

Up Close and Personal

Estonian artist **Mark Raidpere**'s photographs and videos mine the space between private and public *by Jörg Heiser*



Voiceover
2005
DVD still

Voiceover
2005
Installation view

A table, a couple of chairs, an old-fashioned clock on the wall. It's two minutes to eleven. A man fiddles with a video camera, removes the floral tablecloth, switches the camera to night vision and then back to normal. He sits and looks at the camera, resting his head on the table as though he is tired, teasing someone or checking poses as a stand-in for actors soon to join the set for a shoot. Then (cut) he's on the other side of the table, then (cut) directly in front of the camera, adjusting strands of his hair in the mirroring lens. On the clock behind him we read that 12 minutes have passed, but we're only 30 seconds into Mark Raidpere's *Shifting Focus* (2005) and the tension is mounting.

A woman – the artist's mother – enters and sits down. The clock on the wall has vanished; only the nail it hung on is left. The man (Raidpere) sits down. He has changed his red pullover for a dress shirt, (cut) then a dark long-sleeve shirt. Suddenly the image is black and white. The display window is shrinking (as though gradually changing from a television format to widescreen cinema), has a black frame around it, before the image rests on a shot of the mother facing her son across an empty table. Gently smiling, she finally says: 'Well, tell me about it.'

Raidpere sobs, begins to talk and abruptly stops. Sobs again. Hides his face behind his hands. Endless minutes seem to pass. The mother remains almost unbearably calm and patient (why doesn't she get up and shake him, or give him a hug?). 'I'm afraid', he says, 'I don't know what to say first, what later.' The mother replies (they speak Estonian, subtitled in English): 'Don't torture yourself like this, just say what you want to say.' By now it seems obvious that the son is struggling to confess to his mother that he is gay, but we soon discover that's not the case. About eight minutes into the video (an ashtray has appeared, and Raidpere is smoking), he says: 'I'm having a hard time right now. This Venice show, it's more like a nightmare than a delight.' Finally it's out. The artist is having panic attacks in the run-up to his solo presentation at the Estonian Pavilion in Venice in 2005 (which is where this piece was shown for the first time). 'Well, you've got time', the mother says. 'Loads of time. Months.'

Dramatic tension builds and is suddenly deflated – anxiety is resolved by its articulation (the completion of the piece); but why should we be bothered about the artist's psychodramas and his family life? Some argue that it is only through an unflinching confrontation with the artist's ingrained fears and desires, often connected to the circumstances of their upbringing, that great work can be created (hence, especially in film and literature, the ongoing proliferation of family dramas and memoirs). Conversely, others argue that such an approach inevitably produces kitsch, as the artist gets caught up in the age-old cliché of the artistic soul expressing itself, while falling back onto what the mass media – from afternoon chat shows to YouTube – do much better anyway, which is catering to the voyeurism of audiences hungry for confessions. Such an argument is supported by a tradition of critical theory: mid-20th-century





What happened? What's the matter?

New Criticism, which proposed to put the text – as opposed to biography or the author's intention – centre-stage, and post-1960s' Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction, which declared the text itself to be a fundamentally indeterminable entity. Simply put, you could say that the text (and analogously, the art work) was emancipated from the person who produced it and then from itself: its meaning was determined by its audience, while the audience in turn was also determined by its perceptions of the text or art work. In other words, authority moved from the author through the text/work to the reader – from where it bounced back into ambiguity.

But whether or not the text or art work is in some way unified by the 'voice' of its producer, a fundamental (and common) misunderstanding is to take critical theories of how a work can be *perceived* as normative prescriptions of how it should be *produced*. Even if you believe that art takes on a life of its own in the realm of its reception, this in no way implies that biography and subjectivity are taboo subjects to explore. Rather, it is often when this happens that the excitement starts: biography and subjectivity collide head-on with the indeterminacies of production, the formal questions of physical, technical and social process – all of which brings us back to *Shifting Focus*.

The piece made me expect a coming-out because it sends out signals that I associate with previous readings of coming-out as a cultural trope. Yet while frustrating this one expectation, it offers relief: the confession that first seemed to block the way of the production of a work – the anxiety about creating work for the exhibition in Venice – turns out to be integral to its creation. In this respect, *Shifting Focus* recalls Christian Jankowski's videos *Kunstwerk verzweifelt gesucht* (Desperately seeking the art work, 1997) and *Telemistica* (1999). The former involved the artist having therapy in order to overcome a block; he had failed to come up with an idea for a contribution to a group show, which, according to the therapist, was because the curator was too much like his mother (of course, the video turned out to be that contribution). *Telemistica* was devised for the Venice Biennale in 1999, at which the artist asked five fortune-tellers on Italian television if his idea for an art work was sufficient and original – without letting any of them know that the very idea was to call them up. With Raidpere, however, this idea of the work as self-fulfilling prophecy is given yet another twist, as we can't be sure that the clever trick of turning failure into achievement isn't itself just a 'set-up', a red herring

Raidpere finally admits the problem to his mother. 'I'm having a hard time right now,' he says. 'This Venice show, it's more of a nightmare than delight.'



in order actually to allow another level of meaning to return with a vengeance: what if Raidpere really did want to confess something very intimate or serious and created the art work as an easy way out? We can never know – which is the point; a shifting focus indeed. The artist's mother functions as a catalyst, as an exemplary 'reader' of, and participant in, her son's performance – performance both in the sense of an emotional scene, a 'speech act' being staged in order to generate a communicative effect, and in the sense of art being made.

Enter the father. Matti. *Voiceover* (2005) is the counterpart to *Shifting Focus* and completes the Oedipal triangle. Matti's face – a

Left:
Shifting Focus
2005
DVD still

Below left:
5 Guards
2006
DVD still

Right:
10 Men
2003
DVD stills

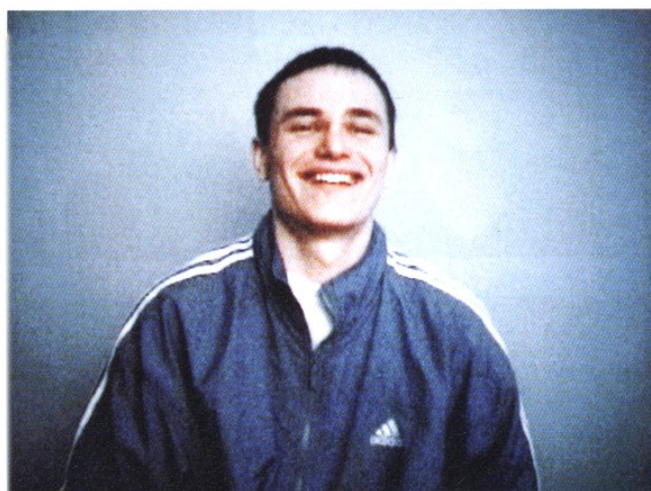
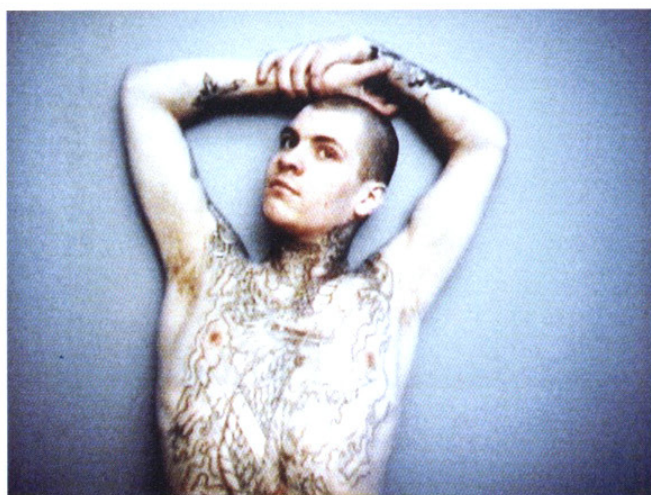
large projection – appears against a uniformly red background, while Raidpere's head is visible on a separate monitor next to it. Patiently, with a deadpan face, the son translates his father's Estonian words into English: confusing sentences – uttered while trying to avoid the camera's eye – about Mafia bombings, a Polish incident of a father and son being shot, of pregnancy through the Holy Spirit, of suicide, and of voices inside his head. It becomes apparent that Matti had a schizophrenic crisis during the time when Raidpere was taking a series of photos of him posing with his own small paintings ('Red', 2000). Recalling that difficult period, the father speaks of a voice inside his head, which said, 'Dear Matti, that you have such a son after all...' – at which point he is suddenly overwhelmed by tears, bends down, runs his hands through his hair and tries desperately to regain his composure. The son, simultaneously, stoically, translates the words and then remains silent – only his eyes are moving, occasionally seemingly almost robotically, an effect caused by the disjointed editing of his literally visualized voice-over.

On one, obvious, level, the voice-over 'illustrates' the voices inside the father's head as echoed in the words of the son; in this, the work is a portrait of a father/son relationship complicated by separation and mental illness. On another level, however, the work dramatizes the question of its own translatability as a portrait. The son projects himself as the professional who translates his father's words into the *lingua franca* of the art world, English, almost cruelly using what seems to be a conflicted family story and an individual's painful struggle with schizophrenia as his pawn in an international game of recognition and acknowledgement. Again, as with *Shifting Focus*, any attempt to separate the piece's 'biographical' weightiness cleanly from its qualities as a smart conceptual loop gloriously fails.

Nevertheless, one's own parents remain a subject that even the most elegant formalizations will eventually choke on, and so another strand in Raidpere's *oeuvre* opens up towards more anonymous encounters. *5 Guards* (2006) is a video interview with five women working as guards in a Latvian art museum – gently registering their attempts to reconcile what is essentially a ridiculously low-paid, boring job with their more or less highly developed interest in classical modern art and the mostly video-based contemporary work with which they are confronted at times, and by which they are often estranged (something they admit only in the most restrained terms). I saw the work last winter displayed on an LCD screen near the entrance to the Contemporary Art Centre, Vilnius, Lithuania, as part of Raidpere's solo presentation there, and its subject matter was echoed by the actual women working as guards in the museum; thus the question of how a mother – as in *Shifting Focus* – might consider the significance of her son's artistic work became a more general one about how contemporary art strangely, awkwardly, resists and yet longs for acknowledgement by 'ordinary' people (even if they are professionally confronted with it as guards 'just' doing their jobs).

Andrey/Andris (2006) is another piece that raises one kind of expectation and frustrates it with another. A text – arranged to the swinging brass intro of Frank Sinatra's 'New York, New York' – flashes smoothly from top to bottom along a strip dance pole and tells the story of a mating game. ('I saw him in Riga in an empty club, after a productive day of shooting [...] I held negotiations, made agreements, I made the shooting four days later, in the same place.') We then see a young, fully clothed guy dancing around the pole in a parody of a come-on. Andrey is interviewed after his routine, asked his age (18) and about his dreams (to make loads of money). This encounter, obviously, eventually led to a piece of art; and yet again, obviously, we cannot know whether the making of art was its main objective.

In the DVD *10 Men*, from 2003, a similar ambiguity is eloquently played out. The work consists of static shots of inmates of an Estonian prison posing for the camera. In the vein of Andy Warhol's 'Screen Tests' (1963–6) they appear in slight slow motion, and the instruction seems to have been simply to pose for the camera. And so they do: tough, dangerous-looking men with muscles, tattoos, broken noses and shaven heads, occasionally smiling timidly – knowingly displaying themselves as objects of fear and desire. We're given no



information at all about the prisoners – no indication, for example, of what they have been sentenced for. Instead, what actually completes and structures the piece is its soundtrack: a simple, melancholic lullaby accompanied by the cracks and scratches of a record, like an isolated loop from an elegiac Hip-Hop track. It undermines the attempt to read the portraits as social reportage, as either denunciation or glorification of low-living, brutal masculinity. The use of a psycho-acoustic convention in place of factual information opens up a rift between the images and their meaning, a rift that is the site, simply, of mourning.



1999



1997



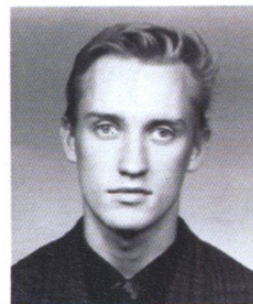
2000



1999



2002



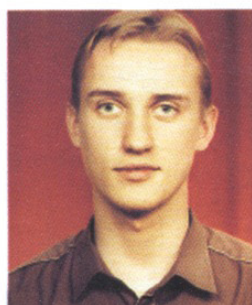
1993



2000



2001



1992



2001



1995



1999

Good Boys

2005

Digital print (originally
published as magazine
insert, 2002)

150 | frieze | May 2007

For more than a decade Raidpere has been making a name for himself in Estonia as a fashion photographer (in fact, in *Shifting Focus*, his mother consoles him by saying that he'll come up with a good idea for his Venice presentation in 'his own time, after work'). In the catalogue to his 2005 Venice show there is a facsimile of a double-page spread from his copy of Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (1979): Sontag discusses Diane Arbus, who by profession was also a fashion photographer, 'a fabricator', as Sontag puts it, 'of the cosmetic lie that masks the intractable inequalities of birth and class and physical appearance'¹ – a sentence that Raidpere has underlined in red ink. Sontag compares Arbus to Warhol and argues that her photographic portraits of freaks and misfits, as opposed to Warhol's (which were mainly executed as films), are triggered not so much by ironic fascination as by a 'strikingly vulnerable' and 'pessimistic' view that finds lower-middle-class suburbia just as freakish and exotic 'as Times Square, lunatic asylums, and gay bars'.² Raidpere's works about his father, mother, museum guards or prisoners similarly bespeak a disbelief in the very idea of familiarity – likewise his self-portraits. In the series 'Io' (1997) he appears naked, head shaved, with cigarette burns on his hands. These grainy black and white photographs were apparently produced shortly after the artist had experienced a serious mental breakdown, but no mention is made of this in the work itself. He draws on his earlier experience of working as a model in strikingly effusive, 'effeminate' poses, creating a strong tension between 'showing his wounds' (to adopt the Beuysian term) and guarding his sovereignty. And thus it becomes apparent that Sontag's quip about fashion photography as a 'cosmetic lie' doesn't mean that one is closer to the truth if one avoids its poses and routines. Conversely, one doesn't have to conform to its rule either: when in 2002 Raidpere was asked by the Estonian fashion magazine *Stil* to select photographs that had influenced him, he submitted a set of 12 passport pictures of himself, all of them strikingly blank in expression, with clothes and hairstyles from different periods. Rather than representing a linear development of growing up, it was as though he was a teenager desperately trying out different styles to find his 'own' – or a spy switching between personas. Again a 'personal' gesture evaded the demand to identify and confess.

The passport piece from *Stil* was on display in the 2005 Venice Biennale, along with *Shifting Focus*, *Voicover*, and *10 Men* – all works that question the parameters of what we define as private and what is allowed to become public. The show was titled 'Isolator' in response to a remark made recently in an Estonian newspaper. Quoted in the catalogue, the head of a Tallinn school, in a homophobic article written for a major local daily, had said that 'such [gay] Estonian "men and women" are enemies of the Estonian state and should be isolated: let them operate within closed walls'.³

To insist that art remain unsullied by subjectivity, a position seemingly based on a critical norm of avoiding the pitfalls of the confessional and the self-aggrandizing, runs the risk of mindlessly perpetuating these kinds of reactionary demands to keep public life clean of, for example, 'private' homosexuality. But Raidpere's response is to present his work as not simply a linear expression of what was previously considered private, a disclosing of what had been in the closet, but rather as a rejection of that either/or scenario which attempts – whether in arts or politics – to determine who may display or disclose what, and when. Time, then, becomes the last, receding resort.

Jörg Heiser is co-editor of *frieze*. His new book *Plötzlich diese Übersicht. Was gute zeitgenössische Kunst ausmacht (Suddenly this Overview. What constitutes good contemporary Art?)* is now out in Germany (Classen, 2007). He has also curated *Romantic Conceptualism, which is on at Kunsthalle Nürnberg from 10 May*.

1 Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1977, quoted from a facsimile printed in Mark Raidpere, *Isolator*, Center for Contemporary Arts, Tallinn, Estonia, 2005, p. 85

2 Ibid.

3 Märt Sults, 'A Duty to Preserve the Species', *Postimees* (28 July 2004), quoted in *Isolator*, p. 3



Andrey/Andris
2006
DVD still

To insist that art remain unsullied by subjectivity, runs the risk of mindlessly perpetuating reactionary demands to keep public life clean of, for example, 'private' homosexuality.

Io
(detail)
1997
16 lambda prints
102×60 cm each

