is action conceived by me, or by others instructed by me. Being physically present somewhere is fundamental also to my artistic research. I might get interested in a place or a community that I hear or read about, but the only way to decide on an idea for an art work is to be there in situ. It's really my whole body that I use in my research, and often as the main material for the work as well. When doing my interventions, I've also found how strong the mere presence of a person can be, often stronger than radical action. Even in a work like *Lost Pigeons* (2012), where my own body is not in focus, everything starts from being present in a place. In this case it was the city of Ghent, where I was commissioned to produce a piece. I saw a little cage with pigeons inside it sticking out of a building, pigeons that looked exactly the same as the ones you could see on the street outside the house. This was a fascinating sight and became the starting-point for the whole project.

ES *It will be interesting to see what kind of dialogue the works create among all of you and in relation to the viewers in the exhibition space. Your different approaches to the theme of the exhibition is undoubtedly one of the intriguing aspects of the show.*

SP Yes, we are really looking forward to the dialogue between our works at Overgaden! The private and the public were the starting-points for this project, but it will be interesting to see where it leads us, what else there is.

Elina Suoyrjö is an independent curator based in Stockholm.



Pilvi Takala, *Players*, 2010. Video still

CV

Suzanna Asp (b. 1976) is educated at Kuvataideakatemia - Finnish Academy of Fine Arts and Slade School of Fine Arts, London. She has had a number of solo exhibitions, most recently *Étant donnés* at Forum Box, Helsinki, 2012, and *Play in Three Acts* at Wip:Konsthall, Stockholm, 2011. Group exhibitions include *Mänttä Art Festival* in Mänttä, 2012, *Örebro Open Art* at Örebro Konsthall, 2011, and *Lost in Translation* at Antrepo #5, 9th Istanbul Biennial, 2005. She has an upcoming solo exhibition at Skaffell Center for Visual Arts in Seydisfjörður, 2013. Suzanna Asp lives in Stockholm.

Maija Luutonen (b. 1978) is educated at Kuvataideakatemia - Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. She has recently had the solo exhibitions *Dedicated* at SIC in Helsinki, 2012, and *Changes* at Helsinki Art Museum's Kluuvi Gallery in 2008. Group exhibitions include *Young Artists 2011* at Helsinki Kunsthalle, 2011, and *Night On Earth* at Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008. She has an upcoming exhibition at Komplot in Brussels, 2013. Maija Luutonen is co-founder of the exhibition space SIC and lives in Helsinki.

Sini Pelkki (b. 1978) is educated at Kuvataideakatemia - Finnish Academy of Fine Arts and Chelsea College of Art and Design, London. Her most recent solo exhibitions include *Embarkation* at Kunsthalle Helsinki, 2011; *Echo for Two* at Photographic Gallery Hippolyte, Helsinki, 2011, and *Entrance to Exit* at Helsinki Art Museum's Kluuvi Gallery in 2009. Her work has been included in several group exhibitions, among these *Tense Territories* at Santralistanbul in Istanbul, 2008. She has upcoming exhibitions at Galleria Sculptor in Helsinki and Konsthärsuset in Stockholm, both in 2013. Sini Pelkki lives in Helsinki.

Pilvi Takala (b. 1981) is educated at Kuvataideakatemia - Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. She has had several solo exhibitions, most recently *Breaching Experiments* at Site Gallery, Sheffield, 2012, and *Suggested Value* at Künstlerhaus Bremen, 2012. Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions and biennials, among these are exhibitions at New Museum in New York, 2012; S.M.A.K. in Ghent, 2012; 5th Berlin Biennial, 2008, and 9th Istanbul Biennial, 2005. Recently Hatje Cantz has published a monograph on her work. Pilvi Takala lives in Istanbul.

GUIDED TOUR

Sunday 2 December at 3pm Overgaden invites you to a guided tour of the current exhibitions in the company of Karen Mette Fog Pedersen, a member of Overgaden's curatorial staff. Afterwards we will serve coffee and cake. The event will be in Danish.

CONVERSATION

Saturday 19 January at 2pm the four artists will continue their discussion about the exhibition and their different approaches to the interfaces of the private and the public in a conversation moderated by the curator Elina Suoyrjö.

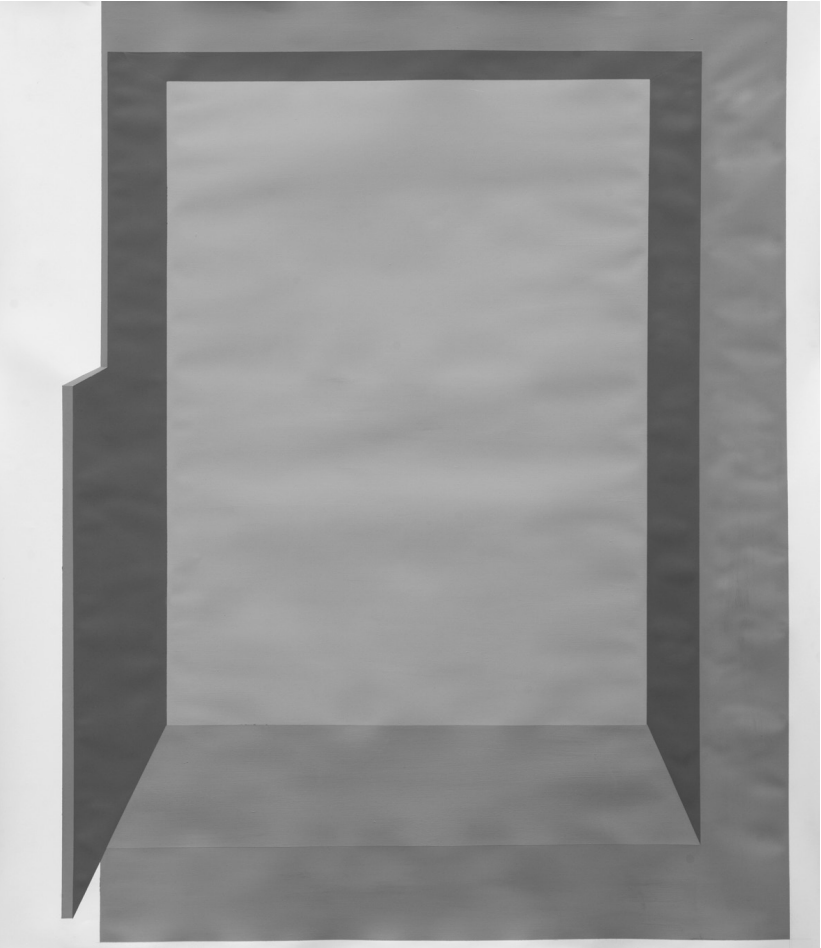
UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

Friday 8 Februar 2013 Overgaden presents the exhibition *Medium Large* by Jesper Dyrehauge and a duo exhibition by Thorbjørn Bechmann and Sofie Thorsen. The last day of the exhibitions is 7 April 2013.

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This exhibition folder can be downloaded from www.overgaden.org



Maija Luutonen, *Balancing*, 2012