

## *Encounters on Emerging Boundary Spaces*

by Ari Hirvonen

Ars'06

Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art

### **Borderline Space**

The drawing of the boundary lines between good and evil, right and wrong, friend and enemy, safe and threatening, familiar and alien, culture and nature, which organizes our way of being in the world and of sharing it with others, has dissolved with the withdrawal of the gods and the waning of the great ideologies. Instead of absolute authorities, stable boundaries, fundamental essences and universal moral truths and definitions, none of which is more valid than any other. We are free for boundless pleasure and self-creation.

At the same time, reality has become transparent. With the fading of boundaries and boundary-setting norms, the superior individual's categorical imperative becomes: one must reveal. The mysteries of life and death are explicable, the secrets of the body and the unconscious can be brought into the light, vague moral value judgments linked to evil are easy to ignore. The cognitive sciences, gene technology, molecular and neurobiology are marginalizing philosophy, ethics, psychoanalysis and poetry. The enchantment of the strangeness of being is evaporating, but to compensate we have the assurance that everything is comprehensible, controllable and manageable, that lack - where there still is any - is no more than an error that can be rectified. In fact, this is a fantasy, which only conceals both evil, along with the deficiency and anxiety.

This fantasy, however, sparks the very anxiety from which it seeks to liberate humanity. To alleviate this anxiety, many people decide to seek some sort of guidance and foundation, something supreme, which would redefine the boundaries both between good and evil, end between the exposed and the hidden. Evenly staked-out boundary markers would liberate people from the despotism of transparency and freedom, and they

would attest to a unity and consistency amid the chaotic diversity of reality. Manifestations of this longing include both neo-nationalism and religious fanaticism, both racism founded on a fear of difference and terrorism that whips up fear. War, too, in its own destructive way, guarantees borderlines. Meanwhile, mood-controlling drugs alleviate both the terror of freedom and exposure, and the anxiety induced by acts of terror and war.

In this situation art, too, has to take "sides". On the one hand, art can set up boundaries and reinforce existing identities and distinctions, thus serving this or that ideology, nation or religion. On the other hand, in the ecstasy of the postmodern, it can want to abolish all boundaries, fixed points and underpinnings. Or then, having been liberated from the logic of identity and from the discourse of relativism, it seeks to bring everything into the light.

But art can also doubly challenge boundaries and identities, expressly by calling into question both their setting up and their preservation, along with their mono chromatically naive overturning and dismantling. Perhaps in this situation art is a demarcation of boundaries that takes place in a boundary space where things turn into their other and where the boundary is an irrevocably open question. In this in-between space the world and being in it are not manageable in their entirety, the diversity cannot be revealed all at one go, as something that is present. Representing and bringing to light always leaves something hidden. But, at the same time, an artwork may be the kind of occurrence of presence in which the mind of being peeps through, in which what exists is revealed, and in which unconcealedness steps forth out of concealment in a certain historical space-time. In this case, however, art does not so much define and control what it reveals, but rather it hears what it reveals, and responds to it and about it. This may also open up new spaces for our way of being subjects, for our way of being in the world.

Several of the ARS 06 artworks can be seen as moving around in this kind of terrain. By marking out the boundaries that organize our being and our world, by calling them into question and challenging them, analyzing their mutual entanglement and inseparability, they reveal something that art that holds on to the boundaries or ignores them is unable to illuminate. This kind of "committed" art speaks to us and hence brings out the point both of the world and of being a human in it. Particularly the works of

Walter Martin & Paloma Muñoz, Motohiko Odani and Adriana Varejao are places for opening up, clearings, which by making out the boundaries between the homely and the alien (and between other related concept-pairs), challenging them, bring out something of what it is to be.

## **The Glacier**

In the winter landscapes inside glass spheres, snow globes, familiar from childhood peace and harmony prevailed. We could watch with admiration as the snowflakes fell peacefully onto fairytale, Christmas or manger scenes, onto Eiffel towers or statues of David. Change and the patina of time, lack and desire, cruelty and evil, were all absent, absent from these worlds of dream, fairy tale, mystery and holidays, worlds, in which the only god counting the time was the snowfall.

At first glance, the works in Walter Martin & Paloma Muñoz's *Travelers* series evoke an endearingly familiar feeling. The works in the *Travelers* series each constitute their own planet, where a complete and unique world opens up before us. These worlds are worlds of good and evil, joy or sorrow, all of them having in common a snow-clad winter landscape, in whose bright whiteness events occur that are both everyday and absurd, both exhilarating and shocking, both familiar and strange.

Now, our gaze begins to falter. It shifts from its place, or rather is divided in two. On the one hand, it wants to see the ever-familiar and safe snowscape with its charming figures or monuments. On the other hand, the strange scenes and situations revealed in the works draw the gaze. Something is not right. In this way the works call into question the expectations, hopes and imaginings that are associated with them at first glance, bringing us under the sway of wonder and amazement.

In many of the works we encounter peculiar situations, disturbing possibilities, unease and confusion. Some of these worlds can even be frightening and anxiety inducing: a stocky man dangling a child over a well (*Traveler 123*); a man goading a naked woman onto a glacier (*Traveler 154*), a giant spider chasing a man (*Traveler 156*);

a woman undressing in front of a chained man in overalls (*Traveler 164*). Our gaze arrives too early at the scene of a crime or accident, since the mantle of snow would soon have obscured the evil beneath it. We have unexpectedly been made witnesses to acts of cruelty, to violence and nightmares that would have been better to remain secret. There is something strange about the experience, since a familiar object reveals to us some macabre aspects.

The weirdness of the works is not just a matter of coming face to face with something totally unknown or alien, but of a dialogue between the familiar and the strange. This feature of the works can be illuminated by the German term *unheimlich*, meaning unhomely or uncanny. According to Freud, *unheimlich*, is unquestionably the opposite of the German word *heimlich*, meaning homely, intimate, and of *heimisch*, meaning familiar, native. Hence, it is not far to the conclusion that the uncanny is the same as the non-homely. But *heimlich* means not only pleasantly homely, but also hidden, secret, kept from sight, specifically that to which the word *unheimlich* refers. And so, according to Freud, *heimlich* ultimately becomes one with its opposite with the word *unheimlich*. Thus, the *unheimlich* brings out the way the homely, the familiar, the intimate, that which produces pleasure and security, is always linked with something concealed, hidden, uncommunicative; the way that something concealed and uncanny resides within the familiar. The uncanny is something that is repressed (un-) familiar and homely, which surprisingly appears from beneath a repression. According to Schelling, the *unheimlich* is something that has come into light even though it should have stayed hidden.

In the works the cozy miniature world that we expect is opened up and shown to be violent and steeped in evil. The reassuringly familiar is turned into the peculiar, the homely into the strange, the good into evil, the safe into insecurity. At the same time as the drama of this miniature world may horrify us, the kitschy innocence and superficial beauty of the glass domes remain unchanged, their mode of being as objects - or as shapes and as matter - is preserved as a kind of homeliness, on which the eye can linger. What makes this a baffling experience is specifically the inseparability of the manifestation of the event and the object, so that we encounter the strange and the familiar, the frightening and the safe, simultaneously. In fact the status of the glass-globes as artworks is about the strangeness revealed from beneath the expectations set up

by ingrained memories and aesthetic beauty, or about bringing the concealed into unconcealment. We no longer so much look at works as experience them (as oppressive), which opens us up to the unexpected elements revealed in the world of the works.

When we move on from the viewing into the world of the works, we also notice that the uncanniness does not remain solely on the level of cruel and nightmarish occurrences, since the world of the works reveals something "more fundamental" about our human way of being in the world. There is thus something about the entire Travelers series that makes our flesh creep, the reason for which we can only suspect. Even the jubilant Traveler 155, in which a boy does push-ups into the air supported by a girl's hands, triggers gloomy emotions.

The time in the worlds of the works has become frozen in its own momentariness, in the tension between the past and future. These worlds of eternal snows, into which the people are enclosed, are bleakly desolate despite their beauty. Culture comes across as having been no more than people's outer garments. The human, homely, familiar world of civilization, technology and laws has withdrawn into its hiding places, leaving people in the midst of raw, unprotected and strange nature. On this glacier of the real the symbolic order is no longer a guarantee of fixed points, a horizon, or identity. Everything is slightly out of kilter. Where the world as we encounter it in all its everydayness is filled with rules, order and shape, these works bring to light something about the unruliness that could at any moment overturn the order that we take for granted. This groundlessness of being is in fact the fundamental order that makes it at all possible to distinguish between order and disorder.

On a more general level, the worlds that are unfolded in these works and the unprecedentedly strange events taking place in them reveal something strange. The origin and goal of being are unknown and inaccessible to human knowledge. Being a human is haphazard, fraught with uncertainty, and ephemeral. The perishableness of humanity is accentuated by the menacing trunks of dead trees that have petrified into timelessness. The only certainty is death, which is both possible at every instant and inevitable for everyone. The human figures in the works testify to this certainty with their own fragile existence. Nobody can die their death for them. This death has to be died alone. The works thus reveal the finiteness and mortality that are intrinsic part of being-in-the-world

of the human figures contained in them. Thus, what they do reveal is Heidegger's *Sein Zum Tode*, being-toward-death.

We can gloomily intimate that soon the snow will have covered over all the traces of humanity, even though a man in a suit is still helping another across a river (or to the bottom of the sea) (*Traveler 157*). But it is specifically through mortal human beings that the world gets its point, it being expressly in the finite human being that the struggle goes on between good and evil. People are thrown into the world of the works, without themselves having been able to make a choice in the matter or about the foundations of this world. Since they cannot control their existence down to its foundations, they simply have to stand in the world with their own gravity. This all emerges all the more clearly thanks to the inability of the human figures in the desolation of the snowfields to flee or withdraw into the everyday meanings and norms endorsed by culture, morality and law. Hence, the works put on view humanity's being in the world without masks, without definite norms and fixed points, with no certainty other than our finitude.

Thus, in the familiar glass globe and in the beautiful snowscape a strange truth opens up, a truth for which, for our own peace of mind, it would be better to remain hidden. The viewing experience is not, however, marked by any fear of death, departure or the dissolution of the foundations of our being, which would be a kind of momentary mental weakness. It is more of an anxiety in the face of our most basic possession and of what cannot be ignored - in fact, an anxiety in the face of our being-in-the-world. The most uncanny thing is thus not the strangeness of this truth, but specifically the fact that it is a person's most basic, closest and most familiar thing there is.

[...]

**Ari**

**Hirvonen**

**LL.D. , Adjunt Professor of Philosophy of Law, University of Helsinki, Finland.**

**"Encounters on Emerging Boundary Spaces", by Ari Hirvonen, was published in ARS 06, Kiasma's catalogue, 2006.**