Jaana Kokko

DAYS AND IDEALS

Jaana Kokko, exhibition view of *Days and Ideals*, 2016. Presented at OPTICA. Photo: Paul Litherland.

Galerie Optica, in Montreal, presented three of Helsinki artist Jaana Kokko's films this past winter. Historically, Finland's cosmopolitanism has made much possible. In the last two centuries, Finland has been connected to both Sweden and Russia, and the three languages are currently in daily use. In the modern era, Finland has been an innovator in terms of social policy and social change: universal suffrage and advancements in education, health, and civil rights came early, and income levels have been among the highest in the world, along with a relatively equitable distribution of wealth. Now, such factors are beginning to feel pressure from the challenges facing all of Europe, and the questions posed by Jaana Kokko's films, following from her investigation of "the political" in relation to feminist practice, make important contributions to the current debate.

To explore these questions, Kokko has developed two practices in particular: working with the temporality specific to video art and working with women in dialogue. In this respect, her work is performative: it exists in the enactment of what it is saying. Kokko is proposing that dialogue, one that relies on questioning, is an effective means of communicating ideas. For example, there might be a question regarding a feminist position on economic disparity or a question about the layout of a woman's kitchen, and the discussion around these questions will be carried out thoughtfully, but in the most ordinary language. In this way, Kokko's female participants work through complex themes, such as "democracy," but without leaving their own situatedness in favour of "high-altitude thinking."

The Optica exhibition included three recent video pieces by Kokko, *The Reading Circle*, (2010), *The Forest Is Young and Full of Life*, (2012), and *Sadam* (2013). In *The Reading Circle*, four women of widely varied age and life experience are seen sitting together engaged in discussion. There is a sense that the dialogues are partly scripted but also improvised. Although many of the issues discussed are what we might describe as socially significant, it is the compartmentalization of life into private and public, which is accompanied by a dissolution of the political into the social, that is one of the guiding themes. In this sense, Kokko draws on the work of philosopher Hannah Arendt, who privileged the role of the human voice in dialogue as the basis of the political realm. Arendt was also deeply committed to the irreducible plurality of human existence, and for her plurality and freedom would only be achieved as worldly realities through political action. One of Arendt's principle sources is the work of Aristotle, and Kokko's works are also quite explicitly dedicated to the notion of "practical wisdom," or *phronesis*, as developed by Aristotle.

In *The Forest Is Young and Full of Life*, a botanist explains his views on the relationship between humans and the natural environment, during a tour through a forest. In a dialogue that takes place in the forest between the botanist and a female companion, the botanist makes an authoritative presentation from a professional's perspective, but when the two gather in a family home, the conversation takes on a less abstract style, and the authoritative voice is dispersed. His views are distinctly anti-anthropomorphic and unsentimental, while hers are much more "traditional," that is, she participates both in the eating of animals as well

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as keeping animal pets around the house. Both individuals clearly care about "the animal," but while one cares on a more abstract level, the other cares more intimately. Conventionally sentimental about animal life, she is not at all uncomfortable with the apparent "contradictions" in her way of life. The botanist refuses traditional human dominance over the animal and natural world but also has no interest in following the woman's inclusion of animals in the daily life of her household.

Kokko's method is not only a method but also a process carried out and investigated in the work itself, one that embodies reflective self-questioning through dialogue and polylogue. The interview form is featured prominently throughout the artist's work, and initially this suggests that the work is didactic. However, because Kokko uses the temporal aspect of video to structure an open-ended relationship between the time of the video and the viewing time of the film itself, the experience is always "unfinished." Along with the interview as a process and a subject, Kokko's practice privileges the perspective of women's daily lives as a means to raise what might otherwise be abstract questions and to situate the ethical and the political in feminist practice. In relation to the context of a "being-with," women are seen and heard speaking their diverse views and the medium of video, being a temporal medium, both gathers and disperses this in multiple ways. In Kokko's work, solutions arise when the alienation endured by people living under neoliberal ideology is countered.

Kokko consistently emphasizes the lived, the contingent, and the corporeal in any construction of the real or of any actuality. In this way, she has been able to propose subjects of global importance and has done so with great restraint and concreteness. Her films are weighted by past experience but also concern for the future as told by her characters. In *The Reading Circle*, the questions that arise include: What is home? What is democracy? Or what does "belonging" mean in terms of a feminist practice? The relationship with any sort of abstraction in Kokko's films is always created indirectly, incorporating whatever tangents may arise. "High-altitude talk" is thus avoided in favour of observations based on lived experience. If speaking is important, then listening also becomes crucial.

In *Sadam*, a woman is seen picking up used bricks from a ruined factory site. She says that she and her husband will use the bricks to build a home. Kokko first encountered this woman in 1999 and later based the character in the 2013 film on her. In the intervening years, the land was sold to a developer who planned to build four hundred luxury apartments. Through this story, the gulf between the poverty of the brick collector and the wealth of the future inhabitants of the luxury flats becomes a palpable image of the financial disparity that so characterizes our epoch.

Again, in *Sadam*, Kokko presents a strange intertwining of tradition and modernity through the stories of several women. These stories are elucidated with Kokko's typical attention to perceptual detail and everyday situations. For example, instead of speaking abstractly about architectural modernization, a woman, a senior gymnast, and a teacher describe the changes to domestic space prescribed by the Soviet state and how these contradicted the sort of homes women would choose, in particular how they would apportion their homes. In *Sadam* we see several women presented as possible role models, the gymnast, a printer, a model, and the brick collector. Judmilla Akalina, the printer, is a woman in her late fifties who worked all her life as a printer using the "obsolete" technology of letterpress. When management modernized the business, she kept the old equipment and continued doing artisanal printing, adhering to a traditional conception of personal care in one's work. These women are posed by Kokko in relation to the question as to who could be the model for the modern woman, a model that could displace what is usually featured in fashion magazines, "…pure, well behaved and silent. A perfect model of a girl who will grow up to be a perfect consumer."

If we ask what conditions and actions are required for there to be rigour in contemporary art practice, Kokko's works provide resonant responses, in which the intellectual and the everyday are consistently interwoven, resulting in insightful works of great sensitivity.

Stephen Horne

Stephen Horne is an art writer living in France and Montreal. His articles and reviews have been published widely in art periodicals, anthologies, and catalogues. He is currently working on volume two of his selected writings *Abandon Building*.

The exhibition *Days and Ideals* by Jaana Kokko was presented at Galerie Optica, in Montreal, from January 23 to March 19, 2016.