



Heikki Humberg, *Rooms of Truth*
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Rooms of Truth?

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The photo series *Rooms of Truth* by Heikki Humberg explores concepts of real spaces compared to imaginary spaces. The series displays images of real interrogation rooms, which, as Humberg explains in his artist statement, are far more different from the representations that are presented to us in television programmes and movies.¹ Therefore, these ‘real’ spaces portrayed in *Rooms of Truth* evoke feelings of uncertainty for the viewer, as they do not fulfill our expectations of these kind of spaces. The images, including the ways they are framed and the angles from which they are photographed, present spaces in which the spectator is simultaneously insider and outsider. Through analyzing the photograph *Room of Truth, Lahti, Finland, For Children* from Humberg’s series, I intend to demonstrate how photographic concepts of space, place and representation are applied in a meaningful way by the photographer, both in this photograph and as part of the series.

When analyzing the selected photograph, we see a room with two chairs placed in juxtaposition under two hanging microphones, another chair in the corner, and a table in the middle. What is striking about the room is that it is not instantly identifiable as an interrogation room, and has more similar aspects to that of a living room or talk show. Humberg also chooses to add the place and function of the room in the photograph’s title, suggesting that it could be a room for children. This also plays with our expectations, as it is hard to find a resemblance with a children’s nursery. It is mainly through the information in the caption that we assume these spaces are real interrogation rooms.

Humberg’s project calls forth Ian Walker’s explanation in his essay “Déjà vu: the rephotographic survey project”, which explains how we feel as if we know places, through different means of photographs visually resurfacing in books, magazines, and billboards. An example of this is the statue of Lady Liberty. When we first seeing these places in actual life, they can be almost “hallucinatory”. Walker describes this experience as “standing there, one is aware of how much the experience of a place the

photograph leaves out.”² Regarding this, we can understand that photographs do not give us the entire experience and view of a space. This brings up the notion of imaginary geographies.

In *Picturing Place* geographers Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan argue that photographic images have been an important way to engage with the physical and human world, and aside from its many functions such as showing places, spaces, and landscapes, photographic images also create “imaginative geographies” or perceptions of place. “A powerful means of picturing ‘place’, both literally and figuratively, they have participated actively in the making and dissemination of geographical knowledge”.³ Nonetheless, there is a tension between truthfulness and geographical imagination, which is also apparent in *Room of Truth, Lahti, Finland, For Children* – even though it is a shot taken of an existing place. An interrogation room is not a very common place for many people. Therefore, we can assume that most spectators will only know the place indirectly through cinema. The cinema is in this case creating the imaginary spaces.

What is also interesting is the vantage point from which the photograph is taken. Not only do we see the room through an oblique view that gives us some idea of perspective, but the room itself is also shot through the window of another room. This creates a frame within a frame.

This particular vantage point and framing raise the question what we are looking at: is it a photograph of a room hanging on the wall of another room, is it a reflection in a mirror, or is it a window? I assume that the vantage point from which Humberg has taken the photograph positions the spectator in the position of the observing official or police officer, before the window. This position is thus a meaningful place within the interrogation process. However, as a viewer of this photograph, this position does not give us as much information. Also, the viewer is only able to see a glimpse of the room in which we are positioned thus giving us only a one sided view of the space that we are in.

What can also be noted about Humberg’s photograph is how it

alternates between an open and inviting space, and a space that creates boundaries. According to Tim Cresswell's *In Place, out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, in human geography we are constantly occupied with boundary making, which opens up to transgressions. Cresswell explains this further by saying that places are "fundamental creators of indifference". The outside needs the inside (and vice versa) to exist in the first place. This means that we are always either an insider or outsider transgressing through these spaces. According to Cresswell "an outsider is not just someone literally from another location but someone who is existentially removed from the milieu of our "place"..."⁴ We can relate Cresswell's view to the selected photograph, as the photograph positions us in room from which we can view a connecting room through a window within a dividing wall. As a result this divide creates a literal border, and in a way complements the theme of an interrogation room.⁵ Boundary making is also present within the photograph, in the sense that we do not only literally see the boundary between two rooms but also through the framing from which the spectators can get an uninviting and uncanny feeling as they cannot experience and comprehend this space.⁶ Yet, Humberg makes us an insider through his use of seeming factual description, which brings us under the impression that we are invited into a somewhat truthful representation of a space, therefore placing the spectator in the position of both the insider and outsider. In general, photography itself occupies the maker with a form of boundary making as it limits him/her to work within a frame. Through taking a photograph, boundaries are formed around what we choose to capture within the frame and what we leave out. Boundary making through framing is then also apparent in the selected photograph in two forms: the frame of the photograph itself and the frame within the photograph that is formed by the window in the room, revealing the connecting room. The photographic place in itself actually is a constructed place (that only exist in this way in the photograph), but which evokes the suggestion of truthfulness. The same goes for the design of the room as it is also a constructed place; the room seems to be 'just' a normal living room or talk-show set up, yet there has actually been a thoroughly ideological research conducted in order to find what design would function best for the act of interrogating.

Lastly, we can examine Humberg's photograph in connection to reconstructions and manipulations. As Hilde van Gelder and Helen Westgeest mention in *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective*, quite a few scholars argue that each photograph is to some extent a "construction" of a place.⁷ Humberg's photograph does not reveal any obvious trace of manipulation or reconstruction. However, we are not sure whether the pho-

tographer might have adjusted the setting by changing the objects within the space. When it comes to existing spaces, Humberg already constructs the space by choosing to leave out people, whom completely change what it conveys. The manner in which the room is photographed and how the objects are placed, are in an almost perfect composition. This makes us wonder whether there was no staging or manipulation at all. What must also be kept in mind is that the interrogation room in itself is already a constructed space, as this room was constructed as an artificial children's room but intentionally functions as a room for 'truth telling' and finding truth. This also says a lot about the people that have created the room, and therefore also gives some insights into the purpose of the room.

When we relate the photographic aspects of space/place and representation to the selected photograph by Humberg and the contents of the series, I conclude that the photograph makes us aware of how much information a photograph leaves out – even when it actually suggests to show a 'truthful' space. The imaginary space compared to the 'real space' is what makes this series interesting; it plays both with our expectation of photography and that of an interrogation space.

References:

- Cresswell, T. (2004) *Place: A Short Introduction*. Blackwell, Malden, MA.
Schwartz, J.M. and Ryan, J.R. (eds) (2003) *Picturing Place. Photography and the Geographical Imagination*. I.B. Taurus, London.
Van Gelder, Hilde and Helen Westgeest, (eds) (2011). *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
Walker, I. (1991 [1986]) *Déjà vu: the rephotographic survey project*. In: Brittain, D. (ed.) *Creative Camera. 30 Years of Writing*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp. 127-144.

1. Statement by the artist added to the photo series.
2. Walker describes how our expectation from a photograph is not always met when we experience the place in real life. Walker, 1999 [1986], 127.
3. Schwartz and Ryan, 2003, 3-6.
4. Cresswell, 2004, 153.
5. Interrogation rooms are spaces in which only certain people are allowed, the people from the outside will not always get the information that is discussed in that room therefore creating a certain border.
6. As mentioned before, the frame within the frame creates a 'mise-en-abyme' like illusion, in which the spectator can become confused whether he/she is looking at a window, a mirror, or a photograph within a photograph.
7. Van Gelder and Westgeest, 2011, 116-117