Each month, FRAME features a Finnish contemporary artist as Artist of the Month on its website: www.frame-fund.fi. Digital source material is provided for each artist. There is a new artist every month, and material for all the current and previous year's artists is available.

Artist of the Month 2003: JANUARY – Pink Twins, FEBRUARY – Maria Ångerman, MARCH – Santeri Tuori, APRIL – Tanja Koponen, MAY – Tuula Närhinen, JUNE – Tea Mäkipää, JULY – Jaakko Niemelä

Tuula Närhinen (b. 1967) is a Helsinki visual artist and architect, who works on Harakka Island near Helsinki. When she works, Närhinen uses experimental methods and tools borrowed from science, and graphic modes of presentation used for setting out research results. The works deal with seeing, motion, light and natural processes in the landscape. Many of them seek to achieve something other than the pictorial representation of natural phenomena discernible with the visual sense. At the same time, the works investigate the modes of representation used in the natural sciences and visual arts, and the pictorial potential of phenomena that have so far been inaccessible to them. Närhinen's works form part of the continuum of environmental and conceptual art in a brittle and humorous way. In 2002, her works were seen in Helsinki, in the studio at Kunsthalle Helsinki, at the Amos Anderson Art Museum, and at the Tennis Palace Art Museum, plus at a group exhibition in Brussels and Helsinki as part of a Helsinki-Brussels residence project. In the spring of 2003 Närhinen is working on a new piece in New York.

Documenting The Invisible and The Vanishing

by Susanna Santala

Susanna Santala: You work on Harakka Island, off Helsinki, which you row to every day in the summer and get to by ice road in the winter. What significance does the island have for your work?

Tuula Närhinen: The island studio creates a possibility for making immediate observations and experiments in direct relationship with the landscape. The variability of the surroundings constantly gives rise to new phenomena, which can be worked on using pictorial means. My works aren't landscape-changing environmental-art projects. I retain the role of observer. The island serves as a research laboratory, where I deal with my subjects using pictorial methods that combine both visual art and science. For example, for *Chromatograms – a herbarium of plant colours*, in the summers of 2000 and 2001, I collected samples of a hundred of the species of flowers that generally flower on Harakka Island. I prepared a small amount of pigment extract from each plant, and separated out the different pigments contained in them using a chromatographic method.

Your works all involve experimental working methods – for instance chromatography – and modes of graphic representation used for displaying results. Would you tell us in more detail about the research methods you use?

Chromatography is a method used to separate out the various compounds in a mixture. The method had its beginnings in experiments by the botanist **Mikhail S. Tswett**, who lived at the beginning of the 20th century, in which he analysed the pigment content of the green leaves of plants. In this method, the pigments rise to different heights up a filter paper, as pure water is absorbed into the sheet of paper after the pigment extract. The resultant sheets of filter paper, i.e. the chromatograms, are kinds of paintings that come out of the flowers' own pigments, which show the spectrum of colours from the flowers. In the work they are on a herbarium sheet alongside the pressed flower.

Tuula Närhinen, Spruce, 2000, colour photograph. From the project Anemographics, a study of the movements of trees, plants and waves in the wind. Photographic eperiments with different wind recording devices.

The work also includes Petri dishes on a light table, which have brilliant, wonderfully bright natural colours. But then the colours evaporate. What is the significance of the transience of the work for you?

The pigment extracts from the plants had dried at the bottom of the Petri dishes as a trace of the working process. The herbarium along with its chromatograms is transient, since the colours of the plants already change when they are pressed and fade due to the effect of the light. Watching the Petri dishes, you see that the colours withstand the light in different ways. The colours absorbed into the paper fade rapidly, so that the whole work vanishes, some of it already before the exhibition.

Although the transience of the work is unavoidable, one of the starting points for it was, paradoxically, specifically the desire to 'preserve' the colours of the floral meadow of summer in an exhibition shown in the winter. This disappearance caused a tremendous documentation stress, which led in part to a failed attempt to record a collection of over 100 herbarium leaves by photographing them on roll film. The disappearance of a big work is something that I would clearly not want to accept, and if it were technically and economically possible, I would further collect the work together into a library of colours in some digitally browseable form.

One primary part of your works is the research tools you have constructed yourself, which record the traces of events and produce a new kind of image world. In *The Landscape Seen Through Animal Eyes*, (1999–2002) you have investigated the structure of animals' eyes and fields of vision in relation to those of the human eye, using what you call 'animal cameras'.

The animal cameras are pinhole cameras constructed from an animals' viewpoint, in which the image emerges without lenses, as the light passes through a tiny hole into a dark box, into which light-sensitive paper or film has been placed. In the cameras I have designed, I have used the possibilities of the pinhole technique to try to take into account the structure and function of each animal's eye. I have also chosen the shooting location, for example, from the level of the fly, bear or fish in its natural living environment.

With the animal cameras I tried to show that photographs and cameras could look quite different from the ones we are used to. The current cameras came about through the need to reproduce in a photograph the world spread out before the human eye. Already long before the chemical invention of photography, the camera obscura was used, among other things, as a model of the human eye to illustrate the formation of the optical image on the retina. Apart from the mechanical recording of what is seen, the whole tradition of painting and the familiar modes of picture making that have emerged around it have had a powerful effect on shaping the pictorial world of photographs. Despite strong traditions, the camera can also be used for investigating the kinds of phenomena that would otherwise remain beyond the reach of traditional imaging techiques or human perception.

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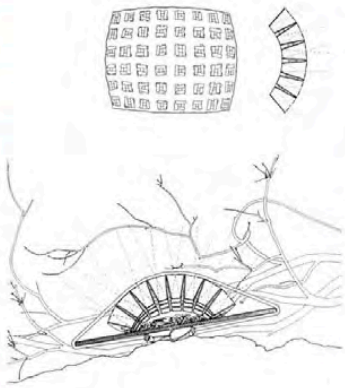
Your work *Wind tracers* (2000) is also associated with a something that is out of reach of the photograph, the visualisation of motion caused by the wind.

They say you can't photograph the wind. You can feel the wind and perceive it as movement, but in a still picture it vanishes from view. In my wind experiments I tried to register the movement caused by the wind by using long exposures to photograph small lights placed inside plants and trees, which traced fine streaks of light on the film as they swayed in the wind. My interest in images that record movement is linked with the scientific experiments carried out by the French physiologist **Etienne-Jules Marey** at the end of the 19th century, in which he used photographs and tracers to analyse the various phases of rapid movements that are beyond human perception.



Flycam, 1999–2002 (see description in the image below).

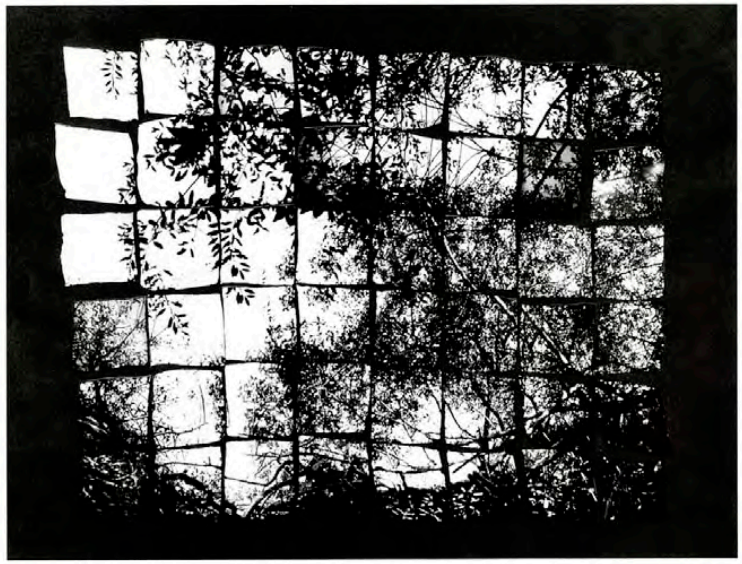
You worked in Brussels in December-January of 2000–2001 and one outcome of that period was your most recent work, *Senne*, which investigates the water in the river running along an underground channel through Brussels, and its pollution levels. Would you tell us in more detail about the making of the work?

I used a home-made net to take water samples from the badly polluted river, from sources as far down as the river mouth, and transferred the samples onto preparate slides. From each slide I selected a detail, which I examined under a microscope and made into a much larger watercolour. In the samples taken close to Brussels and in the corresponding watercolours we see most clearly an increase in the level of pollutants. The other part of the work, *The Best Beers in Belgium*, deals with the use and quality of the river water by playing with Belgian beer vocabulary and with traditior al beer fermentation processes that occur solely through the agency of local microbes.

Where did you get your interest in applying the methods of the natural sciences to art?

I am not interested in the natural sciences in themselves, nor am I trained in the field. I use these methods as a visual artist who is fascinated by the issues involved in seeing and light, and generally by all the tools with which you can pictorially show phenomena that happen in space and time. Thus, in this sense, photography could also be a 'scientific method'. In art circles the optics and chemistry of photography are frequently overlooked as being no more than construction techniques for a visual narrative, but cameras, microscopes, pigments and light-sensitive chemicals in themselves are tools of projection, which directly record traces of reality. Of course, we can ask to what extent these traces are 'pictures', and what relationship they have with the picture tradition? As someone who has been through an aesthetic education, I select, arrange and compose a whole according to the 'rules of art', but more crucial than the individual pictures is what they depict – the phenomenon itself, the idea behind the work. The narrative is not built into a single picture, but emerges from a series of pictures and from a working process.

I prefer a certain systematicness – by following some more or less insane 'program' you can bring out a new viewpoint. Constructing research tools and doing experiments is associated with playfulness and the excitement of invention: 'it works!' – or then not. Surprise is important. Sometimes failed experiments, too, can produce interesting results.



Tuula Närhinen, Flycam, 1999–2002, from the project The Landscape Seen Through Animal Eyes. Like the compound eye of a fly, the image produced by this camera is made up of many facets. This model has 48 pinholes.

You are working in New York in March 2003. Can you tell us something about the piece you are working on there?

Talking about a half-finished work is not much fun, since you can never know how the execution will go. Nevertheless, my aim is to photograph busy street scenes in Manhattan with a pinhole camera that I have built myself that uses sheet-film size colour negatives. The pinhole technique also makes it possible to do relatively long exposures on film material: by exposing them for sufficiently long, all moving objects vanish from view, leaving a fine misty trace in the picture. Without cars and people, the shopping streets appear empty and strangely deserted, in which case street furniture, advertisements and traffic signs generally hidden by the bustle in the street take on an accentuated status. Of course, since the WTC terror attack, the 'obliteration of life' from the street by photographing takes on quite different significances than it did in my original plan, not to mention in the current mood of impending war. We will have to wait and see what will come of it all.

The writer works as a curator at the Kunsthalle Helsinki. ○