

# I did it my way – The case of an artistic doctoral dissertation that does not represent artistic research

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## abstract

My research does not represent artistic research, even though I am a visual artist who is finalising his doctoral dissertation that contains an art production. My doctoral dissertation comprises

- a) a written research on the attitudes of visual artists toward utilising art in society
- b) a written report of the art production (an artist's text) that focuses on exposing the artistic process from the artist's perspective and on art's potentialities to express social critique
- c) an art production that encompasses two solo exhibitions in Finnish galleries – the first in Rovaniemi in Gallery Katve of the University of Lapland in 2008 and the second in Titanik Gallery in Turku in 2010 – and an institution-critical intervention in the form of a free paper focusing on the relation between an individual artist and an art institution at the beginning of 2012.

In this paper I reflect on how I carried out my doctoral project.

KEYWORDS: artistic research, sociology of arts

## Artist in the world of science

Let me begin with a well-known song. Many of us have heard Frank Sinatra – who obviously was not an investigative artist or artistic researcher, but an entertainer – sing the following song:

*And now the end is near  
And so I face the final curtain  
My friend I'll say it clear  
I'll state my case of which I'm certain*

*I've lived a life that's full  
I traveled each and every highway  
And more, much more than this  
I did it my way*

*Regrets I've had a few  
But then again too few to mention*

*I did what I had to do  
And saw it through without exemption*

*I planned each charted course  
Each careful step along the byway  
And more, much more than this  
I did it my way*

*Yes there were times I'm sure you knew  
When I bit off more than I could chew  
But through it all when there was doubt  
I ate it up and spit it out, I faced it all  
And I stood tall and did it my way*

*I've loved, I've laughed and cried  
I've had my fill, my share of losing  
And now as tears subside  
I find it all so amusing*

*To think I did all that  
And may I say not in a shy way  
Oh no, oh no, not me  
I did it my way*

*For what is a man what has he got  
If not himself then he has not  
To say the things he truly feels  
And not the words of one who kneels  
The record shows I took the blows  
And did it my way*

*Yes it was my way*

As life itself, the history of science contains ups and downs – successes and failures. According to philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, the history of science “does not just consist of facts and conclusions drawn from facts. It also contains ideas, interpretations of facts, problems created by conflicting interpretations, mistakes, and so on.” (Feyerabend, 1980, p. 19.) I agree with Feyerabend in that we must not restrict our thinking in advance. Can there be anything as ridiculous as an a priori law in art? Unfortunately, universities with all their programmes – including artistic research – are not that liberal. A conflict arises because I think that there is no single rule, method or theory, “however plausible, and however firmly grounded in epistemology, that is not violated at some time or other.” (Feyerabend, 1980, p. 23.) “It becomes evident that such violations are not accidental events, they are not results of insufficient knowledge or of inattention which might have been avoided. On the contrary, we see that they are necessary for progress.” (Feyerabend, 1980, p. 23.)

Throughout the brief history of artistic research, artists and scholars have doubted its meaningfulness, necessity and status as a scholarly activity. Some artists have legitimized

artistic research by claiming to possess special knowledge that only artists have. (See e.g. Mäki 2005, p. 13–14.) Some have been worried about lowered scientific criteria and questioned the role of artists as developers of research, while maintaining an open on the scientific contribution of art. (See e.g. Nevanlinna, 2001; Kantokorpi, 2001.) The dialectics of scepticism and legitimisation is hard to describe accurately. The discussion on artistic research certainly deserves its own study. I justify the need for research by arguing that research carried out by artists does not invariably represent artistic research. Also, there is no – and should never be – uniform paradigm in this field. To concretise: what comes to research carried out by visual artists, the policies of the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland and the University of Art and Design Helsinki of the Aalto University seem to differ from that of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts.<sup>1</sup> These differences could be studied and analysed. At least I would willingly examine the vicissitudes of Finnish artistic research or research carried out by artists (or whatever it should be called.) In the paper at hand I illuminate artistic research only as much as is needed to express how my approach deviates from it. I concentrate mainly on artistic research in the field of visual art.

In Finland, artistic research is composed of a written part and an art production. The art production may assume the form of a product family or a series of exhibitions, concerts, plays, etc. In this respect my approach is comparable to artistic research, but the deviation begins from conceptualizing the written part. I divide the written part into a written research and a written report of the art production. By the written research I mean a written explication of the research on an issue connected to the work of an artist and by the written report of the art production I mean a written description of the art production – or the artist’s text. With this approach I can demonstrate the connections between the art production and the written parts.

“Artistic research” is an established term signifying doctoral studies carried out in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, the Finnish Theatre Academy, the Sibelius Academy, and to some extent the University of Art and Design Helsinki at the Aalto University. In terms of visual art, *doctors of fine arts* graduate only from the Finnish Academy of Fine arts. Instead of a doctoral dissertation they produce a “demonstration of knowledge and skill”. PhD students in the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland and the University of Art and Design Helsinki at the Aalto University graduate as *doctors of arts* by producing a doctoral thesis with or without an art production. The name of the degree is the same as in the case of PhD students in art pedagogy or media research, who defend a doctoral thesis without an art production.

Nevertheless the differences do not lie in terminology alone. According to Professor in Artistic Research Jan Kaila, head of the doctoral programme of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, “the purpose of the programme was to produce new knowledge based on creative work done by the artist. From the very beginning, the primary focus of the programme was on creative artistic work, rather than adopting any direct model from the world of science. Nor did the programme seek to emulate studio-based or practice-based PhD programmes such as those established in Great Britain.” (Kaila, 2008a, p. 6.) The aim was not to “accept primarily theoretically oriented artists in the programme, but artists whose work and methods display interesting research potential.” (Kaila, 2008a, p. 8.) Kaila (2008b, p. 36) also

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<sup>1</sup> The policy of the University of Art and Design Helsinki of the Aalto University is ambivalent though.

writes that the original aim of the doctoral programme was to melt theory and artistic practice together.

Such a model has proved to be paradoxical. Despite the aims, among the theoretical parts of the demonstrations of knowledge and skill carried out by doctoral students of fine arts it is easy to find presentations in which argumentation follows the direct and established models of scientific conceptualisation and theorisation. (See e.g. Weckman, 2005; Pitkänen-Walter, 2006.) Having noticed the paradox, Kaila (2008b, p. 36) ended up with the dual model of a theoretical part and an art production. And this corresponds to the combining of theory and artistic expression – or practice – which is common in artistic research.

Theory was not applied as such from “the world of science” to artistic practice; instead the theoretical part – ergo written part – described an artist’s work through academic concepts and terms. Artists absorbed the academic way of expression into their descriptions. According to the official formulation of the goal of doctoral education of the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, the emphasis of artistic research is in artistic work: “Doctoral studies in the Academy are based on artistic research where high-quality artistic work intertwines with theoretical research. Doctoral students are experts in their own field, internationally renowned visual artists who apply research methods to their work. The primary results of artistic research are artistic productions presented publicly. As another important result of their research, doctoral students produce reflective and theoretical knowledge about their own art works, the process of making and presenting them.” (Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, 2012.) Is it possible to study some other area than one’s own artistic practice? “In the theoretical part, the author analyses his/her own artistic work, and/or produces new information about the research topic in some other form.” (Finnish Academy of Fine arts, 2012.) According to this formulation it is. Nevertheless, the majority of the theoretical parts of the demonstrations of knowledge and skill concentrate on the artist’s own work and the meanings and conventions connected to it. For the individual artist, this is very likely the most convenient approach – or maybe not.

I find it very intriguing how negatively – or ambivalently – theory is approached in the policy of artistic research. One wonders what is meant by theory in this context: presumably something conceptual – spoken and written. Philosopher Toivo Salonen from Lapland presents a broad understanding of theory. Viewing perception as a problem of the philosophy of science, he writes that perception implies theoretical knowledge and conceptual tools. According to Salonen, theoretical knowledge can be absorbed unnoticed from the philosophical generalisations that live in culture. One can have a theory based on experience without studying theory as such. What comes to the conceptual tools, they are adopted from lingual culture. Both – theoretical knowledge and conceptual tools – can be connected to scholarly work or not. (Salonen, 2011.) In his short introduction to the philosophy of tools the first doctor of fine arts in Finland, Jyrki Siukonen (2011), suggests that a peasant – a Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi – perhaps had a theory even though he didn’t write anything. Correspondingly, a theory – or method – adopted by a visual artist can be the consequence of even decades of work using various tools. Such a theory or method might be non-verbal and lacking in theoretical studies and concepts.

## My way

I do not equate concepts with theory, nor do I equate a written text with a theory. In the footsteps of Salonen and Siukonen, by theory I refer to the ways of shaping various sets of things in the verbal and non-verbal worlds. By concepts I refer to lingual and cultural tools. The structure of my doctoral thesis is based on the way of understanding theory and concepts as described above.

My doctoral thesis comprises the following three parts:

- a) a written research focusing on the attitudes of visual artists toward utilising art in society,
- b) a written report of the art production – or an artist’s text – focusing on exposing the artistic process and art’s potentialities to express social critique, and
- c) an art production that encompasses two solo exhibitions in Finnish galleries – the first in Rovaniemi in Gallery Katve of the University of Lapland in 2008 and the second in Titanik Gallery in Turku in 2010 – and an institution critical intervention in the form of a free paper focusing on the relation between an individual artist and an art institution at the beginning of 2012.

The written research (a) doesn’t deviate much from the conventions of “the world of science”, but the written report of the art production (b) does, because it is written on my own artistic work as it is, without an explicit theory or research method or heavy academic concepts.<sup>2</sup> I justify this division of labour by the fact that I am not studying my own works of art or the thematic areas they are connected to. Instead, in my artistic work I attempt to depict the way in which I react to the utilisation of art within the arts and as an artist and to find out whether any meaningful reaction to this utilization exists at all. In the written report I try to answer to this problem with words.

By opening the stages of my artistic work literally I try to clearly and understandably outline the role of the art production in the research. I am not starting anything new – I continue a tradition. Studies contributing to this tradition include the research carried out by Taneli Eskola in 1997 at the University of Art and Design Helsinki and the research carried out by Jyrki Siukonen in 2001 in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. (See. Eskola, 1997a; Eskola, 1997b; Siukonen, 2000, 2001a.) One finds here the written research, the written report and the art production. (See image 1.) The first artist to defend a doctoral thesis in the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland was Juha Saitajoki. He can also be considered to be part of the tradition mentioned above. (See Saitajoki, 2003.) These three examples deviate from artistic research in which ”theory” is sprinkled with text describing an artistic work. (See Kaila, 2002; Pitkänen-Walter, 2006; Ziegler, 2010; See also image 2.)

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<sup>2</sup> Or at least I attempted to do it so; it is possible that I did not fully manage to meet my aims and wishes.

Image 1. Tripartite approach

PART I	PART II	PART III
<p>Written research on an issue connected to the work of an artist</p> <p>Based on the models, methodologies, concepts and theories of scholarly activity (“the world of science”)</p>	<p>Written report on the artist’s own artistic work, i.e. how one has worked, which materials one has used and in what way, which themes have been emphasised etc.</p> <p>“Artist’s text”</p>	<p>Art production</p>

Image 2. Artistic research

PART I	PART II
<p>Text on artist’s own artistic work that includes theoretical references, concepts and discourses familiar from “the world of science”</p> <p>”Artistic-theoretical artist’s text”</p> <p>Tripartite approach’s part I and II melted together</p>	<p>Art production</p>

In my dissertation I aim to demonstrate the interactive contribution of artistic work to sociological research. The sociological research and the art production have interacted so that the former has functioned as a background for the latter. The results of the research have influenced to the form and content of the second and the third part of the art production. In the prevailing artistic research the body of research that I accomplished could hopefully function as an alternative and possible model for those who cannot, or are not willing to carry out the model of artistic research.

## Short description of the research process and some preliminary answers

As a whole, my research is a case study focusing on the attitudes of visual artists toward utilising art in society and on the possibilities of art to function as a form of a social critique and as a source for an alternative and critical consciousness. The research question concerning mainly the first part of the research is: What kinds of attitudes do visual artists have toward utilising art in society? I answer this question through an interpretation of ideology of interviews with 83 Finnish visual artists (See Thompson, 1990).

The case is a specific Finnish art event *Mänttä XIII Art Festival 2008*. The organizers of the Mänttä XIII Art Festival interviewed 68 participating artists on the utilization of art in society. The interviewees included both men and women and represented various ages and genres. As a participating artist I was aware of the interviews and subsequently given permission by the artists and organizers to use the material for research purposes. Later, I collected additional material and increased the number of interviewed artists to 83.

The interviews were made through email. The artists were inquired about the different requirements set by the market-based cultural politics in Finland. They were asked what they think about the pressure of the exporting and productising strategies of culture and art and about the demand for political awareness concerning the world stage – for example, there were questions related to climate change etc. There were also questions pertaining to the values and forms of practice to which they feel they are committed.

A preliminary conclusion is that those artists who oppose productising and neoliberal procedures and strategies seem to be worried that art will become simplified, standardized and nationalized. Some of them think that the successful branding and productising of Finnish photography can lead young artists to produce art that conforms to the concept. In such a vision art becomes a service product that is oriented to please the customer, who doesn't want to be bothered with difficult questions such as climate change or inequality. Some artists seem to be more moderate in their relation to utilisation.

But why do some of the visual artists oppose productising, or why do they criticise export strategies and addressing societal questions through art? One possible answer is that they only seem to do so. They have learned the traditional way of talking about art. The tradition entails a nostalgic discourse on the classical autonomy of art, according to which one must be reluctant to make concessions to anything but one's own subjective expressivity.

Then, what are the possibilities of art to function as a form of social critique and as a source for an alternative and critical consciousness? The motive behind the first part of my art production was to create a platform to discuss this theme. In September 2008, I rented a gallery room in the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland and spent 108 hours in the gallery. I had academic books and unfinished drawings and paintings with me in the gallery. During the exhibition hours I also worked on a wall painting that was meant to disappear gradually by the end of the exhibition.

The second part of my art production concentrated on the question of technique. I produced works with the slow craft technique and by using a manual typewriter to cover large sheets of paper. In August 2010, I exhibited the works in Gallery Titanik in Turku. After these steps, I came to the conclusion that art is not likely to function as a form of social critique or as a source for an alternative and critical consciousness if art means drawings, paintings, photographs, or other convenient institutional ways of expression. So, I wrote a manifesto called *The Interventionist Manifesto, or seven reasons not to make visual art*. The manifesto is a leaflet, an intervention and simultaneously a manifesto on an institutional critical intervention. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2012, I sent the manifesto as a signed free paper (500 pieces) to all Finnish art museums, art galleries, art schools, art councils, art associations, artist organisations, art magazines, culture magazines and the culture departments of the largest newspapers and radio- and television channels. I published the text also on the Internet in Finnish (See <http://interventionistinenmanifesti.wordpress.com>) and in English (See <http://interventionistmanifesto.wordpress.com>).

Did it work? Well, at first let's see what it looks like.

## ***INTERVENTIONIST MANIFESTO*** ***or seven reasons not to make visual art***

### *A NOTE TO READERS*

*The process toward the end of art has progressed too far to be stopped only by the traditional means of producing images, performances or exhibitions in galleries and art museums. Alongside these modes of production, radical institutional critique is needed. One form of radical institutional critique is intervention, which artists can influence practically without any limits.*

*The present leaflet is simultaneously an intervention and a manifesto on an institutional critical intervention. The manifesto is sent as a signed free paper (500 pieces) to all Finnish art museums, art galleries, art schools, art councils, art associations, artist organisations, art magazines, culture magazines and the culture departments of the biggest newspapers and radio- and television channels. The text is published also on the Internet in Finnish (See <http://interventionistinenmanifesti.wordpress.com>) and in English (See <http://interventionistmanifesto.wordpress.com>).*

Rovaniemi 14.1.2012

Kalle Lampela

### *1. AMBIGUITY*

*Even though I work as an artist and make artworks, I cannot describe exactly how art is made and what turns one object or visual experience into an artwork while another does not. There are no universal or otherwise clear and satisfactory criteria defining manmade products as art.*



## 2. THE DEADLOCK OF AN IMAGE

*I don't believe that there are many people who would be conceptually interested in problematizing an image. This leads to two problems that cancel out each other.*

- a) The high intangibility of an image leads to a tiring narrative. That is when the spectator's individual contemplation evaporates into the air.*
- b) Without an explanatory narrative the idea of an image remains obscure. Is it meaningful to represent such an image?*

## 3. DISCONTENT

*My visual or plastic ideas rarely satisfy me intellectually. Also, the majority of so-called visual art leaves me untouched. Many an image would simply be better left undone.*

## 4. RELUCTANCE TO COMPROMISE

*I am not willing to compromise in order to increase the intelligibility of an artwork if it means destroying the idea of the work.*

## 5. CURIOSITY

*I am much too curious to content myself with repeating one way of doing or reproducing images repeatedly. An image is not a guarantee of art.*

## 6. VISUAL ART IS A CRAFT

*Visual art is made by hand. In this respect the term "art" leaves its origin without a firm base. Crafts are concrete. Art is an abstraction.*

## 7. THE POWER OF AN INTERVENTION

*As a form of expression an intervention is free from the conceptual problems of visual art and the instrumentalism and conventions of the various forms of art. The executor of an intervention doesn't ask for permission to perform his or her act but intervenes in the state of society independent of its restrictions.*

So, I went to a post office on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 2012 and left my manifesto in the hands of sorters and delivery personnel. Two days later I received a phone call from Radio Lapland, a regional radio channel of Finland's national public service broadcasting company Yle. I was interviewed in a live broadcast in the afternoon.

A few other comments followed, but not many. I did not expect much feedback from the established art institutions, but I expected more from grassroots art organisations. Only one organization took contact. That contact was fruitful, though.<sup>3</sup> There were a few individual comments; such as the one from my colleague saying that she felt the same way as I regarding the first “reason” of my manifesto. Feedback from art museums has been scarce. One museum director and one curator told me that documents of this type are archived on the very day they receive it. Thus, the art museum, as an institution, nullified the intervention in the form that it was carried out. I expected this, but once confirmed, I concluded that to question the role of a museum one needs to consider intervention in a more direct and critical way.

But, let’s get back to the questions. What are the possibilities of art to function as a form of social critique and as a source for an alternative and critical consciousness? And what is my attitude toward utilising art in society? To put it bluntly, my art production – in all of its three parts that differ from one another – shows that there are possibilities for art to function as a form of social critique and as a source for an alternative and critical consciousness, but this function is not necessarily clear, intelligible, or influential. As a form of art, conversation and intervention have certainly potential to influence the different levels of society, but in the case of individual artworks, the function seems more or less hidden. They can be seen as storage capacity for many kinds of alternative consciousness and memories. Whether these various forms of expression that I used have an effect on society, is a more difficult question to answer. No easier is the question of how art – in the form chosen by me or in some other form – can effect on society. To answer these questions one needs to carry out a reception analysis.

Then, what is my attitude toward utilising art in society? Perhaps I am not the best person to speak on my own behalf, but from the beginning of making my doctoral thesis I have seen my art production as an answer to that question. First, by producing art in various ways I looked for an answer to the question: What are the possibilities of art to function as a form of social critique and as a source for an alternative and critical consciousness? Second, my art production as concrete exhibitions, projects, and objects can be seen as an answer to the latter question. Whether or not an artist finds the idea of utilization disturbing – like many of the visual artists interviewed in my research did – one can consider art as counteraction to the process of utilization. Nevertheless, to take such counteraction as a starting point for creative work does not necessarily lead to critical expression. There is no unanimity concerning the advantages and disadvantages of utilization.

How does art answer in my doctoral thesis? Its answer is based on two exhibitions and one intervention. The answer is: Whatever the aims of neoliberal cultural policy, art might not be the most effective tool for defending suitable and sustainable conditions for itself, not only because there cannot be unanimity of these questions but also because the influence of art remains unclear. Artists need to take action not only as artists but also as citizens. That means political participation in the areas of civic activism and politics.

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<sup>3</sup> I was asked by the manager of Gallery Titanik to participate in an experimental exhibition called *Nothing ever changes*, which encompassed critical texts and an intervention focusing on the function and necessity of art galleries as an institution. I wrote *Seven theses on gallery* that were shown in the gallery.

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