sau naïe [Finn]: a Finnish steam bath
in which the steam is provided by water thrown on hot stones.

by
Pia Maria Lindman

MFA, time and space based art
Academy of Fine Arts, Finland

Submitted to the Visual Arts Program, at the Department of Architecture
in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Science in Visual Studies
at the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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ABSTRACT

A Finnish proverb says that the sauna is the most democratic space in the world. Here, we dismantle our vestments of social status and relax in a distinct social space where everyone shares the same basic needs of comfort and the refreshment of body and soul. This is the ideal condition of Finnish sauna. In the cultural climate of New England, a sauna that facilitates this condition must be reinvented. I have designed a sauna adapted for the MIT Campus. Here, through the interaction of the bathers, a social dynamic similar to the Finnish can emerge, also for those who do not share the cultural understanding of Finns.

The Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna was open for public bathing on MIT Campus, from May the 6th until May the 22nd, 1999.
Location: Next to All Faiths Chapel, Building W 15 and Stratton Student Center Building W 20, 84 Massachusetts Avenue

Thesis Supervisor: Krzysztof Wodicko
Professor of Visual Arts
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INTRODUCTION
ARTIST STATEMENT

In developing my art, I place myself in living environments that are part of my personal life experience. There is always some friction or discrepancy in these environments. In the instances when a tradition in the form of architecture, social norms or laws, does not reflect contemporary living conditions there is most likely a conflict between the actual ways of life and the expectations humans place on themselves in relation to their lives. In these instances, there are opportunities to critically view both the traditions and the expectations. An instant like this, may become a clearing in the multiplicities of discourses. A readjustment between traditions and expectations will result in new fixed identities and the clearing will disappear. The dynamic of art is to maintain a continuous flux between the fixed and the critical moments.

I conduct constant inquiries into sites, social contexts, and traditions in both larger and microcosmic levels. From the knowledge I thus acquire, I create artwork that subtly highlights discrepancies and necessitates personal renegotiations. In displacing the audience with the effects of my art I offer a chance to reach a moment of free thought in the clearing between the fixation points of one identity and another.
Finland has recently become a member of the European Union, a membership that was quite inconceivable until 1992, when the Berlin wall fell. Following Gorbachov’s Glasnost, a quiet revolution overturned the political and cultural atmosphere in Finland. Finns could finally openly and completely associate themselves with Western culture and Europe. However, in the new ‘real’ European Finnishness, disconcerted voices have emerged. In Finland today there is a growing interest in Finnishness as cultural heritage and a token of uniqueness.

One aspect that has been reviewed is the sauna and specifically the public sauna. The private sauna, ideally a vernacular cottage next to a lake, has always been a symbol of Finnishness, but now the public sauna is having a renaissance. They were predominantly built at the turn of the last century for and often by a growing urban proletariat, that worked in the factories of the major cities. In these saunas, political polemics flourished. Jorma Saarikivi tells us what it was like in the public Kotiharju Sauna (fig 1: Kotiharju Sauna in 1928) in the 1950’s when he was a teenager: “There were no fights in the sauna, no other than verbal ones. They would always end in something like: ‘Cunt, you are so bourgeois, it’s easy for you to say, because you’ve got everything’, or ‘You’re a simple laborer, you cannot ever get to where I am.’”

These public saunas, as spaces created for the proletariat, perhaps today represent for urban Finns political and cultural identity and offer empowerment for those who feel the most threatened by the cultural Europeanization and economic

1I paraphrase here Declan Kiberd’s article “Modern Ireland: Postcolonial or European?” from the anthology Not on any Map, Essays on Postcoloniality and Cultural Nationalism, ed: Stuart Murray, University of Exeter Press, 1997. Both Finland and Ireland seem to have parallel histories: both have been subjected to imperialist rule; both gained independence partly as a result of the European nationalist movement (Ireland in 1916, Finland in 1917); and both struggle with multiple identities that manifest in variations of languages and cultural identifications.

globalization. For the blue collar workers today, the public sauna seems to represent their specific urban Finnishness, both cultural and political, but also a way of identifying across cultures, through class recognition. In the catalogue *Kotiharju Sauna 1928 - 1998*, Ari Ahleskog, chairman of the Association for Kotiharju Sauna, mentions ‘friendship visits’ by the Association to other public saunas in Estonia. Estonia has only recently gained independence from the former Soviet Union, and due to the economic and cultural condition of Estonia, recovering from the Soviet era, public saunas in Estonia resemble past times in urban working class settings. Ari Ahleskog further states: “[We, the members of the Association] experience our sauna as a place, that represents old, tolerant ‘cityhood’. It is a place with an atmosphere that one has to experience in person.”

It is very true. Kotiharju sauna is remarkable in its atmosphere. One senses connection with a history of urban Finland that few young urban professionals ever knew existed. However, already the fact that an association for the saving of the old sauna has to be founded indicates that this urban workers’ culture is on its way out, and that a nostalgia is at play here (fig 2: entrance to *Kotiharju Sauna*, see also figs 3-6).

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3The weight of the legacy of the Finnish Civil War of 1917 - 1919 is still strongly felt by many members of the working class. In this war, the communist revolution was eventually quenched and the atrocities by the revolutionaries were revenged by the political right with even bloodier consequences.

4The Association was founded in 1995 for the restoring and maintaining of the old public sauna of Kotiharju.

5The Finnish ‘stadilaisuus’ is a word in Helsinki working class slang and intranslatable; however, it refers to working class urban life in Helsinki city.

The anthropologist Lisa-Marlene Edelsward has researched the sauna as symbol of Finnishness. Coming from outside of Finnish sauna culture, her perspective is beneficial for the purpose of critical analysis and her dissertation is thus one of my primary sources in this Thesis. Edelsward discusses at first the word sauna and finds that it is an ancient word in Finnish vocabulary. It is not a loan word, but: “entered the Finnish language when the proto-Finns were hunters and gatherers who had not yet migrated to the Finnish peninsula.” To this documentation demonstrating the alleged age of Finnish sauna can be added verses from the Finnish epic Kalevala. Kalevala frequently refers to the sauna as a unique and sacred healing space. However, this epic is based on oral tradition and cannot substantiate our conclusions of age. Most likely the songs have transformed themselves through time in order to adapt Finns to changing life conditions. Therefore, Kalevala includes for instance a verse that describes the birth of Virgin Mary in a sauna. Kalevala was collected and written down by the Finnish-Swedish Fennophile Elias Lönnrot in the mid-nineteenth century. His task was political: as a fennophile he participated in the ‘discovery’ and invention of a Finnish culture and history, that were designed to legitimize the Finnish independence movement.

8Ibid., p 20.
10Fennophiles consisted of Finnish and mostly Finnish-Swedish intellectuals, who propagated for Finnish independence from Russia.
11Until 1809 Finland had been a province of Sweden. Between the years 1809 and 1917, Finland was a Grand Duchy of Russia. In 1917, when Lenin started the bolshevik revolution, Finland sought and gained national independence from Russia.
The nationalist movement headed by Lönnrot and architects like Geselius, Lindgren, Sparre and Saarinen\textsuperscript{12} instituted the sauna as a key symbol of Finnishness, a symbol still active today.\textsuperscript{13} No doubt Finns have been bathing in saunas for centuries, perhaps for thousands of years, but Kalevala cannot be trusted to prove the origin of the sauna, nor to give an accurate description of it. Rather, Kalevala describes the sauna the way it was at the time Lönnrot wrote it.

Ironically, corroborating evidence of an earlier Finnish sauna culture relies on descriptions by strangers from other cultures that looked at Finns with a colonialist Western mind rather than with fennophilic enthusiasm.

SMOKE SAUNA, THE ‘ORIGINAL’ SAUNA
(fig 7: a Smoke Sauna)

Based on documents and drawings from as early as the seventeenth century, we can with certainty establish what most seventeenth and eighteenth century smoke saunas looked like. From the accounts of foreign travellers we also know partly what the bathing practices were. In 1910, the Finnish architect Veikko Kyander,\textsuperscript{12} Geselius and Sparre, two Finnish-Swedish architects at the turn of the last century made field investigations into various parts of Finland, mapping out vernacular architecture and sauna architecture. Their objective was to establish a distinct Finnish architecture, that would stem from the people of the yet to be born nation. For more information see Ritva Wäre: \textit{Rakennettu suomalaisuus, nationalismi viime vuosisadan vaihteen arkkitehtuurissa ja sitä koskevissa kirjoituksissa}, (title in english: \textit{Built Finnishness, Nationalism in the Architecture and Writings on Architecture at the Turn of the Century}), Suomen muinaismuistoyhdistys, Vammalan kirjapaino, 1991.

\textsuperscript{13}Today, there are more saunas in Finland than ever: 1.6 million for 5 million Finns. The figure is from Aaland, Mikkel S\textit{weat}, UURL address: http://www.cyberbohemia.com/Pages/historyofnordic.htm.
measured and produced drawings of a sauna dating back to 1699\textsuperscript{14} (fig. 8, drawings of a smoke sauna from 1699).

The seventeenth and eighteenth century sauna was a separate building usually on the periphery of the farm. Mostly, it would be heated once a week on Saturdays. These saunas were called "smoke saunas" and were heated with a stove that was constructed by piling stones on top of each other. This required skill; even the arch above the fireplace was constructed without any mortar. These ovens had no chimneys and therefore a thick smoke would fill the sauna above the level of the top of the stove. These stoves were very large, and would need two to five hours of heating before they would be hot throughout. When the oven was hot enough, the fire was put out. Two hours later, the sauna was ready to use. First however, an initial häkälöyly\textsuperscript{15} was thrown: one or two ladles of water was thrown on the hot rocks so that the smoke was driven out of the sauna through ventilation openings, thus making the air breathable. The temperature in these smoke saunas was not as high as in modern saunas, only about 50 - 60 degrees Celsius, compared to 80 or even 120 degrees Celsius in the hottest saunas today.\textsuperscript{16} The smoke sauna was usually built straight onto the earth, a factor that contributed to the especially delicious aroma of the sauna. The earth also breathes and keeps the hot air moist and pleasant, while the modern, well insulated and electrically heated saunas tend to be suffocatingly dry. This is why many refer to the smoke sauna as the only real sauna, and prefer a smoke sauna to anything else. However, many anthropologists believe that the predecessor to the smoke sauna was the "pit sauna", which was basically the same sauna as the smoke sauna, only half dug.

\textsuperscript{14}Most of my knowledge of the smoke saunas is acquired from Vuolle-Apiala, Risto: Smoke Sauna, RAK Sarmala Publishers, Helsinki 1993. The bathing practices of smoke saunas are, if not otherwise footnoted, from Lisa-Marlene Edelsward: Sauna As Symbol, Society and Culture in Finland, Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 1991.

\textsuperscript{15}Häkä means carbon monoxide, löyly is the specific steam, that is obtained only in saunas by throwing water on the hot rocks.

\textsuperscript{16}60 degrees Celsius equals 140 F, while 120 degrees Celsius is approximately 250 F.
into the earth (fig 9: a Pit Sauna).

The smoke that permeated the sauna gave a specific aroma to it. It also had two other functions: the soot attached itself to the timber walls and impregnated the wood; and it killed bacteria and other microbes. The smoke sauna was actually the most hygienic space of those times. This is also why it was used for child delivery. Also, the dead were brought in there to have their final wash before burial.

Although most Finns are nowadays born in hospitals, sauna as the site of these two ends of a life cycle is a very strong symbol even in today’s Finland (see figs 10 - 12: smoke sauna interiors, figs 13 and 14: smoke saunas, figs 15 and 16: bathers, figs 17 - 19: drawings and details).

Although the bathing procedure was probably not exactly the same in smoke saunas two hundreds years ago as it is now in electrically heated saunas, a short description of the procedure the way it has become established now may give the reader an idea of what happened and happens in a sauna: “You start the sauna bathing by climbing up to the top platform. You will sit or lie there until you break a sweat.” According to contemporary practice you should shower before you enter the sauna. This would not have been convenient in earlier times, and would have meant wasting a lot of water. Furthermore, if you wet yourself you will not sweat until you are again dry. From a health perspective sweating is crucial to bodily purification, because as you sweat, your skin opens its pores and secretes impurities of the body. The procedure continues: "After the sweating session, you may rinse your body with water and cool off outside. The second session in the sauna entails returning to the heat, where you will now have the steam bath. You throw water on the hot rocks in order to create steam” that will further open the pores in your skin and relax your muscles. Vihta is an important healing medium in the sauna. It is a whisk made of birch twigs, and is used to hit, pad and whisk the skin all over your body. The movements of the whisk massage your muscles and increase your skin’s blood circulation. The beneficial substances of the birch
leaves get into your skin through the open pores and increase the secretion of impurities from your body. After the second session, that lasts from ten to twenty minutes: “you rinse your body with cold water and step out of the sauna to cool off. You may take a dip in a lake or sea if available, or you may roll in the snow if it is winter.” The extreme cold after the hot sauna feels very pleasurable as long as you get over the temperature threshold. “After cooling off you may return to the sauna for more whisk and steam bathing. After the sauna and washing yourself, you should let your body temperature cool down for half an hour before dressing.”

If you dress too soon, your steaming body will make your clothes damp so that you will catch cold.

The established procedure today is partly a result of marketing measures taken by sauna manufacturers and distributors, that in the 1970’s had to make the sauna comprehensible and desirable to Europeans and Americans, who were estranged from sauna culture. In this marketing endeavor, sauna had to be cleansed of all connotations of promiscuity and sinful nudity. Furthermore, it had to be presented as a luxury commodity with exotic and erotic undercurrents. However distasteful a commodification of the sauna this process may have been, the images of this “civilized” sauna was re-projected onto Finns, and some of these cultural modifications have established themselves as “truly Finnish customs”. Among these re-projections I include the demand of silence in the sauna, the prohibition of alcohol, and the sexual taboos. Especially in the case of the sexual taboos I believe that they indeed existed also earlier as an unwritten agreement, but I do not think the practice was as strict as the sauna marketers of the 1970’s wish to portray it. Obviously, puritan minds in Europe and America had to be tranquilized.

17 This description of the sauna procedure is a compilation of the numerous sauna brochures available from sauna distributors and Finnish Sauna Society.

18 You should behave in the sauna as in the church”, this quote is in every brochure I received from American sauna distributors. During my 30 year life in Finland I have never encountered this demand.

19 Also the uncommercial Finnish Sauna Society was founded after World War II to promote Finnish sauna culture and spread the good word of sauna. Under their
MORALITY AND NUDITY

PART 1. SOCIAL PRACTICE AND ITS ETHOS

The seventeenth and eighteenth century smoke saunas were fairly large, housing all the people of the farm at the same time. This means that the farm owners and their kin living and/or working on the farm as well as any hired help would bathe in the sauna at the same time. Both sexes would bathe together, and everyone would assist in the bathing - scrubbing, massaging and whisking each other. If there were any visitors on the farm they would be invited to have a sauna bath. However, only if the visitor was considered no longer a stranger, he or she would join the hosts. Du Chaillu describes the passage from bathing alone to bathing together with his hosts as follows:

_The stranger, the passing inhabitant of the cities, does not bathe with the people, for they are shy: he may have his bath, but all alone. It was only when they had come to regard me as one of themselves that I was allowed to accompany them; then the neighbors, old and young, would often come to bathe and keep company with Paulus. I remember well my first bath en famille. One Saturday after noon a couple of young fellows, friends of mine, as the girls were giving the last touches in cleaning the badstuga shouted, 'Palulu, take a bath with us to-day!' 'Yes, do,' exclaimed the rest of the company, among whom were the father and mother of the large family. The weather was piercing cold, the ground covered with snow, and I was glad that the bathing place was within a stone’s-throw of the dwelling. From my window I noticed several maidens wending their way with rapid steps towards it, in a costume that reminded me of Africa, minus the color. I did not wonder at their speed, for the thermometer stood below zero. Soon three rather elderly women took the_
same route from a neighboring farm... other young women followed, and all were quickly lost to sight behind the door, which they shut at once. ‘They must be about to hold a sort of levee in the bath,’ thought I. Several aged men then made their appearance, followed in quick succession by younger ones, and children of all sizes; none had on any clothing whatever, and they also joined the throng inside. When I saw the field clear, I thought it was time to make a rush for the building. I emerged from my room at a running pace, for I was dressed as scantily as those who had preceded me. I hastily pushed the door open, and was welcomed by the voices of all the company as I closed it behind me. The heat was so intense that I could hardly breathe, and I begged them not to raise any more steam for a while; the sudden transition for 20 degrees below zero to such an atmosphere overpowered me. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness of the place, by the dim light which came through the cracks of the door I began to recognize the faces of my friends. There were more people than usual, for all the neighbors had come to have a bath with Paulus.  

See also figures 9, 10 and 11: drawings of smoke saunas, cupping and healing in saunas.

MORALITY AND NUDITY
PART 2. PRIVATE AND PUBLIC

One conclusion from Vuolle-Apiala’s and Edelsward’s descriptions of the smoke sauna is that the seventeenth and eighteenth century smoke sauna cannot be defined in terms of public and private, because the agrarian culture of Finns did not follow these lines of Western thinking. Social divisions of space seem to have been done with a larger community in mind, a community based on collaboration and cooperation.  

20 20 degrees Celsius equals approximately -5 F.

trust among villagers and neighbors. Sauna and thereby nudity could be shared not only amongst the nuclear family as defined by modern Christian religion, but among those who were accepted into the larger community.

Also other travellers than Du Chaillu would report on the peculiar bathing habits of the natives in Finland. Attention was often given to the unself-conscious nudity of Finns in and out of the sauna:

They will sometimes come out, still naked, and converse together, or with any one near them, in open air. If travellers happen to pass by while the peasants of any hamlet, or little village, are in the bath and their assistance is needed, they will leave the bath, and assist in yoking or unyoking, and fetching provender for the horses, or in anything else, without any sort of covering whatever, and while the passenger sits shivering with cold, though wrapped up in a good sound wolf’s skin.22

However, the Swedish ruling class’ moral conceptions started to have an impact on the Finnish sauna practices and thus, during the hundred years between mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth century a transformation occurred. Edelsward notes that by 1882, the state of transition had led to sometimes even ludicrous inconsistencies. She refers to Du Chaillu’s illustrating account:

In some places the men and women [who have been bathing together] as if by agreement, do not return together, and the old women wear something around their loins as they go or come from the bath... There was a crowd of visitors [in the family room], neighbors of different ages, and among them three old fellows, - a grandfather, father and an uncle - who were sitting upon one of the benches with legs crossed, minus a particle of clothing, shaving themselves without a looking-glass. Nobody seemed to mind them...23

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23 bid., du Chaillu, p 94.
The moral resentment of Westerners was a cultural imposition on the Finnish peasants’ everyday life. Public bathing facilities and even saunas had been widely spread over Europe in the Middle Ages, but had since declined in numbers because of their increasing association with promiscuity, prostitution and venereal diseases.\(^{24}\) In defense of the Finnish sauna culture Olaus Magnus reacted on the moral judgement of Europe already in 1555:

\[\text{It is not as Poggio claims in a letter to Leonardo Aretino: that naked people of both sexes meet with inappropriate notions. He probably means the people in Northern Germany, especially near the Baden area, who are rather loose with their morals. Among these people there are some who are so loose and degenerate in the hot baths that they even drink and sleep and allow themselves all kinds of evil and other foolishness in the baths. If such immodest creatures were found with their customs in Nordic bathing places, they would immediately be carried out and into the deep winter snow drifts with the risk of being smothered. In the summer they would be thrown in ice cold water and left some time without food.}\(^{25}\)

The debate between nudity related to Finnish sauna practice and puritan morals of Christianity is thus at least some 450 years old. Concerning sauna practice in America, Aaland recounts the following incident: “The first sauna in North America was built by Finnish and Swedish immigrants who settled in the Delaware River Valley before 1638...The earlier establishment of sauna on the homestead lent a sense of familiarity, order and security to immigrants who found themselves in an alien land.”\(^{26}\) Americans of other cultures reacted strongly to the “strange nocturnal rites” and according to Aaland some farmers in Minnesota complained to

\(^{24}\)An interesting parallel to these circumstances is in New York City of the United States. Until the 1980’s in the lower east side there were numerous Russian and Turkish baths. In fear of HIV epidemics, most of these were forced to close down by the city, because they were conceived as centers for homosexual rendez-vous.

\(^{25}\)Olaus Magnus in 1555, quoted in Aaland, Mikkel: Sweat, URRL address: http://www.cyberbohemia.com/Pages/historyofnordic.htm.

\(^{26}\)Aaland, Mikkel, Sweat, URRL address: http://www.cyberbohemia.com/Pages/historyofnordic.htm.
authorities that Finns were worshipping pagan gods in strange log temples, and from time to time performed ritualistic dances naked in the moonlight. In 1880 in Wright County, Minnesota, a sauna went on trial. However, the charges of pagan worshiping were dropped when, as Aaland tells us: “it was proved that Finns were law abiding, American citizens of a staid Lutheran calibre” and it was explained that “the sauna was a place for cleaning and not for worshipping pagan gods.”

Obviously, this is another case where Finns adjusted the meaning of sauna bathing so that it could be retained as a custom in a culture that did not understand it.

In defending Finnish sauna practice, I believe it has been necessary to establish and stress the 'sacred taboos' of Finnish sauna. Edelsward notes about her respondents in the 1980’s and 1990’s: “The taboos against comparing bodies, making lewd remarks or any overtly sexual behavior is strictly followed.” Some remarks by the respondents include:

- Sex in the sauna is dangerous for the heart.
- It is too hot for sex anyway!
- The Finnish sauna doesn’t have anything to do with sex, like it has in some other countries where sauna is considered to be a doubtful place.
- There are no taboos against it, but the sauna is in no way an inherent part of sexual games or intercourse.

The turn of the century Finnish-Swedish painter Akseli Gallen Kallela, renowned for his illustration of the Kalevala, tells in his autobiography:

27 Ibid.
28 Lisa-Marlene Edelsward: Sauna As Symbol, Society and Culture in Finland, Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 1991. Edelsward conducted a research among Finns in the form of a questionnaire about notions, ideas and habits of sauna bathing. A total of 218 Finns responded.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
It was still a common custom also in Satakunta in those days for the male and female hands of even so-called gentlemen's farms to bathe together. When I was a brat I once took part in such a sauna and my eye chanced to fall on a fat, naked, red-headed servant girl who in all her splendor was descending the sauna platform. In my innocent indiscretion, I made an impertinent and indecent remark. Bailiff Tuomas who was in the bath rose from his bench and said sternly: You... I’ll show you!... I sneaked away from the sauna ashamed, I felt that I had done something that offended the purity of the sauna, and from that moment on I was awakened to respect the holiness of the sauna and nudity.

Although there have always been those who break taboos, it seems that the sauna for Finns, at least today, sustains its significance as a space where: “Nudity is normal, non-suggestive and non-erotic.” This attitude toward nakedness and the fact that every Finn grows up having access to this special space that does not categorize bodies according to sexual division, must have an impact on the society in general. As one of the respondents of Edelsward’s questionnaire puts it: “I think that nakedness would be more unnatural if there were no saunas.”

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32 Sleepy Sleepers, a Finnish rock band sang in the 1970’s: “Who is fucking who in the sauna?” Also, poems from earlier centuries tell about erotic inetration in the sauna.

SAUNA AS LIMINAL SPACE

The easiness with which Finns go naked into the sauna is based on an unwritten agreement that those who enter the sauna enter a liminal space where everyone has given up all the tokens of social hierarchy and position. There is no visual connection between the outside and the inside of the sauna, because those inside the sauna share this social agreement based on openness and vulnerability, while those outside are still attached to a social everydayness. The bathers go through the sauna ritual together, and transform from stressed out persons to glowing, relaxed and comfortable bodies. Ideally, they engage in a non-verbal communication through sharing: a pleasurable physical and mental condition, and mutual actions. In discussion with my thesis advisor Krzysztof Wodiczko, I came to a realization that Finnish culture does not emphasize verbal communication, it is instead based on communication through function.

The sauna ritual proceeds in a series of shared functions: throwing the water on the rocks; whisking or scrubbing each others backs; taking ice cold dips in the lake; rolling in snow or pouring water on each other. Also, after the sauna the communion usually continues with a shared meal.

Edelsward discusses sauna as ritual and liminal space. She contends that the liminal quality of the sauna is of seminal meaning for Finns. Liminality in general refers to a threshold, an interstitial period between two states.\(^3\)\(^4\) The ritual participant, eg., the bather, is symbolically separated from the ordinary. Turner\(^3\)\(^5\) specifies characteristics marking the liminal period from the normal social sphere,


such as: nudity, behavioral changes, reflection, sacredness and taboos, cleansing, egalitarianism, and a sense of rebirth. Edelsward makes a comparison between Turner’s definition of liminality with the Finnish sauna and notes: “Spatially, temporally and socially, the sauna is set apart. Traditionally, the sauna building has always been built at the edge of the farm compound, like a threshold between the home and the world of fields and forest.”\textsuperscript{36} The sauna bath is also the threshold between work and leisure, the week and the weekend, the profane and the holy”. Edelsward’s respondents express it very aptly:\textsuperscript{37} “The sauna is a different kind of environment, another world”, “[The sauna] takes your mind out of the ordinary and everyday things”, and “[Going to the sauna] is sometimes like travelling out of your troubles.”

My project \textit{Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna}, entailed people bathing on MIT Campus. Some of the comments from people having had their sauna bath were very similar: “There is no concept of time in here”\textsuperscript{38}, or “Sorry, I am not in this world right now.”\textsuperscript{39}

Edelsward describes the sauna ritual in all its complicatedness lucidly: “The symbolic separation of the sauna is conceptualized at once as something practical, as something emotional and as something spiritual, as a separation which encompasses all levels of experience. On the practical level, the sauna is

\textsuperscript{36}Here, Edelsward pursues her own argument pro liminality. However, as Vuolle-Apiala points out in \textit{Smoke Sauna}, RAK Sarmala Publishers, Helsinki 1993, there were also practical reasons for the location of the sauna on the periphery of the farm: smoke saunas were very prone to burn down. To stop the fire from spreading to other buildings of the farm, the sauna was built separate. This practicality notwithstanding, Edelsward’s argument is valuable. It is also very possible that the practical reasons initially took the sauna to the periphery and then the location contributed to the development of the sauna into a liminal space.

\textsuperscript{37}The three following quotes are in Lisa-Marlene Edelsward: \textit{Sauna As Symbol, Society and Culture in Finland}, Peter Lang Publishing Inc, 1991.

\textsuperscript{38}From personal notes.

\textsuperscript{39}Ibid.
something for which one must prepare and then physically enter thus creating a separation with the ordinary life left outside. The separation is also something emotional, since one experiences different feelings in the sauna such as relaxation, invigoration and the joy of life which are often overshadowed by the pressures of the ordinary life outside. The sacredness of the sauna is connected to the liminality of the space. Turner describes it as a stage of transformation and states: “We are not dealing with structural contradictions when we discuss liminality, but with the essentially unstructured.” In this unstructured condition, an ordinary behavior is no longer appropriate. There is either complete absence of rules or special rules ‘designed’ for this condition only. According to Edelsward, in the case of the Finnish sauna, there is a set of special rules. The primary rule is peacefulness and the second rule is nudity without sexuality. Edelsward emphasizes: "Nudity in the sauna is a very important part of the behavior of the ritual...Removing one’s clothes means removing oneself from the ordinary world, it means becoming a part of the separateness of the sauna." Further, Edelsward notes: "In the sauna, the bathers lose their sexuality: there is a strong taboo against sexual behavior or references." By Edelsward’s description of the sauna as a transformative ritual it becomes clear that for the transformative power to have an effect it is necessary to follow these rules of nudity and asexuality. However, just as important as it is to lose your categorized sexuality in the sauna, it is crucial to take pleasure in the corporeal sensuality of the sauna bath. In my own experience, sauna is erotic and sensual, but in its liminality does not adhere to the sexual categories that we have learned to account for in a heterosexual society, nor does the practices of sauna translate into any sexual categories.

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41 Ibid., p 90

42 Ibid. p 92.

43 Ibid. p 95.
I find it difficult to explain why saunas survived in Finland, while they died out in the rest of Europe and Nordic countries. I do not think it is satisfactory to explain, that because Finns perceived their saunas as sacred, they were not associated with promiscuity and venereal diseases, and thus needed not to be closed down. Why indeed did the Finns perceive their saunas as sacred? And how much of the sacredness is a construct in order to defend the saunas when attacked by moralists? These unanswered questions notwithstanding, today the sauna ritual and liminal function are very active in Finnish sauna practice and have a veritable significance for Finnish society.

FACILITATING LIMINAL SPACE IN HYBRID NEW ENGLAND/FINNISH SAUNA

In Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna, the rules were somewhat different from those in a Finnish sauna by Edelsward’s definition. I did not demand that the bathers behave like in a church. I had accommodated the New England puritan morals into the sauna and divided the sauna into two compartments with a crimson curtain. These compartments housed one bather at one time. Each bather was expected to be naked inside his/her own compartment. By puritan denial of corporeality and ban on nudity, a person integrated in puritan morality is never allowed to reconnect mind with body. Therefore, also communication happens only through a distancing, symbolic and verbal language. However, any interaction between the two visually isolated bathers had to happen through an altered form of communication. It happened through functions that were focused on sharing the steam from a shared heater, and sharing the fresh air from a shared air vent. No one was allowed to enter the isolated compartment during the time some one was bathing in it. The openness and vulnerability of the bathers sharing a ritual in nudity was replaced with strict privacy. This was both a requirement by Campus
Police as well as an intentional design detail from my part. I wanted to emphasize the cultural impossibility of replicating the ritual as it exists in Finnish culture. However, with the curtain I facilitated another, modified, ritual. Because of the culturally determined notions of nudity in New England, people integrated to New England culture are not able to share the condition of honesty and vulnerability that are requisites of an ideal Finnish sauna. In New England, nudity in front of another person will refer irrefutably to improper sexuality, indecent exposure and promiscuous behavior. Even when willing, this person will not feel comfortable enough to even start sharing the sauna experience in the ideal Finnish way. Only people, who have been bathing according to similar practice as the Finnish sauna, have grown to share and trust that convivial space of the bath or sauna, and can immediately feel comfortable when socially and physically dismantled in the presence of other people in such a liminal space. In installing the curtain in Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna, the issue of nudity is alleviated so that the New England bather can feel comfortable enough to attempt to share the sauna experience with the other naked person on the other side.

Also, many more modifications of the ritual had to follow from the installment of the curtain. The bathing practice in Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna included me as the attendant, wearing a white uniform, that generally refers to nurses and washing ladies. I had the phonetic sign of the word ‘sauna’ embroidered on the uniform. The uniform and label gave the bathers an impression of professionality and authority, that helped the bathers to prepare themselves mentally for the ritual. They gave a sense of sincerity and security. The bather might not feel sure about the procedure and feel anxiety in the face of a new experience of heat and nudity. The message of the uniform stated clearly that the bather was in the care of a professional initiator of the rite of passage. Prior to the bathing, I gave each bather a ‘walk-through’ of the sauna, during which I explained how the sauna works. I explained the use of the water for steam, how to open the air-vent, and how to make breathing easier in the heat by cupping your hands in front of your nose and
mouth. I warned not to slip when coming down the stairs sweaty. I explained the
importance of sweating. In the beginning of the rite, I gave each bather his/her own
towel and a bucket of water with birch leaf extract in it. I explained the healthy
effects of the birch leaf extract. I also recommended cooling off by sitting outside in
the fresh air, and by having me or someone else pour cold water on their bodies.
The rest of the ‘rules’ that I recited to each bather as they entered the sauna were
also based on practicalities:

You may leave your valuables in the care of the attendant.
Receive your water, ladle and bucket from the attendant.
Enter the Sauna.
Undress and leave your clothes in the dressing room.
With your bucket of water and ladle climb up the stairs into the sauna.
Make sure your door flap closes tightly.
Sit or lie down on the platform and relax in the heat until you sweat.
At any time, you may open the air vent in the ceiling.
After 10 - 15 minutes, you may cool off by going out or by rinsing your
body with cold water.
After your break, return to the sauna for the steam bath.
Use the ladle to throw water on the rocks from the platform.
Relax in the steam.
Rinse off.
Cool off outside and have a cold drink.
Repeat the steam bath as many times as you like.44

A crucial part of this artwork was the interaction that was performed between the
attendant and each bather, as well as between each two bathers who shared the
sauna. Another important aspect was each bather’s personal experience of the
sauna, that was a conjunction of three corporeal conditions: the volatile proximity
of your own naked body to another naked body; the proximity of your naked body
to the teeming public life outside the sauna; and the transformation of your
physical condition from tense to relaxed.

44From my poster attached to the reception counter of my Hybrid New
England/Finnish Sauna.
The mental transformation that accompanied the corporeal involved the interaction between the bathers inside the sauna. This interaction happened in spite of, through, across and with the help of the dividing curtain. The basic elements that affected the corporeal in the sauna were heat, air and water. The steam is a combination of water and heat. I designed the *Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna* so, that these elements were necessarily shared by the bathers. In a ceremonial way, each bather received their own bucket of water from me, prior to entering the sauna. Inside the hot room, they threw the ceremonial water on the rocks in order to steam themselves up. However, the steam would enter in both compartments on the two sides of the curtain. The bathers had to negotiate the amount of steam they were willing to share. Once, a pair of bathers, strangers to each other, invented a way to move the curtain above the heater so that it would direct the steam more to one side and less to the other. A pair that both wanted a lot of hot steam realized that the curtain was reducing the effect of the steam, because the curtain captured some of the steam inside its folds. They pulled the curtain aside. Also, in the case of air ventilation the bathers had to negotiate: if one bather needed fresh air and opened the air vent, the bather on the other side might have felt he/she was getting cold.

I agree with Edelsward's insights about the sauna: the physical, emotional and the spiritual conjure in the practice of the bathing. There are no intellectual short cuts to understanding this sauna performance/ritual designed for MIT Campus. It has to be *bathed*. This is why there was no reason for me as the attendant to explain to the bathers the emotional nor the spiritual functions of the ritual, because everyone that bathed would find these effects through the act itself. Every bather undoubtedly brought in their own cultural background into the sauna ritual, so that the understanding of the physical transformation may have varied. However, with every bather, there were clearly an invariable notion of relaxation and release of stress, that was expressed in happy faces. Many a stranger found him/herself making new friends across the curtain, without seeing the other until the end of the
ritual. The liminal space allowed people to create new social norms for themselves during the ritual, and to find new ways to connect with strangers. Also, perhaps, at least for a fleeting moment, the bathers did not categorize their body according to sexual divisions nor notions of perfect bodies versus fat, sloppy or otherwise “imperfect” bodies. As one male bather told me: “You know, I am always very conscious of my body, and I don’t like to expose it, but this time, I certainly forgot it for a while, at least for a while.”

What is then in the other end of this liminal space and transformation? This question requires a lengthier discussion. According to Edelsward, in the case of Finnish sauna, in this liminal space Finns reconnect with nature. The sauna is on the periphery of the farm, it stands between social connection and wild nature, the orderly and chaos. Also traditionally, Finnish women delivered their babies in the sauna, and the dead were taken there for their last purification before burial. Beyond the sauna were the extremes of birth and death. In front of it was everyday life. Edelsward claims with good reason, that wild nature for Finns represents the true state of being. It also represents the possibility to live outside society and according to an individualist Finnish ideal of freedom. Thus, through sauna bathing Finns may be free and ‘one with nature’ - finally be the person he/she ‘really’ is. Eventually, this ritual helps the ‘nature Finns’ to reconnect socially as well. At the end of the ritual Finns can reach a mutual understanding of each other ‘the way we truly are’. Finns’ relationship to nature is a cultural construction and a myth. The idea that the sauna reconnects Finns with nature is an invented tradition as Hobsbawm has explained it: “Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable past.”

45From personal notes.

46Hobsbawm, Eric & Ranger, Terence, eds: The Invention of Tradition, Canto,
Edelsward compares the sauna with the idea of invented tradition and notes: “The sauna apparently has a long history as a nearly universal Finnish custom, but only in modern times has it also become an invented tradition.” During industrialization, increasing amounts of Finns moved from the rural areas to cities. For many Finns, the rural life-style remained the only ‘true’ one. This notion was supported by nationalists, who sought to define Finnishness ‘in its essence’, and propagated for a romantic view of Finns as the ‘people of the deep forests’. The sauna was appropriated by nationalists and turned by them into an invented tradition. The rural sauna tradition was very suitable for this propaganda, because it connected with a rural past and there, located an ideal Finnishness. Even the urban worker going to sauna every Saturday could hereby identify with the true nature Finn he/she really is. Regarding the urban worker, I do not think this was the only thing he/she connected with. I will return to this topic later.

Edelsward continues her argument by showing that in Finnish culture the sauna is a key symbol. She paraphrases Ortner, who describes one type of key symbol as: “vehicles for sorting out complex and undifferentiated feelings and ideas, making them comprehensible to oneself, communicable to others, and translatable to action.” In Finnish cultural context this means that sauna as symbol and ritual helps Finns to create a meaningful set of relations between many areas of life, including an individual’s relationship to nature, to him/herself, and to others; it is a concatenation of meanings expressing the ideal reality of the Finnish world view.

In the unstable conditions of our modern world, invented traditions build a link.


between the ideal and the actual. Invented traditions are frequent in the context of national ideals, and the case of sauna is no different: saunas were not defined as distinctly Finnish until the nationalist movement made it a ‘historical fact’. However, we know that sauna practice was a continuous custom throughout centuries in Finland. Hobsbawm states: “[T]he very appearance of movements for the defence or revival of traditions [indicate a break between present and past].” He continues: “Such movements...can never develop or even preserve a living past (except conceivably by setting up human natural sanctuaries for isolated corners of archaic life), but must become ‘invented tradition’. On the other hand, the strength and adaptability of genuine traditions is not to be confused with the ‘invention of tradition’. Where the old ways are alive, tradition need be neither revived nor invented.” Thus, Finnish sauna practice is both a living tradition and an invented one. Finns reconnecting with nature in the sauna is both a genuine experience as well as a constructed ritual.

It is worthwhile to note, that Edelsward has looked at only the private saunas in Finland and the customs around them. Her respondents were predominantly students from a small town, Lappeenranta, in the Eastern part of Finland. Only a small part of the respondents were from Helsinki, and judging from her method of distributing the questionnaire, a major part of these respondents were also students. This research thus excludes important information about other kinds of sauna traditions, specifically those that developed during the period of industrial urbanization among working class Finns.

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51 Ibid. p 8.
KOTIHARJUN SAUNA
PUBLIC SAUNAS AND THE WORKING CLASS

There are many versions to the sauna, that have developed through time in dialectical response to changing conditions of the environment. One interesting modification of the sauna occurred in Finland at the turn of the century, when major cities became crowded with laborers from the rural areas, that migrated to work in the factories.\textsuperscript{52} In Helsinki, these workers lived in the East side of the city, in cheaply built and poorly furbished apartment houses. These apartments were small, with only one or two rooms and no washing facilities. Large families lived cramped up in these small quarters.

Earlier in the nineteenth century, the residence buildings in the cities consisted of smaller wooden houses with a sauna in the courtyard. The new apartment houses were high stone constructions and could not facilitate a sauna inside their walls. However, when water piping and sewage systems were built for Helsinki in 1875 - 1878, it became possible to construct new type of 'city saunas'. There was a demand for saunas among the workers who were accustomed to sauna bathing. Saunas were also necessary for health reasons and for the maintaining of a general hygiene. According to the \textit{Kotiharju Sauna 1928 - 1998} catalog, by the end of the Second World War there were 120 'city saunas' in the East side of Helsinki, in Kallio and Sörnäinen districts. This means that almost every street corner had a sauna. The public saunas became part of a culture specific to these districts. Also, they instituted new sauna customs, appropriate for the particularity of these saunas. Thus, the public urban saunas developed into another kind of living sauna tradition. This tradition involves very different elements than the ideal, invented

\textsuperscript{52}In Helsinki between the years 1870 and 1910, the population increased four times, from 32 000 to 128 000. All the information on the demographic development of Helsinki mentioned in this Thesis is from: \textit{Kotiharjua Sauna 1928 - 1998}, ed. Satu Siponen and Kotiharjuna Saunayhdistyksen toimituskunta: Ahleskog, Ari, Kupiainen, Antero, Pärnänen, Jussi, 1998.
tradition of ‘Finnish sauna’. However, strong connections to earlier customs remained: still today, the washing lady performs cupping and acupuncture in the public saunas, as was also customary in the old smoke saunas (see fig 15).

Veikko Porkkala tells about the atmosphere and the customs in the Kotiharju Sauna in the 1930’s.\(^53\)

_The life in the locker room has changed a lot. Especially during the prohibition law in the 30’s\(^5\)\(^4\), the men would talk about ‘booze, smugglers and pushers’. It was very popular to talk about politics, especially the movements of the right\(^6\)\(^5\) as well as the problems of the labor unions._

Porkkala also mentions that even during the prohibition law men would get drunk during the sauna evening. Despite harsh political debates, the atmosphere was warm and welcoming. Most time was spent in the locker room, discussing. Common problems of the lean years in Finland troubled everyone. Also many friendships were initiated in the saunas that carried on in the outside.

In the 1950’s East Helsinki was notorious for its violent criminality. Jorma Saarikivi tells about his childhood living next to Kotiharju Sauna. He visited the sauna with his family, sometimes bathing in the family sauna\(^5\)\(^6\) together with his whole family, sometimes he would bathe in the womens’ side with his mother. When too old for the ‘girls’ side’, at the age of 12, he started going to the mens’ side with his friends:


\(^{54}\)During the 1930’s it was forbidden to sell or consume any alcoholic beverages in Finland.

\(^{55}\)Porkkala refers to _Lapuan liike_, a right-wing movement with fascist implications.

\(^{56}\)Kotiharju Sauna is divided into three parts: one private side for groups, one public side for women, and another for men.
I had to, because my Dad forced me, although I didn’t want to... Dad would look after us, because there were a lot of kids around then. Big guys would sit tightly on the top platform, where it was the hottest. The sense of community was so strong that everyone took care of each other. In the sauna you also learned to get along with all kinds of people.

However, the macho sauna world of the male side had its own rules and customs:

On the top platform would sit real burly men. It was fun to see who would steam Parkkinen off the top. Parkkinen was a reddish old man, he had two whisks, and from the top he would just keep throwing steam. Then this chimney sweeper would come — and he is just as bad! It was a spectacle to watch which one of them would give in first and get off the platform. Every Saturday they would hassle each other. One of them shouts: ‘Don’t throw!, the other one: ‘Throw! Get the hell off the platform!’ Some one would pass out in the corner... Some guys would be so drunk that when they got the hell out of there, they had to be led home by the hand. We knew them well enough to know where their homes were.

Saarikivi also tells that he would meet his friends in the sauna at a certain hour on Saturday. Eventually he might go to the sauna two or three separate times each Saturday, just to see all his friends, and then go to the ball.

The saunas were spaces through which men acquired social identity in their urban environment. In other words, they would gang up according to the saunas they went to. Saarikivi explains that each block had their own sauna, and if someone from another block would come into their sauna everyone would be suspicious:

What the heck is he doing here?’ Everyone would try and steam the guy off the top, so that he’d learn that he’d come to the wrong sauna. Sometimes the guy would have so thick a skin that you yourself had to get off before he did.

57 Hot steam packs to the top part of a sauna, and the air on the top platform gets very hot. Those who cannot endure the heat choose to sit on a lower and cooler bench.
The macho culture focusing on the capability of 'taking the steam' was pervasive in the male side of the saunas. As Pertti Jokinen notes:

...in the sauna, the bosses and the workers would finally be equal. The one whose skin could take the most heat would win.

Political tension in Finland ever since the Civil War were potentially explosive, especially before the 1990's. Deep anger and frustration was buried inside most of the members of the working class, women and men alike. Children would grow up inheriting the anger and frustration, never resolving these emotions. The public discourse in Kotiharju Sauna and other public saunas in East Helsinki seemed to have striven for this resolve. Equality for these men meant an opportunity to take revenge on the white collar business man with his fair and soft skin. The business man would get steamed and burned in the sauna, while the worker with his thick hue would be left standing victorious. This weekly imaginary ritual was a symbolic redemption of the despair, social exclusion and shame that haunted many a successor of the red revolution and defeat, including those who ideologically identified with the revolution and those who were connected to its fate by blood relation. This social condition has not waned away until recently, and is waning now partly because of the time passed – those who still can actually remember the Civil War are passing away – but also partly because of new research into the events of that war has brought old atrocities into daylight and a delayed acknowledgement of past injustices has atoned for some of the social wounds.

I think that this 'revenge ritual' has gradually transformed into the 'tolerance ritual', manifested in a Finnish popular contemporary sauna quote: “Sauna is the most democratic space in the world.” Perhaps this is also why Ari Ahleskog can write in Kotiharju Sauna 1928 - 1998, that the 'cityhood' surrounding and lived out in these saunas signifies above all tolerance. Through this new democratic ideal of public urban saunas deep, indeed lethal, political grudges were steamed out and the opponent was symbolically revenged, so that outside the sauna politics could be
run more democratically. The sauna has thus developed from a rural structure and space, that could not be defined according to a classical division of private and public, on one hand into the private family sauna, and on the other into a very public and democratic space indeed.

What went on in the meantime in the womens’ side the Kotiharju Sauna 1928 - 1998 does not reveal. To this date, I have not found any research or documentation of womens’ customs of public sauna bathing. I can only resort to my own experiences, having frequently bathed in the two most popular public saunas in Helsinki, Kotiharju Sauna and Yrjönkadun Sauna. Bathing together with women in these saunas is one of the most welcoming and warm social experiences I have had. You may convene with women of all ages and members of classes, share experiences and memories. The topics range from any detail of everyday life, from growing plants to politics. I feel that having shared numerous times the sauna with all these various women, I am able to identify with the whole gender of Finnish women, including all generations and social levels. I can recognize myself in a positive image of womanhood in Finland. I feel part of a sisterhood, which is a group bond that extends itself outside the sauna into the social and political realm. Sauna practices have political potential, they have a crucial significance in creating political forces.

Compared to the descriptions of the mens’ side, womens’ side was not as competitive, although many took pride in their capability of sustaining the steam. The social openness has sometimes astounded me: once I visited Kotiharju Sauna in the company of three Asian women: one from China, one from Korea and one from Paris. When a lady in her 90’s met these three strangers of Asian decent (she confided that she had never seen Asians in ‘the real’) after her initial and very conspicuous awe, with innovative and illuminating gestures she walked these three visitors through the sauna procedure, without any words, except occasional inadvertent utterances of Finnish. I do not think her motivation for giving this
introduction to the sauna was merely Finnish pride. She took profound joy in her moment of communication with people coming from so far away. She was happy to share with these people her life experience compressed into a sauna experience. In my performance as the attendant for Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna, I capture a memory of that incident.

CONFRONTATIONS WITH FOREIGN SAUNAS,
HEALTHWORKS IN CAMBRIDGE MASSACHUSETTS
A PRELUDE TO MY THESIS PROJECT

In Finland everyone grows up bathing naked in saunas together with their families, relatives and friends, often both sexes mixed together. My understanding and experience of bathing in a public sauna, being a very significant part of my cultural identity, including my relation to my body, sexuality and relation to other women, is a very different one than what the cultural practice in New England, U.S.A., offers. In Healthworks at Porter Square, a women only health club, the sauna was separated from the rest of the wet area by a glass wall. It seemed an awkward place to put up a glass wall. Usually, in Finnish saunas the division of gaze is such that those in the sauna are in the same field of vision, while those outside the sauna do not see into the sauna. It is a liminal space closed off to the outside, where normal social rules reigns, but open to the inside, where another set of rules are in power.

This glass wall became even more absurd, when I noticed that women in Healthworks seem to be strangely uncomfortable with their own and other’s bodies. A proximity to naked bodies of same sex seemed even more terrible than the proximity to naked strangers of the opposite sex. I suspect that this is both a symptom and a cause for a profound social isolation between women as a group. Rather than sharing a sisterhood, a sense of having similar interests in terms of emancipation, women look at each other as rivals who judge each other according
to the stock measure - the male gaze.

The exposure by the glass wall hardly helped people to relax in their already uncomfortable relation to their own and other’s nakedness. The wet area was separated from the locker room with a rippled glass wall that obstructed the view both ways. Likewise, the showers were separated from each other with frosted glass. Clearly, the architects have pursued an agenda of obstructing the gaze in order to facilitate these women’s bathing without too much discomfort about same sex nudity that a puritan culture demonizes. Nevertheless, the architects cannot eject the gaze by these obstructions rather, they reiterated it by trying to hide it behind these semitransparent walls.

The situation at Healthworks was like a foucauldian play of surveillance and gaze: the one gazing is indicated but not necessarily in action, and no one wants to evoke it. In this terror balance the women avoided a gaze that was not looking, in fear of it becoming activated. Therefore, the women wore towels wrapped around their bodies, even while sitting in the sauna. They changed their clothes in hiding. Some wore bikinis or swimming suits everywhere they went. Silence and paranoia dominated the space. Worst yet, the architecture did not facilitate sociality, but in interaction with the cultural imperatives further isolated these women from each other.

In the following I will describe my thesis project Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna, in which I have attempted to address these issues of nudity and morality that had arisen before me at Healthworks. In the design of the Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna, I hoped to be able to implicate the gaze in absurdity and to open up the sauna practice for new social and cultural inventions and interventions.
THE PROJECT

In response to my alienation in New England saunas I had to design a sauna that negotiated preconceived notions of corporeality and bathing practices. The Finnish sauna became my point of departure, however, along the way, I had to review it as well as my own identification with it. This re-evaluation encompassed also my identification with Finnishness. Concerning New England, after living there for almost two years, I have acquired some notions and projections of its cultural characteristics. It is similar to the calvinist traditions in the Ostro-Bothnian part of Finland. This culture is familiar to me, because my father grew up in it. It is quite remarkable to notice that this is the only culture in Finland where there is no sauna practice. As a counterpart however, my mother grew up in Karelia, a culture that has a very social and vivid sauna practice.

Thus I named my sauna project Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna, adequately reflecting both the hybridity of the saunas I visited in my present situation, as well as my personal hybridity from my past. Naming an artwork does not mean that the artwork has to restrict itself to the meaning of the name. Although I designed my project with my personal hybridities in mind, I expected that all the various bathers from various cultures were going to bring into the sauna their own projections and cultural understanding, so that each sauna experience would be a further hybrid of the practice I had designed. Each bather invented the sauna tradition, the rules and the conditions, departing from my initial set of rules, that were there to facilitate the variety and multiplicity of projections. If there was anything left of my ideal of the sauna, it was the physical process and transformation through relaxation, that opened the passage to those new cultural and social processes the bathers created in interaction with each other.

My relationship to my cultural past was manifested in many design details of Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna. I borrowed the forms and structures of
Finnish sauna benches the way I remember them. The air vent and stairs were built like they were built in old smoke saunas. *Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna* was built straight onto the earth like smoke saunas used to be built. This is one of the reasons why the aroma of my sauna was as pleasant and humid as it used to be in a smoke sauna, despite the fact that *Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna* was electrically heated. The other reason for the humidity was the fact that I used plastic and not wood for the lining.58

I made sure the architecture of the space was pristine and simple, according to contemporary Finnish architectural ideals. Simple tectonic solutions as well as the white color of the plastic and the untreated wooden surface were all part of a mythical and romantic Finnish architectural aesthetic. The wooden buckets were the only objects I did not manufacture myself.59 I procured them from a Finnish sauna distributor. According to Finnish standards these buckets are kitschy tourist attractions, and I would not use them in a sauna in Finland. However, I needed to demonstrate clearly for the participants of my artwork, that the sauna they were about to take was sincerely connecting to a tradition. To prepare them mentally for the ritual, the buckets were useful symbols. In introducing each bather to the sauna, I ceremonially dropped a few drops of birch leaf extract in one of the buckets and then slowly filled it with water. Then the bather would receive this bucket, a ladle, and a towel. Even the duckboards that were placed on the green grass inside the ante-rooms of the sauna – the entrance space and the dressing room – reminded me very distinctly of Finnish saunas. No shoes were allowed on these duckboards, and before entering the sauna, the bathers were asked to leave their shoes at the door. The shoes left outside also told the passers by if the sauna was vacant or not.

58 The plastic is not a traditional material, however, the Finnish Army uses similar material in their tent saunas.

59 India Viola manufactured two of my four benches according to the ones I had already built. She also built the counter according to my design and under my supervision.
The interior space of Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna was divided into three successive areas: the entrance space, dressing room and the hot room. These were separated by hanging screens, made of the same white fabric as the walls: two 24 inch wide screens on each side of the door; one 50 inch wide screen in the middle separating the entrance space from the dressing room; and an insulating wall between the dressing room and the hot room, consisting of flap-doors on top of stairs, that led to the platform inside the hot room. The bottom seams of these screens and flaps contained sand to weigh the fabric down and keep them straight. The screens did not reach the ceiling nor the floor, but left a 12 inch wide gap at both top and bottom. One could see from the outside into the structure, all the way to the wall that insulated the hot room. Thus one could guess at the procession of the spaces already from the outside. Also the light travelled gradually into the structure, so that the hot room was dim, lit only by the daylight that traversed through the white fabric. Inside the hot room, the boards of the platform were of poplar, as well as the railing above heater and on the opposite walls. In this way, any surface that came into contact with human skin in the heat was of the smooth and cool surface of poplar. The platform inside the hot room was approximately four feet high, which left a distance between the ceiling and the platform of approximately three feet. This is the usual height of the top platforms in saunas and it is used because it is high enough for the bathers to reach the hottest steam in the hot room (heat and hot steam always rise up), and it allows for enough space to sit up and move around. The platform extended itself around the space of the heater, which was located in the mid-rear of the building. This design was a very special modification of the sauna. Usually the access to the top platform is over several benches of different heights. The lower benches are for those who cannot sustain the heat. The custom is that those who prefer to sit on the top can throw as much steam as they like, because those who cannot take it, can move down where it is cooler. In Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna, the bathers climbed straight to the top on ladder-like stairs located immediately outside the hot

60 A specific quality of poplar is that it does not conduct heat.
room. Therefore, there were no alternatives to the amount of heat that the bather could let him/herself be exposed to. Thus, the negotiation with the other bather became necessary.

THE CURTAIN –
IRONIC, CONFESSIONAL, SPECTACULAR, AND PROMISCUOUS

A heavy iron pipe was suspended from the ceiling cutting through the sauna structure from the entrance all the way to the back wall, and extending even outside the building in both the back and the front. A crimson, velvet fabric hung from the pipe, dividing the space in half. The velvet curtain meticulously followed the variations of heights and forms of the structure, always carefully covering the surfaces. When the curtain had to make its way across the stairs, the bottom design of the curtain was notched in a square angle for each step. The angled forms of the curtain were maintained by a heavy chain, sewn into the bottom of the fabric. The chain also weighed the fabric down so that it always hung touching the floor. When a bather touched and moved the curtain, it offered resistance. It was larger than the space it was filling, so that each movement would remain as a trace in it, because the curtain would fall back into place and shape only partially. In the front of the sauna, the curtain extended to the end of the iron pipe, covering it fully. Thus the curtain also entered and interfered with the space immediately outside the door. This was the space where three benches and a large receptionist counter were arranged to form a waiting lounge under the branches of surrounding trees. A faucet was on the side of the door, and underneath it was a large wooden tub for collecting water. This tub was placed on a wooden pedestal, specially designed for this function only. The tub was used to pour water over steaming hot bathers when they came out of the sauna and wanted to have a cold shower.
In this lounge area, bathers would come and sit on the benches to cool off and interact with other people, who were either waiting for their turn or just socializing. The curtain cut through half of this lounge, so that people sitting on opposite benches had to move the curtain in order to see each other. Thus, the presence and interception of the curtain was stated already in the very beginning of the sauna ritual and manifested its imposition even for those who did not bathe. From outside the sauna, you could see the lush red spine of the curtain recede into the depths of the sauna. At the back of the building, the bare iron pipe stuck out three feet into the air, thus showing that the division went through the whole building. The curtain represented the cultural imposition of New England prudence onto my ideal sauna. Promiscuity, sinful women and prostitution are associated in most Western cultures with the color of crimson and the lush quality of velvet. Likewise, crimson velvet is a very common fabric used in theater curtains. The curtain in Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna can therefore also be associated with spectacle, the circus and role-plays. Another connotation that was recognized by some bathers was the referral of the curtain to the confessional in the Catholic church. All these associations are foreign to an ideal Finnish sauna. The curtain was thus both formally as well as culturally and symbolically foreign to an ideal Finnish sauna, but an integral part of my Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna – in expressing precisely the hybridity of it. The various readings of the curtain were a function of the bathers’ further hybridization of the Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna, as they projected onto it their own cultural backgrounds.

The white fabric walls of Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna allowed enough light to travel through them, so that a passer-by may cast a shadow on them. The bathers inside would become very aware of the minimal membrane that separated their naked bodies from the teeming public space outside. To put it shortly, in asking people to bathe in my Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna I actually demanded quite a lot. Firstly, they would have to share the intimacy of the sauna with possibly a stranger that they have never seen before. Secondly, they were
separated from the public space with a thin wall, which might seem to them to be merely symbolic. These are reasons why it was important that I functioned as the responsible attendant, ensuring the bathers of cultural and physical safety. Also, it became evident that to many the curtain became a comforting object in its strange familiarity. “It kind of follows you through the whole thing” as one bather put it.61

Puritan morality, with its necessary companion, sexual overcoding of everything human, functions in a similar way. It inhibits improper sexual behavior, but in order to inhibit, it has to code everything according to sexuality. Thus also, if a person is ingrained in puritan culture he/she is compelled to constantly evaluate what behavior is in the realm of proper sexuality and what is in the realm of the improper. However, behavior that cannot be defined according to sexuality, proper or improper, makes the whole puritan paradigm redundant. This situation will lead to displacement and insecurity of this person. The crimson curtain was conciliatory in its familiarity for those who needed it, but at the same time, in its absurdity it ironized the need of sexual categories.

THE ASPECT OF SPECTACLE

I have already discussed this artwork in terms of the performances that were staged in the various interactions between the attendant and the bathers.62 As I mentioned earlier, another important aspect is each bather’s personal experience of the sauna, which is a conjunction of three corporeal conditions: the volatile proximity of your own naked body to another naked body; the proximity of your naked body to the teeming public life outside the sauna; and the transformation of your physical condition from tense to relaxed.

61 From personal notes.

A third aspect involves the 'waiting lounge' in front of the entrance to the sauna. Bathers coming out of the sauna, steaming and relaxed, cool off on the benches and interact in other kinds of relationships than inside the sauna. As exceptionally hot bodies they are dynamic insertions into public space, expressing corporeal discourses of openness, pleasure, nakedness, honesty, and intimacy. Physically, as an intense backdrop to their glowing bodies, and symbolically, as a projection of puritan morality, the crimson curtain imposed a quality of spectacle onto these bathers in the public space. However, this imposition can be utilized in a subversive way. Sitting on the benches outside, wrapped in his towel and gesturing in a wide circle with his arms one bather exclaimed: “It is not us who are the spectacle, they are!”

*Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna*, the bathers and I, and other people joining the crowd affiliated with the sauna, became a spectacle in public space, like a gypsy camp or the circus. Gypsies and circus people arriving at a village, station themselves in public space and in front of everybody’s terrified eyes open up their wagons spreading out their personal lives on the public plaza or field. If accosted, they will answer with their own symbols and tricks. They play the part of the strange, weird, dangerous and other. This is a way to acquire respect and keep a distance. In the eyes of the villagers they are a spectacle. Gypsies and circus people use that spectacularity to insert themselves in a public place and appropriate parts of it for their own use and definitions.

63From personal notes.

64I here write about the gypsies and circus people in the way they have become myths in the white, western imagination. The behaviour of gypsies or anyone in an antagonistic relationship to a dominating culture, might stem out of necessity without being a conscious 'defense mechanism'. It is nevertheless this behaviour the dominating culture reads as the trickster's spectacle, terrifying and titillating at the same time. Thus, I may speak of a mythical gypsy and his/her subversion of public space through spectacle, as long as it is understood, that this is a construct active in the white Western culture, rather than a living and personified gypsy. More so, nothing obstructs the activation of this construct in the symbolic stage of, for instance, MIT Campus.
Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna as a group performance, does the same for the sake of stirring the public discourse to examine its premises of defining nudity and social structures.

By estimation, proportionally very few New Englanders or even Americans bathed in my sauna. By far a larger number of bathers have come from other cultures. This is not a surprise, since many other cultures have a healthier view on corporeality, and many other cultures have bathing practices similar to sauna bathing. This is why the spectacularity of the sauna practice is one of the crucial aspects of Hybrid New England/Finnish Sauna. If I cannot allure New Englanders to bathe in my sauna, I can at least highlight the discrepancy between puritan morality and corpo-reality in public space. The bathers sitting on the benches outside the sauna make visible the pushing and pulling of the boundary between public space and the space of the sauna. This boundary is indeed very physically felt when sitting on the benches. Because of an altered state of mind and body, induced by the liminality of the sauna, the bathers push the boundary by merely being there. This activity interferes with the everydayness of the public space, and everyone that passes by the site and sees these half naked glowing bodies, will have to review his/her perceptions. Every now and then, someone leaps over the boundary and joins the glowing pack.
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APPENDIX

ILLUSTRATIONS OF SAUNAS

Kotiharju Sauna

Figures 1 - 6

all images of Kotiharju Sauna are from
Kotiharjun Sauna 1928 - 1998, ed: Satu Siponen and Kotiharjun
Saunayhdistyksen toimituskunta: Ahleskog, Ari, Kupiainen, Antero,

Smoke Saunas

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all images of smoke saunas are from Vuolle-Apiala, Risto:
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All images of my sauna project are photographed by Toshihiro Komatsu, during the 18th of May 1999.
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fig 1.4: I put the duckboards in place...

fig 1.5: ...the last one.

fig 1.6 - 1.8: Then I take down the screens.

fig 1.9: Now, the sauna is almost ready.

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fig 1.11: The curtain extrudes from the entrance like a tongue from a mouth.
fig 1.1: The sauna is sealed over the night.

fig 1.2: The seal is opened, and the counter has been carried out.

fig 1.3: The entrance. The screens are rolled up for the night for better airconditioning.
fig 1.4: I put the duckboards in place...

fig 1.5: ...the last one.

fig 1.6: Then I take down the screens.
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fig 1.9: Now, the sauna is almost ready.
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fig 2.11: Giving the bucket is an important moment. It is the first step towards the liminal space, which should be reached mentally despite the publicness of the situation.
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