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THE PROBLEM OF MISSING AUDIENCE

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Tämän opinnäytetyöni kirjallisen osion tarkoituksena oli pohtia ongelmaa ihmisten mielenkiinnon puutteesta taidetta kohtaan Suomessa. Yritin ottaa mukaan ehdotuksia joilla taiteilijat voisivat parantaa tilannetta, mutta vihainen nuori mies minussa saattoi saada yliotteen.

OPINNÄYTETYÖN NIMI ENGLANNIKSI

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The purpose of this thesis was to reflect some issues regarding people's lack of interest for art in Finland. I tried to include some suggestions what artists could do to improve the current situation, but the angry young man inside may have gotten the best of me.

SISÄLLYS

1	THEREIN LIES THE PROBLEM.....	5
2	RANDOM THOUGHTS.....	7
2.1	Importance of Being Me.....	7
2.2	Shock and Awe.....	8
2.3	Going Public.....	10
2.4	Comics: or How I Learned to Love Art.....	13
3	WHERE DOES IT ALL END?.....	16
	LÄHTEET.....	17

1 THEREIN LIES THE PROBLEM

I believe in humans and fine arts. Meaning I believe that an ordinary person with a bit of time in hand would enjoy art enough to appreciate and seek it. In Finland people are relatively well off and they have the luxury of possibilities to go and see it, so the question comes, why is any random gallery almost always empty of visitors?

One reason might be the trend among artists to do pieces to satisfy their inner “visions” or comment cleverly each other’s works. So many great artists of the past have not been understood during their lifetimes, so it must mean that being incomprehensible is a merit in itself. Who self-respectful artist would make a piece that’s meaning is clear for even a five-year-old? And is there any better way to show off than comment someone else’s cryptic piece by taking the idea even further? Everybody wants to be a snowflake and have a say and if people aren’t interested in the message that’s just their loss.

Seems that most of the contemporary art is conceptual or studies of shapes and colors. But if one has to think about the meaning of the piece for more than half an hour to get something interesting out of it and the piece can’t induce the viewer for more than five seconds the artist has a problem; not the audience that’s long gone but the artist who is shouting to empty halls. And what about these studies then? People can and do buy wallpapers and curtains with made-in-china prices already. Supermarkets sell colorful balls and forests are full of shapely rocks for one to gape at. And garden gnomes exist for the more complex taste.

There has to be some sort of middle ground between the “nice” works and the others that are so deep the sun doesn’t reach them.

A Russian teacher I met years ago was of the opinion that theater, opera, ballet and such are dead art forms. I’m not entirely sure what she meant by it but possibly the fact that when people used to consider those art forms entertainment they’ve now become something only stuck up enthusiasts enjoy. Perhaps something similar has happened to paintings and sculptures. As oil painted landscape was once something

anyone would admire and like to hang in their homes it's now more of a relic or heirloom from grandparents.

Finally, are we really, artists and audiences alike, plain lazy and stupid? Artists for their lack of communication skills and audiences for their lack of interest? Or is this just some phase the contemporary art has to go through? Or the price artists pay for not taking the audience seriously?

2 RANDOM THOUGHTS

2.1 Importance of Being Me

In her text, *An Unfashionable Audience*, Mary Jane Jacob asks: “But what if the audience for art (who they are and what their relationship with the work might be) were considered as the goal at the center of art production, at the point of conception, as opposed to the modernist Western aim of self-expression?” (Jacob, 1995, 50) Her point seems to be that art institutions such as museums have colonized the contemporary art scene with the help of artists concentrating on themselves. The critique sounds disturbingly accurate.

People craft things for their own amusement all the time but only few, called artists, make a career out of it. Resulting pieces can be way too similar considering the supposedly professional approach. If you are working with one idea or piece long enough it is easy to lose perspective. The journey from A to B might be interesting for you, but if the resulting portrayal of B is too simplistic, too personal, too much about the conclusion, the audience does not have the opportunity to be touched. Except perhaps when the whole audience consist of other artists and art related professionals.

One way to avoid this might indeed be including the audience in the process or the piece. Here too, extra effort should be made to reach non-art-professionals and that is the real challenge, requiring the self-absorbed genius to descend to the level of mere laborers. Luckily, humans are curious like little squirrels and enjoy congregating. Whenever there is a small mishap or accident, people who are not in any way concerned will gather around to testify the events. As much as an individual’s behavior is hard to predict, crowd’s behavior is easier, and has been studied with great accuracy. It is knowledge, that advertisers use every day but artists rarely even recognize. Manipulating others for own personal gain is distinctly human trait, and could be used more effectively even if the goal had changed to be the “greater good”.

2.2 Shock and Awe

There will always be works of art that need and deserve a slow, meditative approach from the viewer. Fantastic pieces will get attention regardless. Most works, however, should hold the interest of the audience long enough to communicate and make people think further from the surface level. Average artist might consider applying the method of shock and awe. Simply having some surprising element or technique will do.

For example, one of the best works I have seen so far is Aurora Reinhard's *Julio & Lupita*. I saw it in Kiasma where I entered a darkened room with a video footage covering the rear wall. Lazily eyeing the video I saw a couple dancing with some background music. Watching passively with very little interest it took some time before I realized the woman was actually a doll, and that specific moment of comprehension made the piece amazing.

I watched the video over and over again, later from the internet as well, and though I cannot fully articulate the thoughts it has created over the years I cannot forget it either. For me, making a successful piece of art still means offering an experience of similar significance to someone else.



Stills from the video “Julio & Lupita”, 2004 (Reinhard, 2004)

In this case the shock and awe effect was due to my lack of expectations. I did not have any information on what I was to see save the name of the piece, no info of the other dancer being a doll, and that is one reason I strongly oppose the texts attached to works explaining what is there and why. If a work cannot impress you without the

text it's not likely to do so with one, and if it can, the background and contexts are rendered irrelevant. So why take the risk of ruining it for the viewer?

Also, if art strives to communicate in deeper levels than mere language the statements regarding specific pieces become banal.

2.3 Going Public

Art in public spaces in Finland tends to remain decorative. If a sculpture is installed in front of a huge shopping mall or in the middle of dull concrete apartment buildings it's easily eaten up by the ruling environment. Especially if in form, it resembles the environment. We don't have shortage of historical monuments of great men and alike but those have little to offer in terms of artistic experience. Much could be done by installing works of art seamlessly to their surroundings or shaping the environment to be one massive entity.

Other trouble with public art works is that they are considered to be pricey and therefore necessarily permanent. They have to be weather-proof, vandalism-proof and criticism-proof, in a way that their value can always be demonstrated in great detail. Not much room for controversy there. (National heroes cast in bronze seem to fulfill the last requirement naturally.)

Public art has unique aspects, mainly because it could and should be designed. Victor Papanek has written an excellent book about the industrial design (Papanek, 1973, 25-36) and the principles he presents could be used directly in making public art. In Finland's homogenous mental climate we would really need some heated debate and new sense of community, and public art could be designed to respond to those needs. We have a history of shutting down artists who have dared to offend, even unwittingly, but the fact remains that without debate we won't ever learn to discuss matters.

Sad example of a crucified artist is Teemu Mäki. We all know he killed a cat. He murdered an innocent animal, afflicting unnecessary pain in the process. Terrible, shocking, monstrous, yes... The original video piece was much more than killing a cat, but after so many people expressed such strong opinions the "cat" got a life of its own. (Now, we do not need all the meat we eat and certainly do not need to throw away as much, and kittens are still drowned annually, but somehow that hypocrisy seems to be beside the point.) People expressed their opinions in various forms, and probably the piece was not successful in what it set out to accomplish, but it kicked some life to our art debate for a short period of time, at least. It is very interesting how we can justify killing animals for conspicuous consumption but not for art.

Equally interesting is that according to Teemu Mäki, he was fined for not killing the cat efficiently enough and, that the Finnish Centre for Media Education & Audiovisual Media (Mediakasvatus- ja kuvaohjelmakeskus, formerly known as Suomen Elokuvatarkastamo) banned showing the video piece after Mäki refused to cut the cat-killing part from it. (Mäki, 2004)

Reading about the whole episode makes me feel like living inside a Terry Gilliam film.

As an example of a successful and intriguing public art I have to mention Gordon Matta-Clark. (Too bad he was an American.) From his many projects the severed houses with big holes or altered plinth have become best known.

Photograph of “Splitting”, 1974 (Matta-Clark, 1974):



I've only seen photographs of his work, but even those manage to create a sense of warped reality, something magical to our commonplace lives: Exactly something public art can achieve at its best.

In Finland we have a great history of splitting houses, too. We choose our materials carefully using only the oldest and most beautiful houses, and do the actual splitting thoroughly, so that nothing is left standing. In my beloved hometown, the European Capital of Culture 2011, Turku, we have some serious professionals: The ornate Finnish Art Nouveau building, built in 1902 and called “Blue House”, was demolished completely in 2011, perhaps in honor of the on-going cultural celebrations. (Incidents like this make me think we deserve to be Finnish: miserable alcoholic people with four rainy seasons.) If you have a strong stomach there is a video work “Destruction of Beauty” documenting the ending process of the “Blue House” in youtube, posted by an artist Jan-Erik Andersson (Andersson, 2011).



(YLE/Koutonen, 2011)

2.4 Comics: or How I Learned to Love Art

Comics as a definition, comes from the early purpose of newspaper ‘funnies’. They have offered a comic relief in the American newspapers starting from the early 20th century and the practice has spread to Finland as well. Will Eisner, a pioneer in comics, coined the term of graphic novel to better depict long stories in printed book form. Our Finnish word, sarjakuva, roughly translated as serial picture, has still to meet its match.

The reason I want to mention comic books here is that as a medium, they have succeeded in many things contemporary paintings and sculptures are struggling with now. In Finland, comic books are easily available and moreover, approachable. Many who consider art as something distant and hard to understand can appreciate art in the form of a comic book.

Children can start with ‘funnies’ but later shift their interest to more mature content of complex storytelling and quality art. (And no, porn is not included here as it does not usually have complex stories.) There have been some half-arsed attempts to elevate comics to fine arts by presenting the original hand drawn pages in art galleries, but I see that as a pointless activity. Perhaps studying the technique and details is interesting for those wanting to make a comics themselves, but for average viewer it would be much more important to read the whole story as it was intended to appear in printed form.

Comic books are also relatively cheap: You can buy an outstanding work of art with fraction of the price of a painting. And store it conveniently at your book shelf. I believe existing art libraries strive to do the same but their practice is still mostly unknown for larger audiences.

Here is an example of a page from *Black Orchid*, published in 1988-1989, written by Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Dave McKean (McKean, 1988):



Ironically, this picture is from an internet site that sells original comic book art, i.e. usually pages that have already been reproduced and printed in a whole comic book. Site states that this piece is “completely painted with airbrush and acrylics”. When I read the book myself some years ago it actually seemed a bit off balance. The appearance seemed too dominant for the story to keep up but I enjoyed the strong atmosphere nonetheless. And it is a great example of comics expanding their boundaries and growing out of the ‘funnies’ they used to be.

I am probably highly biased as I grew up with comics as bedtime stories and actually learned to read with them but it seems many have shared that experience. Perhaps it is comics’ institution-free and rebellious, low-art reputation that attracts unlikely people.

3 WHERE DOES IT ALL END?

I don't know about other countries but in Finland we don't seem to have any excuses for not supporting the fine arts and artists massively. We are relatively wealthy, supposedly "civilized" and could really use something original to show for the rest of the world. Unfortunately it's understandable that the general public doesn't want to support art that it doesn't like or understand.

Effects are visible all around us and before we rush to congratulate ourselves for saving the art school in Kankaanpää and declare that masses rose to support its existence we might ask why closing a particularly good art school is even talked about in every few years? A school, that was built specifically for fine arts education with all the necessary spaces and appliances. One, that has functioned successfully almost fifty years and has an impressive list of graduates who are thriving artists today. Right answer is probably complicated beyond my understanding but the simple answer might be because it's possible.

In politics saving money seems to be "in" thing right now and as fine arts are not something people seem to deem important it's easy to justify cuts from that department. I mean, who wouldn't want to save all poor people from starving and losing health care by cutting all fine art funding and relocating it, and who wouldn't believe that only thing occupying politicians minds is the welfare of the people? It's also a long-term technique to reduce visiting lecturers, teachers and applying students. If I'd be a dictator with means, I would sue any politician absent minded enough to suggest cutting the funds from art education for harassment. The ones planning to transform the art school of Kankaanpää into library would be shot on sight, or at least castrated in the name of national security.

Seriously though, if we have nothing to offer for the public how can we justify the funding from other tax payers? If things continue to go downhill fewer talented people will choose the career in art field or to have an opportunity to even consider it. That would only result in fewer good works of art and even less funding and there; we would have a perfect circle.

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