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Everything is Connected - Sweet Punch: Nordic Video Art

26 February 2007

by Mark Amery *Courtesy of The Dominion Post 23/2/07*

Nordic Video Art? Outside of international festival time in Wellington, the prospect of this has the earnest idiosyncratic ring to it of an exhibition of Polish architecture, say, or Canadian embroidery. No contextual information is provided as to the significance of the work of the Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish



artists in *Sweet Punch: Recent Nordic Art* at the [Film Archive](http://www.thebigidea.co.nz/files/imagecache/display/images/41201.jpg) (<http://events.filmarchive.org.nz/>). So what relevance here? Well, art will out. This compact exhibition of five works exposes what great potential video still has in taking a more complex and personal perspective on the documentary. And how fledgling is its use in this way in New Zealand. This exhibition's punch is as powerful as it is sweet.

It's also a reminder of how insular Wellington can be. Most video that we see here is local and emergent. Yet a show like this wouldn't raise an eyebrow at New Plymouth's [Govett Brewster](http://www.govettbrewster.com) or any number of venues in Auckland - *Sweet Punch* comes to us from Pakuranga gallery [Te Tuhi](http://www.tetuhi-themark.org.nz).

"The small doesn't exist without the big, and the big doesn't exist without the small, everything is connected," muses Kosmos, the subject of a Gun Holmstrom video.

These video works all play in some way on this thought. They play with scale in the broadcast of the intimate; the complexities involved in the shift of emotive, personal moments into the public domain.

The show itself is a bit like this too. A small exhibition of very personal work traveling to small public venues a long way from home. Striking a chord with a lot of recent contemporary performance work in Wellington, these artists' share an interest in art engaging meaningfully with community.

In Holmstrom's *Kosmos*, the subject speaks at length to camera. Through the artist (a friend) he shares thoughts you might suspect even those closest to him are not privy to. We become aware of the fragility of the confessional mask and the relativity of truth as Kosmos muses on psychic travel and his vague belief in a soul's ability to travel, and then reveals these thoughts came to him after a period of mental illness. Finally we follow him out into an open, empty snowladen landscape. Through all this we have been drawn into a meditation on how the biggest thoughts are found in the smallest and most troubled settings.

The proliferation of reality television and documentary cinema, and the elevation of ordinary individual lives to spectacle has made video more, not less ripe for use by artists in revealing people. Now familiar with the recycled formats of television in primetime we learn to distrust broadcast reality and enjoy its staginess. People come to love the taste of irony to be found in these synthetic experiences.

All this makes the genuineness of these artists' documentary stance

refreshing. They record rather than construct; they are full of love rather than cynicism. They reassert that truth can be documented, but that it comes with a chorus of confused emotions and a constantly shifting perspective.

On a monitor in the window of The Film Archive, a passersby can watch a middle-aged woman more familiar in look from bingo halls competently going hell for leather on snare drum and high hat. It'd be a kooky music video idea if Raakel Ruukka's work didn't come across so joyous, genuine and thought-provoking.

On another monitor the camera comes in close to the drummer's face. The speed slowed down, she is the picture of focus and determination. In the breadth of its emotional journey her face is a novel. The work is heroic but on a domestic scale, like the stamina of a tired mother being challenged by her children.

There's a fast and roguish accordion accompaniment which she seems to react to, and I'm left wondering what is going on off camera. Is she being goaded or teased? It is as if she has been at it for days, caught between ecstasy and agony like the girl with the dancing red shoes. Equal parts celebration and revelation, it upturns prejudice without resorting to didacticism and leaves a smile on your face.

The same goes for Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleien's collaboration with a motley crowd from Birmingham. *The 1st Complaints Choir of Birmingham* saw the artists collect complaints from residents and then put them to song, to be sung by the individuals as a group in locations throughout the city. The complaints range from "why does my computer take so long?" and "the bus is too infrequent at 5.30" to a rousing chorus of "why don't they pay me more?". Wellingtonians will surely identify.

I used the phrase 'video art' at the top of this column but curator Emma Bugden is careful to avoid it. These artists use the camera to record and document; a tool to come in closer to what is already there.

Like the *Complaints Choir* video, *Pugnae Spectaculum* by Vanna Bowles and Robert Johansson is simply an edited record of a performance. The performance is a boxing match in an art gallery between two artists, one male one female, with a raucous art crowd and dancing girls between rounds.

I found the event an empty art-world serving hurrah until the match's conclusion when the two boxers embrace for an uncomfortably long period of time as the crowd jeers on. The joke turns on the crowd, the work becoming more about the voyeurism in contemporary art society than the bloodied and bowed artists in the ring.

Early on, the event's MC is at pains to remind the audience that this is not a boxing match but an image of it - "a distant picture". Here I am in a Wellington art gallery watching an art event in a Nordic art gallery. The small and the big collapse together, and suddenly the fact that this is a video and not a performance in real time means everything.

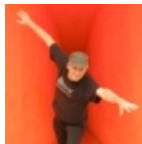
What: *Sweet Punch: Recent Nordic Art*

When: until 9 March 2007

Where: The Film Archive, Wellington

Submitted by [Mark Amery \(/profile/mark-amery/5\)](#) on Mon, 26/02/2007 - 10:48pm.

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