

# Combining art and design education with cultural heritage

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## Abstract

In this paper, I present ideas on both the role of art and design in education, but also on the role of art in society. My paper relies on my own role as a university teacher in two Scandinavian universities: The Aalto University/School of Art, Design and Architecture (Finland) and Linné University/ Design (Sweden). I have been keeping MA courses in both universities, which combine elements of local cultural heritage with art and design education.

In my paper I wish to show student works since 2005 done in co-operation with Helsinki City Museum, Ateneum Art museum and Swedish Designarkivet since 2009. These examples with analysis will show interesting possibilities in using the museum archives as sources for artistic process. Also the student works will give a critical discourse on the way museums work. Art and design practices can be embedded into our society in order to manipulate and reorganize the way we think of the history.

The questions that arise from the topic of art and design education in the thematic of cultural heritage and museums are multiple. Firstly, we can look at the broader topic of rethinking the ways museums work. Secondly, we can examine the learning process. And thirdly, we can open up the possible role of art and design in contemporary society.

**KEYWORDS:** exhibition design, experimental art and design, museums, archives, installations, critical visuality, rethinking the museum, post-museum

## Introduction

*“Everything has the potential to become an object of wonder; it just depends on how we look at it.”*

For decades there has been an interest to define what is a museum. Without doubt, there are many answers to this. Some claim the museum is among the most successful leisure venues in the world (Falk, 2009, p. 21) or call it the poetic museum (Spalding, 2002, p.147-167)<sup>1</sup>. No doubt there are many meanings and functions connected to museums. Already in year 1970 Joseph Vech Noble presented his “Museum manifest” where he defined the five basic responsibilities for every museum. These were: to collect, to conserve, to study, to interpret and to exhibit (Weil, 2004 (1990), p.74). This model has proven to be very useful and can still be seen as the basic structure for contemporary museums.



**Figure 1.**

**A vitrine is a common tool in museums to show artefacts. A vitrine both protects and makes the museum object special. (photo: Outi Turpeinen in Oxford Natural history museum)**

When we talk about museums, and especially cultural historical museums, the common view is to consider the museums as institutions to tell the objective truth of something (Aurasmaa, 2002, p. 28, Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.127). A museum can, for example, tell a story on Virgin Mary with an exhibition of historical artefacts placed in a vitrine (Turpeinen, 2009). All the visual elements in an exhibition create multiple meanings for the museum artefact depending on the framework used (Turpeinen, 2005). A simple example of the meanings of exhibition design can be found in a vitrine, a common museum tool, which is mainly used in order to protect the precious museum artefact, but simultaneously the object gains various meanings once placed into a vitrine in certain order with other objects, with explanatory texts and with visual surroundings such as colour, layout and texture in materials.

As the viewpoint of this paper is concerned with art and design educational practises, it is further in my interest to mirror them in museum context. In fact, the use of artistic practices in cultural history museums reflects well with the British museology researcher Eilean Hooper-Greenhill's notion concerning the new concept of “post-museum”, where the museum concentrates on the use of museum objects, rather than further accumulation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 152–153). This kind of thinking is

fitting well with the working habits of artists and designers. After all, the creation of something new has been a characteristic of art since romanticism (Aurasmaa, 2002, p. 335). When looking at the common history of historical museums and artists, there can be noticed a tendency, where especially since 1990's the interplay between cultural history museums and artists has become a target of interest. Flash Art published an article “De-coding the Museum” in 1990 (Decter, 1990). In a handbook of conceptual art from year 1998 you could find a genre of artists curating exhibitions (Goddfrey, 1998, p. 404). Many historical museums internationally invited artists to re-arrange their collections<sup>2</sup>. Artists have also changed displays in cultural historical museums, which reflects a change of attitudes. There are several good examples of how artists have been interplaying with historical museums.<sup>3</sup> There seems to be a clear functional use for conceptual artistic installations in cultural history museums, which can confer new associations and meanings on exhibition artefacts.

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<sup>1</sup> Spalding is writing about the concept of poetic museum from the view point of a museum presenting a story which is constructed around one singular thema. As an example he mentions The Wasa Museum in Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>2</sup> For example “Mining the Museum” installation by artist Fred Wilson in Baltimore Historical Society, USA 1992 or “Give and take” installation by Hans Haacke V&A museum and Serpentine gallery in London in 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Look for example at Decter 1990, Greenberg at al. 1996, McShine 1999, Mäkelä and Latva-Somppi 2011, Putnam 2001, Turpeinen 2005 & 2009, Weschler 1995 or Wilson 1995.

## Rethinking the ways museums work

*'... our constant need to re-create our world, constantly reworking, reinterpreting and remaking... our physical surroundings organized by internal narrative...' (Pearce, 1997, p. 2)*

The idea of rethinking the ways museums work is not a new idea in the academic studies of museology, but in art and design education the reinterpretation of historical museum has not been applied much.<sup>4</sup> Therefore I would like to pose a question: What can art and design students offer in their installations in museum context? First of all, we can talk about design emotions as the experimental works by art and design students give visual experiences.<sup>5</sup> According to the head of the Helsinki Museum of Cultures Eija-Maija Kotilainen "Currently, practically everyone working in museums agrees that the best exhibitions are those that manage to successfully reconcile factual and experiential dimensions." (Kotilainen, 2007, p. 194) In the same article Kotilainen claims that ethnographic museums have been forced to develop new, appealing ways of presenting cultures (Kotilainen, 2007, p. 195). There is a growing need to develop museums in order to update the meanings to new target groups, for example to immigrants, teenagers and other groups. Secondly, the student works give new perspective to historical exhibitions. It might very well be so that the student works lack the factual information, but rather focus on elements of humour or visuality. This in itself promotes new thinking in the context of historical museums.

In my own teaching in art and design context, the basic starting points has been to question, critically view and also to be impressed by the material and existing structures of museums and archives. There can be found an interesting juxtaposition between the concept of assuming the museum to be a truth telling organization in relation to a critical visual viewpoint. This forms a starting point for a fruitful teaching situation: how to combine the different viewpoints of the traditions of building an historical exhibition with contemporary art and design thinking?



**Figure 2. How to update the past? How to make the history relevant?**

**Art work "The Countess Olga J. explores the world view" 41x44cm, Outi Turpeinen 2011**

## Introducing the student projects

*"By continually rethinking the display of its collections, a museum demonstrates that it is open to fresh investigations and insights shaped by ongoing cultural transitions." (Corrin, 2001, p. 6)*

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<sup>4</sup> However, there are some projects. For example "Songs and stories", a joint study project by Design Academy Eindhoven, Estonian Academy of Arts and University of Art and Design Helsinki during 2008-2009. Publication Songs and Stories 2009, published by all the involved universities.

<sup>5</sup> More on design emotion theory, look at Desmet 2002.

I have planned and been teaching the course “Museum as artist media” in the Aalto University School of Art and Design, Helsinki since 2005 and in Linné University, Sweden since 2009. Both of these Master level courses have focused on looking at historical archive and exhibition producing institutions. For the students, it is a great opportunity to learn while working within an existing historical collections. During the eight years of teaching in this course, I have proposed the following questions to the students: What has been selected to be shown in a public institution? Whose is the history, which is being displayed in the museum? From which perspective is history or different cultures being presented from?

The viewpoint I have introduced to the students towards archive and museum collections has been critical, but simultaneously exited. The idea of the course has been to combine practice and theory while examining museums. Usually the autumn term has consisted of lectures, museum visits and essays written by the students, and during the spring term we have made an exhibition. In this paper I will present three different study courses during past eight years 2005-2012. After the presentation I will go deeper into the questions of the benefits and problems of the study projects.

1. Museum as artist media course in co-operation with Helsinki City Museum 2005-2010
2. Museum as artist media course in co-operation with Ateneum art museum 2011
3. Design archive course in Linne University 2009-2012



**Figure 3. Each year the students also make a catalogue, web invitation and other graphic material to complete the exhibition project. Above posters from the MA student exhibitions in Helsinki City Museums.**

1. Museum as artist media course in co-operation with Helsinki City Museum 2005-2010

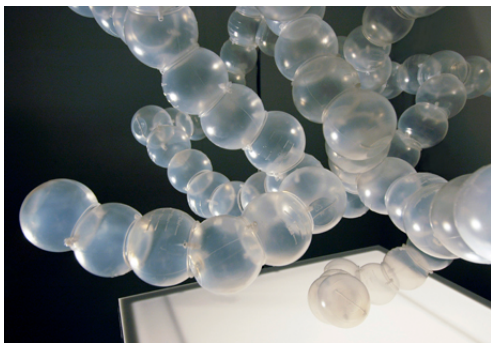
With this MA course I did 5 years of co-operation with the Helsinki City Museum, which “records and upholds the intangible and material heritage and the cultural environment of the Helsinki area.”<sup>6</sup> Helsinki City Museum is divided into several locations and within this course we worked mainly with the museum in Sofiankatu, close to the Helsinki Cathedral. The characteristic element to consider from the perspective of exhibition design is that in this course we did not work in white cube concept, but rather we built an exhibition inside an existing exhibition. In other words with the students were added something into an

<sup>6</sup> Part of the Mission statement from the museum’s webpage  
<http://www.hel.fi/hki/Museo/en/Etusivu> 15.2.20112.

exhibition presenting the life and history of Helsinki and its people. During the course the students got the chance to make a shallow dive into museums world by examining exhibitions, reading and writing on museums and finally by making their own comments into the exhibition "Helsinki Horizons" in Helsinki City Museum (Sofiankatu 4, Helsinki).

It is of great importance that the original fragments from the past have been shown next to the artworks done by the students. In a way, the past has been interpreted through the filter of the present. In this way the visitor can also make her/his own interpretations of the interplay between the museum artefact and the concepts of these students. One of my students, also a well-known Finnish contemporary artist, Kaisu Koivisto, was juxtaposing her own installation with a historical museum object. There was emphasis laid on the way the artwork was to be displayed in the exhibition.

*"As I was preparing my contribution to the exhibition Take Another Look, I was intrigued by the objects of the vitrine which is titled Dirty City. It includes among others an early 20<sup>th</sup> century toilet seat decorated with floral patterns, as well as a death shirt from the Helsinki Isolation Hospital. The vitrine detaches the objects from their original context of dirtiness, cleanliness and hygiene. There is a laundry ball in almost every household in Finland. It belongs to the realm of quotidian cleaning chores, but like other objects we use daily, it will be waste when it is not usable any more. Laundry balls were once novelties, which became a standard household item. One day they will be objects in museums of cultural history, where will slowly become brittle and disintegrate due to the material. The steel table, which is part of Laundry Ball Obsession, brings forth meanings to the work: the table resembles laboratory equipment. The table connects the work with the realm of ultimate cleanliness."* (Koivisto, 2008)



**Figure 4. "Dirty city" artwork by Kaisu Koivisto was placed opposite a beautiful decorated toilet from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Helsinki. Exhibited as part of Take another look exhibition in Helsinki City Museum 2008.**

Another student, Tytti Korin, was manipulating historical images, where she combined images from the Museum photo archive and images from the present-day. *"The way photos are constructed is subtle. At first glance the photos seem like ordinary museum pieces. However different decades and attitudes meet in these photos. The issues from today are seen through the historical view."* (Korin, 2008)



**Figure 5. Manipulated images from the photo archive of Helsinki City Museum by Tytti Korin. Exhibited as part of Take another look exhibition in Helsinki City Museum 2008.**

During the study term 2008-2009 the students of the University of Art and Design got a fine opportunity to have a peak into the collection archive of Helsinki City Museum. We visited



the storages and were surprised by the amount of artefacts.<sup>7</sup> As a result there were new insights and interpretations of the museums collections in an exhibition called “Recharged collections”.



**Figure 6. A photo collage “Helsinki” by Miho Shimizu and Øyvind Renberg. Exhibited as part of Recharged collections exhibition in Helsinki City Museum 2008.**

One of the art works was titled Helsinki and it was a co-operative interpretation of Helsinki by a Japanese student Miho Shimizu and a Norwegian Øyvind Renberg. *“The project was established as a collage portraying the Helsinki City Museum and the city of Helsinki. It explored how the museum processes culture and constructs history by selecting certain objects while leaving others out. And while some objects are displayed, a majority is hidden in storage and rarely shown. Of the museum collection, the work included paper dolls and other pieces from the display and storage rooms, juxtaposed with material from around Helsinki, in a repetitive wallpaper pattern.”*

*Snow features as a blanket across the collage, inspired from the seasonal, white Finnish landscape, with traces of human and animal activity imprinted on its surface. Snow conceals, but also reveals the landscape in spring, and in the collage this cycle becomes a metaphor for the museum's own natural cycle of display, storage and editing.”* (Shimizu, 2009)

## 2. Museum as artist media course in co-operation with Ateneum art museum 2011

During spring 2011 we were working with Ateneum Art Museum and made a happening “120min MUSE/UM”, which lasted for two hours in a Friday evening on May 2012 in the centre of Helsinki. In this happening a group of art students were working outside the museum walls by presenting and projecting thematic ideas on museums. The idea was to transfer the public space into a living museum for two hours. The idea was also to take art among the people instead of people going inside a museum. The project was extending the museum space outside the museum space. The group of students were also questioning the

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<sup>7</sup> The Helsinki City museum collections consists of about 200 000 artefacts, 800 000 photos, 5000 artworks and 40 000 archive artefacts. (14.2.2012, <http://www.hel.fi/hki/museo/en/Collections+-+Research>)

expectations of objectivity, which is often associated with museums, with their own subjective ideas.

One of the students, Emma Fält, stayed inside a cardboard transportation box for 120 minutes. You could only view her eyes through small eyeholes. *"Dropping out means leaving a group for either practical reasons, necessities or disillusionment with the system from which the individual in question leaves. It is used in various contexts."* (Fält, 2011) There were also other students, which played the role of museum guards, guarding the area.



**Figure 7. Above an image from the 120" MUSE/UM happenig outside Ateneum art museum in May 2011. Emma Fält 2011: *Dropout*, a storage box with a human inside it and a art student playing to be a museum guard next to the box. In the background *The great escape* by Ilari Laamanen and *P-Wall* by Samir Bhowmik.**

Another student, Lilian Sokolova, presented the urban space by framing things in the small park next to Ateneum with pink frames. *"Welcome to 120'MUSE/UM! Look around you and enjoy the exposition. Urban space has a lot of nice things to offer which just need to be found and revealed. Little bit highlighting, marketing and change of display can make a selected object to stand out. Don't you have your own piece of art somewhere already? Start your collection now! This is your chance, don't waste a day!"* (Sokolova, 2011)

The students works demanded attention from the passing by walkers, by bringing the museum habits into the street. One student, Sara Munguía even sat for two hours on the lap of the huge statue of Finnish National writer, Aleksis Kivi (1834-1872), in the railway station square. Another student, Fatmir Mustafa-Carlo, walked with huge cardboard male models pictures from the Post museum to the Ateneum museum. The surrealism of the event created confusion and laughter among the people on the street.

### 3. Design archive course in Linnè University 2009-2012

Historical archives are often hidden away from the public eyes. Mostly, researchers of particular interest can only approach them, which is a pity, as these archives actually are great treasure chests for artists and designers. During the course in Linnè University in Sweden,



one of the main tasks was to introduce the students into the archive material in the National Design archive in Nybro, South of Sweden.<sup>8</sup> The students used the archive as inspiration and the Design archive also offered an exhibition space for the student's work. The idea was also that Design archive could benefit from the student's creativity, by finding new ways to use the vast archive material.

“RE-ENTER” exhibition was shown in the Design archive in Nybro, Sweden 15.1. - 31.3.2010. The students got an opportunity to have a look at the variety of the material in the archive, which contains around 100 000 sketches in the collections within different areas of design such as textiles, glass, fashion and industrial design.<sup>9</sup> From this rich collection of various drawings, textile samples and sketches, the students selected one original sketch to be reinterpreted in their own works. Some used the original material almost as it is, some only as a starting sparkle for their work. The students created many interesting stories, which arose for example by mixing personal memories with historical images. One of the students, Jonas Forsberg, created a fictional character and built a brand around this theme.

*“My project “Bobby Blonds resurrection 2010” is based on a sketch depicting a pair of gloves that I have used as an inspiration for the shape of a drinking glass. My general idea is based around a person that collects memorabilia from a fictional superstar named Bobby Blond. I'm currently growing a beard to alter my appearance to slowly but surely transform my stature into that of Bobby Blond. The drinking glasses and a pair of dark sun glasses will make up the objects/memorabilia on display at the exhibition and a photo or possibly several of Bobby Blond/me will also be present. Bobby Blond was the sort of character that you just couldn't ignore; loud, obnoxious and sometimes outright rude he possessed all the traits befitting a washed out super star. He was never seen without a pair of large black glasses adorning his face and he was famous for drinking vodka straight up out of large pink glasses that he claimed had once belonged to an Indian maharaja. Everyone knew his career was virtually over and that his talent sifted away with every line of cocaine he snorted but we were still mesmerized by his very existence. Bold, brash and with an almost perverse need to shock his surroundings he always took center stage when in public amusing the boards of disciples with anecdotes about his rock n' roll life style that could last for hours on end. In my mind, he truly was the blueprint for the tormented super star that wrestled with his inner demons.” (Forsberg, 2010)*



**Figure 8. On the right, an original sketch of gloves from Swedish Design Archive. The other pictures present work by Jonas Forsberg with a fictive character and designed drinking glasses inspired by the sketch of gloves.**

<sup>8</sup> Designarkivet is part of Kalmar Art Museum. [www.designarkivet.se](http://www.designarkivet.se), 15.2.2012

<sup>9</sup> Information about The design archive 18.1.2012:  
<http://www.designarkivet.se/en/index.php?pageid=111>



In another project “Tracing Deborah” in the Linné University in 2011, the group of students were asked to create a common theme for the exhibition and under this theme they all created their individual stories. The students decided to create a fictive person called Deborah. Each student then chose a different time period of her fictive life in order to create a part of her life story. All students wrote narratives for the life story, but also made artefacts to accompany the story. Using the collection of Design archive as visual inspiration created each of these stories.

## The learning process

*“I have come to learn to respect and to understand deeper the often quiet and ignored work that the staff at museums around the world has made into their passion for the benefit of the visitors.”* (Comment by one student)

During the courses there were various things the students learned by doing themselves. We were working as a team, together with the museum professionals, who taught the students basic things about handling museum artefacts. For example during one of the study terms the students of the Aalto University got a fine opportunity to have a peak into the collection maintenance of Helsinki City Museum. We visited the storages and were surprised by the amount of artefacts. Also the strict protocols of the museums caught our attention: use of white gloves, the number codes of the objects or the visually intriguing cardboard boxes. As a result of this learning process, I hope that museum collections continue to be part of the designers and artists tools also later in their career as they work as professionals.

In this course the students learned how to create an art & design concept. The students learned how to create stories and how to visualize these stories. In other words, the students have been tracing their own creativity with fictive stories. The students were also encouraged to work as a team, which was a real challenge as there were in all courses many nationalities represented in the group. It was important that the museum MA courses were in English language, so there were also international students in the course. As a consequence, there were also interpretations from people from outside of Finnish culture, who were looking for example at Helsinki from another angle. Different backgrounds brought alternative ways to examine our visual surroundings and in the course we learned from each other.



Figure 9. A press example titled “Old sketches inspired new design” 2009 from Nybro Sweden of the students learning process.

*“There is one thing that differentiated Arkiv 3.0 from the other projects, something that I haven’t experienced yet as a designer: a team work that involves cooperative work with non-design students. It is absolutely different from the individual work on a project, where you approve your own ideas, make your own decisions, develop and produce prototypes, and the only advisor you consult in the process is a teacher. In the end, when you finish an individual work, it feels more personal, it has more meaning and value, you carry out something really yours, whereas a group work doesn’t give you the same feelings.”* (Comment by one student)

Furthermore, the students learned how to build an exhibition, do some marketing and to make a catalogue. This included finding out about material suppliers, even sponsors and about asking permission for art works in public spaces. The students also learned a way of using an archive as a source material for the art and design process. This learning process and questioning delivered new visual comments to the museum world. As a result there grew new insights and interpretations of the museums collections. Also some students from creative management studies were studying in this course.

*“The most valuable thing that I will take with me from this project is the sense and feeling that although I am a business student, nothing can or will prohibit me from being creative. I think that a lot of people think that just because they are business students they don’t have to same ability to be creative as people th at work in a more creative profession such as architects or artists. But thatis wrong. As a direct result of this project I have gained a lot of confidence regarding my ability to be creative and coming up with ideas that might not always be so business orientated, but that in the end, could prove beneficial in a business environment.”* (Comment by one student)

As a teacher with an artist and designer background, I also tend to hope that the museum professionals learn something from the working methods of art and design. One core thing in art and design is the element of experiment both with concepts, but also with various materials. Another thing is different ways of scheduling, where a study project is moving relatively fast from an idea into realization. On the other hand, the museums plan most exhibitions years ahead, which makes the process longer. The study projects were also light in structures, which reduced the time, but also money issues. There is yet another aspect, which should not be forgotten. The economical benefit for the museum in co-operation with universities is important, as the public funding for museums is reducing. For example, the Museum of Cultures in Helsinki<sup>10</sup> is forced to totally freeze its exhibition production since the beginning of 2014. As a consequence, cultural history museums are often forced by economic pressure to focus only on conserving the cultural heritage instead of putting their effort on exhibitions. This is a very shortsighted policy, as exhibitions are obviously one of the main activities of museums. I strongly believe that the students of art and design bring creativity and critical thinking into museum exhibitions.

## Conclusions

*“Contemporary Western museums can be considered as places where both memory and history contribute to the process of remembering and identity formation, through objects, in a public and accessible way.”*(Catalani, 2010, p. 236)

My own personal aim and passion in all of my work, weather it is research, lecturing or own artistic work, has been for years to create interplay between history and contemporary culture. Art and design practices can be embedded into our society in order to manipulate and reorganize the way we think of the history. Finnish history researcher Jorma Kalela’s notion of stereotypic historical research is applicable also to museum exhibition context. His question “What is relevant in history?” is valuable, as it raises forward the critical notion

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<sup>10</sup> The Culture Museum in Helsinki is part of the Finnish National Board of Antiques (Museovirasto).

towards history and the presentation of history (Kalela, 2000, p. 43). To represent artefacts in museum exhibitions demands deep look at the selected narrative from many perspectives, so that the museum exhibition would not repeat clichés from the past or images of dusty or patterned exhibition. It is possible to view history in a many-sided and varying perspectives and create updated interpretations.

One crucial role of the museum in our society is to produce knowledge, but it is also more and more relevant for the museum to give emotional impulses with its exhibitions. Art and design in co-operation with historical museums and archives can first of all bring new interpretations, secondly subjective viewpoints and thirdly visualize contemporary ideas of beauty. Anyway, in all cases there is a desire to find another angle into the collections. The idea of joining unexpected things together in order to create new platforms for thinking, creates new understanding.

Professor of museology Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, is stating the need of cultural changes in museums, when she talks about the idea of post-museum. There are many problems in the museums field, especially when the need of change in the museum scene is refused by forces of conservatism (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 162). This is unfortunately something I have noticed myself as well, as I have been researching and working with museums for twenty years. In museum scene there is a need for change - to find new ways of working - but this is often difficult, as there are multiple interests.<sup>11</sup> One usable idea is to transfer the tools of art and design somewhere they have not been used so much and further, to increase the role of art and design in our contemporary society.

Today, in our multinational society, one valuable museum concept in order to understand the world around us, is the concept of an ethnographic museum. Museologist Anna Catalani proposes an interesting question: "How effectively are museums bridging personal and universal memories and histories, especially when they are dealing with non-Western groups and non-Western collections?" (Catalani, 2010, p. 238) Furthermore, museum director Eija-Maija Kotilainen evokes the problematic of how to challenge visitors to ethnographic museums, when so many have first hand and personal contacts with foreign cultures (Kotilainen, 2007). I believe strongly that this is just one strong fascination for cultural and historical museums. They are places, where to find out deeper insight into different cultures and traditions.

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<sup>11</sup> This can easily been seen in the incredible amount of discussion in Finland in the beginning of year 2012, when, for example, our main news paper Helsingin Sanomat has devoted pages and pages of space for the discussion of possible new Guggenheim museum in Helsinki. On the other hand, the Finnish government is cutting 3 million € in budget from the Finnish National Board of Antiques (Museovirasto). This creates conflicts of where to put the focus on.



**Figure 10. "Wisdom from the past?" installation by Outi Turpeinen 2010.**

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