



BODY IN COMMUNICATION WITH THE PROCESS: FLESH IN PRINTMAKING

MASTER'S DEGREE DOCUMENTATION 2016

ROMA AUSKALNYTE

SUPERVISOR: JOHN COURT

EXAMINERS: LEEVI HAAPALA, DIEGO BRUNO

**ACADEMY
OF FINE ARTS**

**UNIVERSITY OF
THE ARTS HELSINKI**



2016 HELSINKI



INTRODUCTION



This text will introduce and analyse works produced during my Master degree studies between 2013 till 2016. One of the work was presented in "Kuvan Kevät 2015" which was opened on 6th of May till 31st. The second piece was shown at the group exhibition with Jarmo Somppi and Kristina Janni Ståhl. Exhibition was opened on 17th of September till 04th of October 2015. Both of them were placed at "Exhibition laboratory / Project Room" space in Helsinki.

My current art practise mainly focus on text based art in combination with printmaking or video, as well as various body/performance experiments. The main influences are coming from printmaking processes, how they lead to new, ambiguous transformations of old ideas. Body for me became a material for printmaking, like the importance of gesture and repetition in printed art pieces. I do not try to concentrate on one theme or one media of choice, instead the idea and works themselves guide which media I should choose. During previous couple of years I explored text as my way of delivering ideas, now I am shifting towards performance and video installations.

This documentation will be divided into three different sections: *Process*, *Body* and *Presence*. In the first part I will try to concentrate on printmaking as my most commonly used media and how the processes in it influence me. I will also look how they are connected to my practises now and how I see printmaking as part of my future work. Moreover, I will elaborate more on text, which is still frequently used in my artworks.

On the second part, *Body*, I will put more emphasis on the importance of the body in the process, awareness of it and actualisation of the physical, labour work in the printmaking. Also, I will consider at which point I begun to concentrate more on the acutalisation of it and how all this work is usually hiding behind the print.

The last part, *Presence* will shortly analyse where printmaking stands for me in the sense of contemporaneity and how the use of philosophy leads to new visual experiments. I will explain my idea of contemporary and thoughts over how - and if at all - the printmaking should evolve.

CONTENT:

PROCESS	5
BODY	12
PRESENCE	22
REFERENCES	24



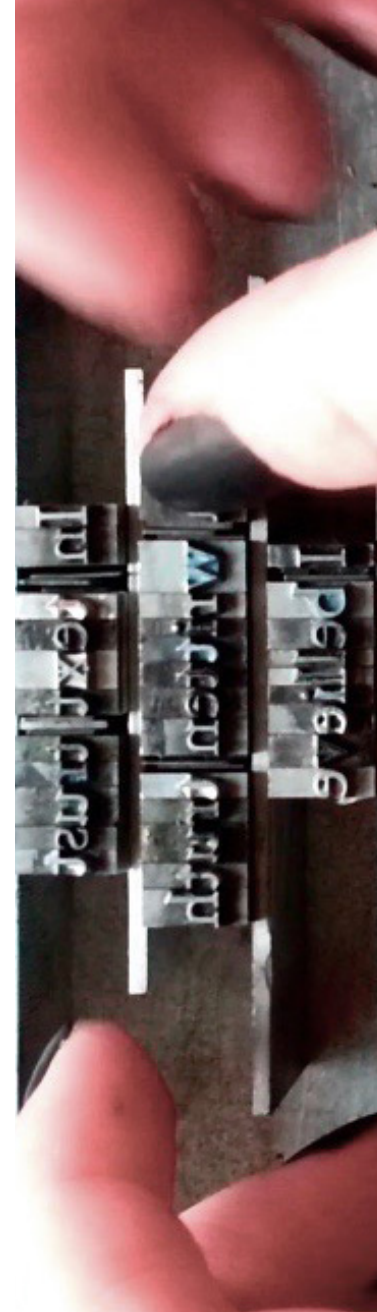
PROCESS

Printmaking is long and laborious process. When you are in so called "working state" you sometimes become not aware of what you do and how you are doing it, however the most important question is why you do that? In this part I will introduce the main characteristics of printmaking and how it leads to my works; what intrigues me and how I use printing medium and text in my art pieces.

In early days some of printmaking techniques like letter press or relief print were mainly used as one of the techniques to reproduce books and texts, maps and images. For that purpose it worked really well: all the techniques, from etching to lithography, were "cutting edge" technologies. However after the invention of digital or offset printing, most of these techniques were adopted or inherited by artists. How Heidegger expresses "[...] when writing was withdrawn from the origin of its essence, i.e., from the hand, and was transferred to the machine, a transformation occurred in the relation of Being to man [...]" (Heidegger, 1962). So it is no coincidence that the invention of the printing press conform with the beginning of the modern period. Printmaking started to serve as one of the ways to express the artistic "drive", to look for different means of how to deliver a piece of art. Some things changed, like it was not so important to follow the exact technicalities, there were more space left for experimenting and self expression. Newer machines were built, but principle left the same. However this archaic way of making art has some nostalgic fascination among artists, the hand crafted technique still attracts young students into studying it, just as it intrigued me as well.



'TO PRINT PRESENCE / TO PRINT ABSENCE' Project Room, 2015 Helsinki

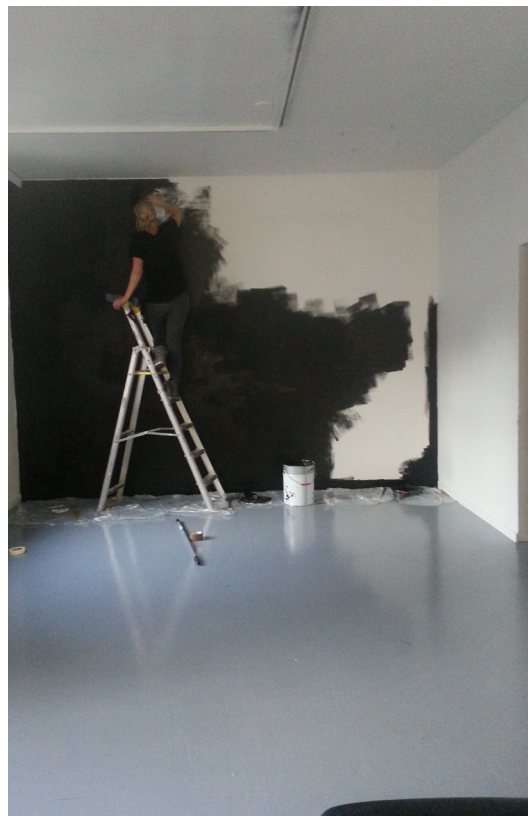


An edition in printmaking is a number of prints printed from the same plate (matrix), mostly during the same period of time. There was a braking point during my study years, when I had to face one of the disadvantages in my relationship with the printmaking - an edition. At some point printmaking for me became more a trouble rather than a solution as a method of expressing myself. The main problem was the image making and multiple reproductions of the same print. Where is an original in the edition of 30 images? Are these images drawn on the lime stone or on the copper plate really represents me or the image itself? These questions became the first break in my view of printmaking. 'Statements' A1 size offset prints, which I made in 2014 became the first works to question that. Where in these prints text goes accordingly to the addition number? How to detect the original in a pile of paper?

For these works I chose to use the offset technique, however the technique itself does not matter that much. The idea was to use the fastest way to make an edition of prints (nowadays offset is used to print newspaper, books etc). Text worked as the representation of the edition numbers: 'This is the first of three' 'This is the second of three' and so on till 'This is the third one'. However the text was not going along with the "original" edition number. The idea was to show and to question the originality in the printmaking. It became a comment like a criss cross game: only three of them were "originals", what meant, the text was going along side the edition number. All edition was exhibited in the gallery 'Project room'.



First stage of the work 'Punishment' 2014-2015 / collecting text



'INCOHERENT STATEMENTS' 2015 Project Room Helsinki 2015.09.17

In 2012 I got more inspired by the writings of philosopher Jacques Derrida and his method of Deconstruction. One of the part in his deconstructive criticism was to question upon the structuralist logic, where according to them, "while the sign is made up of the pairing signifier and signified, it is the signified that has privilege over the mere material from of the signifier (written word 'cat'). That is because the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary: there is no reason why CAT should signify "catness"; any other combination of letters could do the same job... " (*Art Since 1900*, 2012). Text becomes empty and at some point "dead" material to work with; words after they were written can never be the same after. Like the most known Jacques Derrida phrase "There is nothing outside the text" ("Il n'y a rien en dehors du texte"), claiming, that nothing exists behind the written language.

Another work that I presented in my second exhibition was a piece consisting of writing on the floor "To print presence/ To print absence". Work was created as a collaborative piece between me and the viewers in the exhibition. At the beginning, work was not visible, it only appeared when the spectators were walking through it. During the last days of the exhibition, the writing was barely visible: the glue worn off. The idea behind that, was to present the temporality of time and artworks, also to highlight what can be presented as printmaking project. In this case the viewers became the creators/printers of the piece and at the same time they destroyed it. Piece was made only using textual means, simple typographic composition.



'INCOHERENT STATEMENTS' 2015 Project Room Helsinki 2015.09.17

This interest in text lead me forward to come across with the first textual experiments in early 60's America, by the artist John Baldessari, William Anastasi, Joseph Kosuth and the rest of Siegelau group (Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Lawrence Weiner, Seth Siegelau etc.) otherwise known as the begging of conceptual art, how it emerges as the connection between text based art works and critique of formalism as well as the philosophical shift of that time: critique of structuralism and the reduction of text. All this abandonment of the colours and brush strokes and reducing them to the simple text fascinated me (like William Anastasi piece 'Reading a line on the wall'). Text was a crucial vehicle for artists who challenged the notion that an artwork should consist of a physical object. With a shift towards ideas and systems that invited the viewer to engage with an intellectual concept, art became increasingly ephemeral and transient - famously described as the dematerialisation of the art object.

We can not not to read, our eyes sees and we try to read, it doesn't matter in what language. Text attracts us, we are intrigued by it, how it can inform us, but at the same time it can mislead us too. This ambivalence was adopted in my art pieces, I still find this the most intriguing element and material to work with. Of course, making this kind of art could be describes as pointing your finger for the dog – the dog looks at your finger. Is this not deeply connected to the idea of text based art: pointing out the obvious? Text works as the easiest representation of the works: how difficult it is to read? However, it seems that it is more confusing rather easier: you write a text which would point out the main idea, but the spectator still looks at the finger (text), not the direction it is showing. It has been expressed that the text is like half empty half full glass: "[...] empty in the sense of being devoided of all content aside from the facts of its own legibility. Full in the sense then during the moment when the reader reads the reading all distinctions between the content of the work and the activity of the beholder dissolves into a state of self-awareness, immediacy or for the lack of better word, Truth [...]" (Robert Brennan on William Anastasi, 2014). This 'Truth' in the written word will be more questioned in my later works.



Exposing plates 2014 / Studio work

Also, printmaking appeared as one of the techniques to duplicate books by collecting the text using small led letters that allows to make multiple copies of the same writing. During my internship at Manchester's printmaking workshop 'Hot Bed Press' in 2014, I had experience to work alongside typographers and artists who were using letterpress technique. This long process of collecting text blocks lead to the questions about the truth and non questionable *status qua* of the text. We ought to believe, that what is written is supposedly to be true. However this truth became more and more unstable and raised more questions than gave answers: is it really true what is written? In academic surrounding they motivate you to read and analyse, but if I am not doing that or not agreeing with that, what then? Obey what you read? These questions influenced me in creating works of my second part of my master documentation: 'Body' when awareness of my body and the process of printmaking collided.





BODY

We are in constant state with our body, we become aware of it only when some faults happen like cuts, illnesses or traumas. We use it every day, going to work, picking things, printing artwork. What really fascinated me was the repetition of the body movements during printmaking process: roll inks, grind stone, ink the plate, print - repeat. At some point you start to get lost in all of this and how all this bodily movement is visible in print? It is not.

The question with which I was tackling in my work for "Kuvan Kevät", was how to show this process, not in banal documentation, but to find the way to present this "fleshiness" in printmaking. Jean-Paul Sartre expressed that "the body is a part of every perception. It is the immediate past in so far as it still emerges in the present that flees away from it. This means that it is at one and the same time a point of view and a point of departure - a point of view and a point of departure that I am and that I also go beyond as I were off towards what I must become" (Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe, 2012). This idea of the body becoming the surface, the matrix and the printing press, was fixed in my mind for quite a while. Body became a tool for me, and 'a point of departure' for my ideas and also a big part of my perception about art: this timeless object, at the same time still belonging in the present but fleeting away from it, like our selves, our existence, our bodies temporality. I am in constant state with my body, I feel all the faults in it and it brings experiences and ideas. Repetition in printmaking is another reminder of my body limits: printing never lasts long, it is ending at some point when you get tired, you finish edition, make some mistakes and you can not continue.

Falk Heinrich expressed in his article "*Flesh as Communication*" that "[...] all artistic action originates in the living flesh. But the flesh is also a material on which societal structures and values are imprinted." This phrase was the first one for me to bring ideas about the imprints. During my internship, when the text block used to be finished, I would press my palm on the text block, in order to check if the spelling was right. Work 'Punishment' was my first attempt to use my body as a printmaking tool. In this work performance art, video installation and printmaking falls into one object.





'PUNISHMENT' Work in progress / Studio work



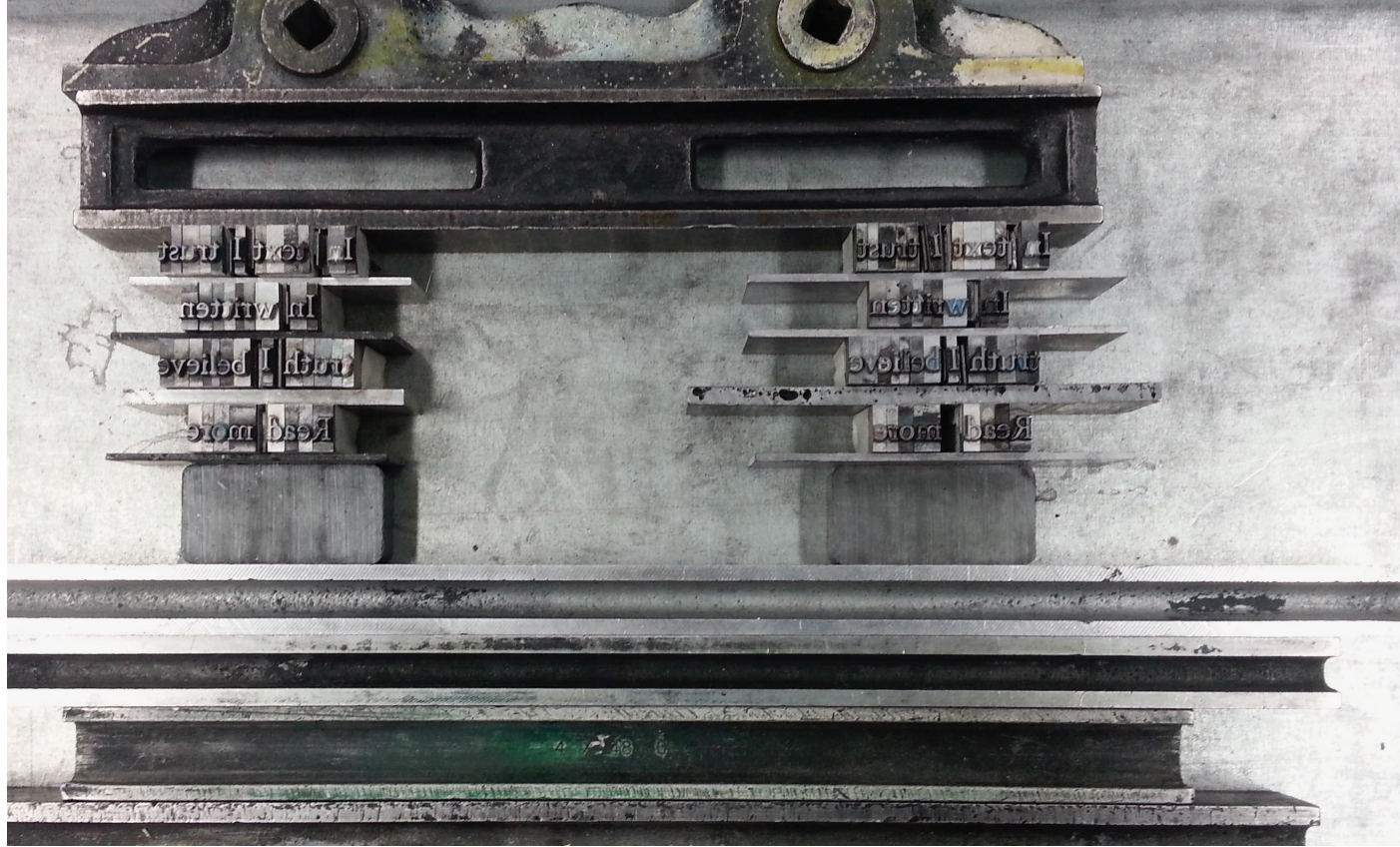
'PUNISHMENT' Left knee

The primary state of the work 'Punishment' was different from the final piece. At the beginning I was struggling with the medium: should it be performance or video installation? At first, the idea was to present all of the process: how the text was collected, how it was locked to the plate. During communication with my supervisor John Court and during many experiments the final work concentrated precisely on the act of kneeling.

From 'Kuvan Kevat' description: "// There were a punishment in the schools: if a pupil is misbehaving, not listening and not doing what s/he is told to do, s/he was sent into a corner to kneel on a dry peas. // //Can truth really be found in a book? I am suspicious of written texts and written knowledge. However, it seems that I need to live by that knowledge anyway... //". I have decided to use my own body as a plate, as a press machine, even as a colour. Regardless of whether I use paper or my own body, I can make imprints, relief prints and print letters or do mark making. Why not take the printmaking method and put it into a new environment? This work is the first experiment where I try to combine what on a first glance seem to be very different medias: printmaking, video and performance art.

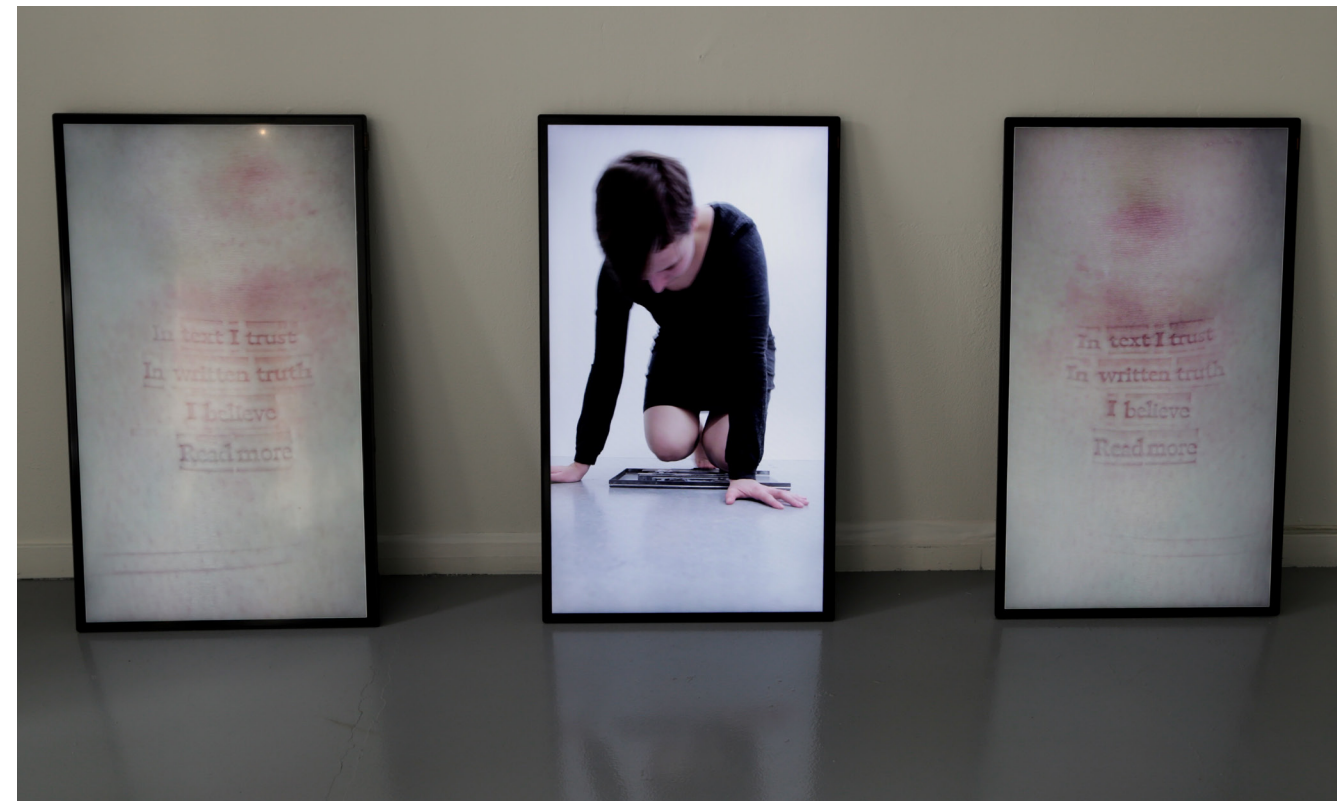
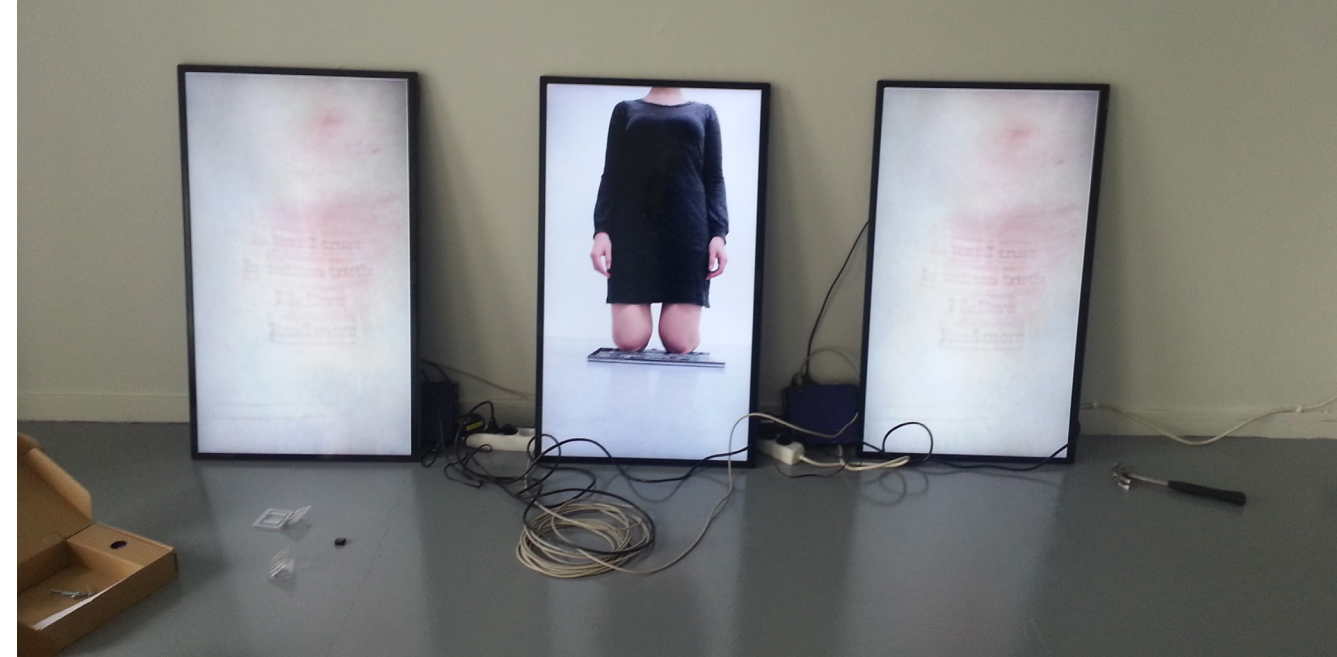
In this work the main act was concentrated on the kneeling part: very minimalistic, but at the same time very violent act. On the side monitors viewers were able to see how the text slowly disappear from my knees, and repeats again. Text on my knees "In text I trust In written truth I believe Read more" looked like an empty mantra or constant reminder to do that. Disappearance presents my doubts about truth in texts (any text: books, newspapers, articles, critiques...). At some point texts becomes unreadable and I leave the plate.





'PUNISHMENT' Kneeling plate /Led letters

For my second exhibition I have created two video performances under one title 'Frustration'. These works like previous ones, reflected on the printmaking and the text problem. In these videos I was also concentrating on the idea of simulacra - copy without the original. For this purpose I have decided to use my artist statement as a 'point of departure'. Writing description of myself always troubled me and the main cause for that was that I could not see myself in written text. This became another analytical point for my works: how to find yourself there? In the first video you can see me sitting with my back turn to the viewer. I am writing something on my back. Another video is where I am trying to put led letters used in typography on my face and to keep them there. In both videos I fail. This struggle represents the endeavour I have with the writing and the disconnection between myself and the text about me: I do not see myself there. The text in both videos is my artist's statement, the same text was in the description papers and in my portfolio. Text at some point became a copy of me, without me (copies without the original). False claim of being.



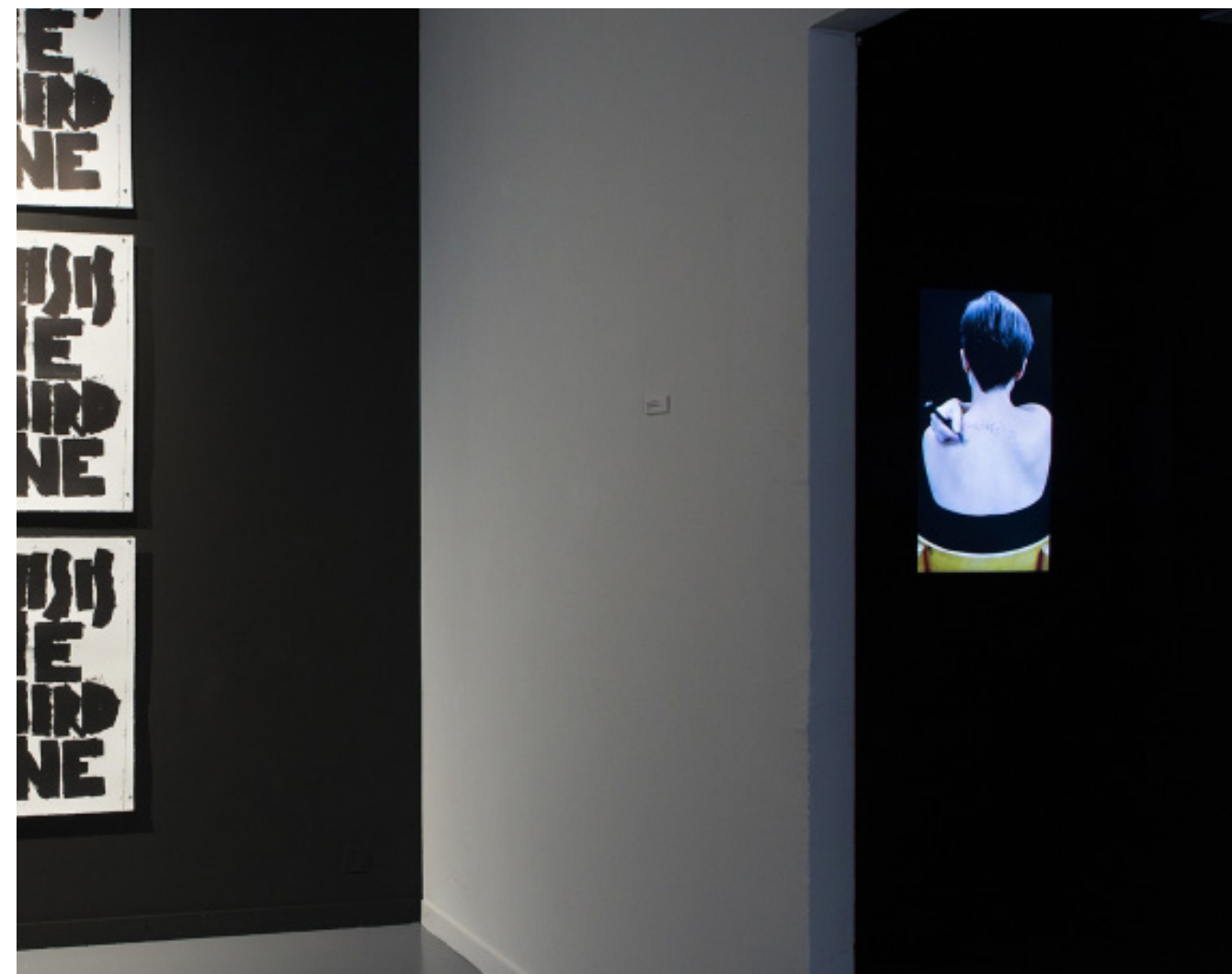
'PUNISHMENT' Installing for Kuvan/Kevat 2015.05.05

Performative act and video is becoming the major choice of media for me. Body experiments started to interest me only couple years ago, I have never worked deeply with it before. Mostly I perform to video camera, it becomes a mediator between myself and my ideas. "But what if there's no audience present? Or if my 'audience' is simply a video camera, framing what I'm doing in duration and document? Can this be considered as performance?" . These questions are widely analysed by the artists like David Buuck, and as so far, it is hard to say if they reached some sort of conclusion. For me audience never matters during my work, I am more concentrated on the final product and how that final image will affect (or not) the viewer, will they understand what I am trying to say or not.

Of course, video performance always loses something, in this case liveness, the connection with the viewer and at some point sense of the presence. However it has also the unlimited time, work becomes timeless. Body is a limiting one, it can not repeat the same action perfectly without any problems: at some point it would brake the repetition. Video allows me to repeat every action perfectly, like in Bill Viola's 'Emergence' or Gary Hill's 'Up Against Down' video installations. Furthermore, video brings the possibility of montage, like in the examples mentioned, artist can slow the time or increase it and create different compositions. Then again, my personal approach is to avoid any alteration to the video, try to keep as lively as possible, show all that happens. It could be argued that my works became a documentation of the process. To some level it can be perceived like that, but the way the video is composed and filmed (it was never performed lively or with audience) brings a different notion. I like to control the the point of view, to show exactly where and how to look; no distractions like people walking in front of the camera or background sounds as in documentations. Video allows me to focus only on the main idea of the work, the main spot. This is the major reason why I do not see myself as pure performance artist, there is a different in working specificity, but of course it always depends on the idea and the work.



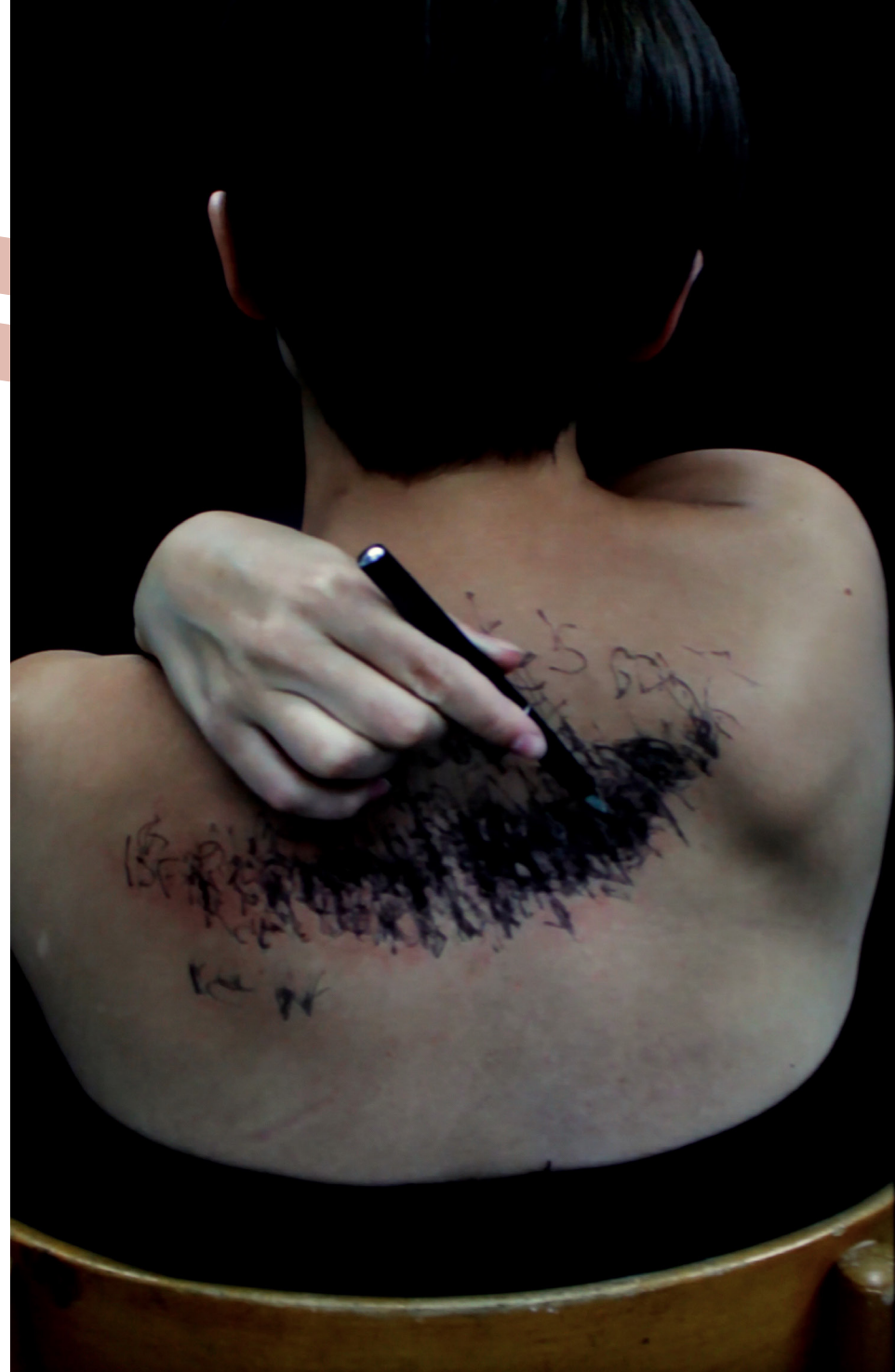
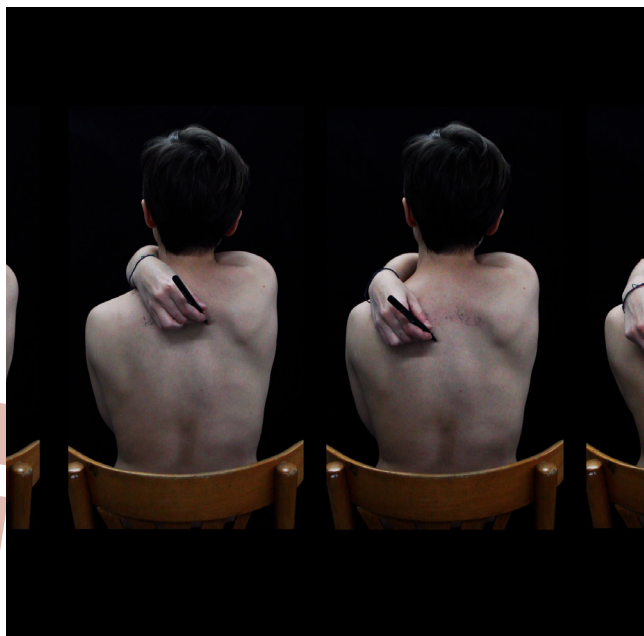
'INCOHERENT STATEMENTS' 2015 Project Room Helsinki 2015.09.17

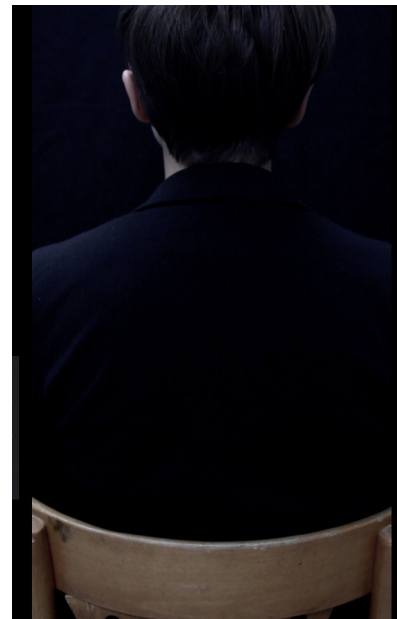


'FRUSTRATION' Project Room Helsinki 2015.09.17



'FRUSTRATION' both video works were exhibited in front of each other, in the dark space at Project Room 2015.09.17



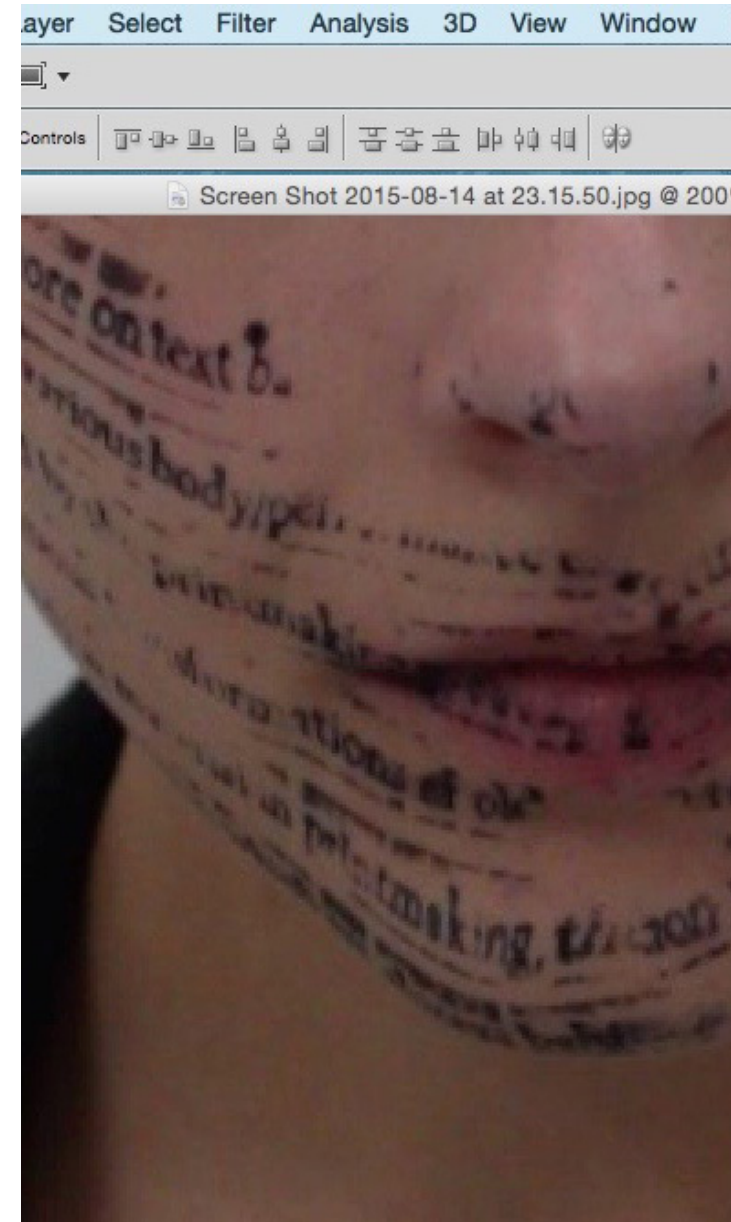


PRESENCE

According to the more classical notion, the state or fact of existing, occurring, or being at this moment is being present. What does it mean to be present or in other words contemporary in printmaking?

Printmaking uses a vast amount of old techniques, some of them older than others. Can an artist working now, but using painting techniques and manner of 16th century can be defined as contemporary? These questions always troubled me. On the other hand, the idea of contemporaneity is very unstable and also very problematic. According to Kant it is just an idea, an object beyond possible experience. So how to point out a contemporary artist and what are the characteristics of one?

My personal relationship to this is closely similar to the ideas of philosopher Peter Osborne. He pointed out that "an anti-aesthetic use of aesthetic material", "post medium condition" (do not necessarily stick to one medium) and "a historical flexibility of the borders of this unity" (Peter Osborne 2010) could be described as contemporary approach in art. My artistic practice falls into the section of mixed media arts, even though I am working as a printmaker, I am constantly shifting between mediums. This gives me a bigger variety of different ways to express my ideas. I believe that contemporary artists should be willing to experiment in order to not get stuck in working process, to constantly look for different ways of expression.



More on text

There is a final element I wish to highlight, the way I use philosophy in my artworks. Conceptual/contemporary art is proposing and creating new approach to it: it is not asking a question upon itself, it is asking its viewers to start questioning. My personal approach to the artistic ideas was always through the philosophical prism. Furthermore, I believe art as well as the philosophy never provided any clear answers. Art is devoid of clear meanings, it can just give a hint of possible significance of the an idea. For this reason I never try to explain my works too much, each spectator has their own perception of things and it is highly influenced by what is happening around them. Sometimes, when compared to philosophy, art may have a disadvantage from its failure to propositionally verbalise concepts. And yet, art has an enormous advantage in its ability to use perception as a tool to look for new ways of expressing self-consciousness. In this point art can co-exist with philosophy. Like I expressed before, it has ability of indicating people of their own perception, which is a key feature of self consciousness.

All fine art techniques from painting to printmaking are only the means of delivery. Bering in mind that everything changes so fast we can not keep up constantly with modern technologies. After sixty years we will not use digital printing any more. If so, would old techniques like printmaking still exists? Considering the fascination of the old, I think it will. Personally, it is still intriguing to use seldom techniques. Even though they are half of a century old, they can also bring new experiences. It all depends on the idea and the artist who is using them.

REFERENCES

- HEIDEGGER, MARTIN. *Being and Time*. Trans: John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. 1962.
- Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and David Joselit *Art Since 1900 Modernism · Antimodernism · Postmodernis* 2012
- ROBERT BRENNAN on William Anastasi <http://artequalstext.aboutdrawing.org/william-anastasi/>
- DANIEL MEYER-DINKGRÄFE *Consciousness, Theatre, Literature and the Arts* Cambridge Scholars Publishing; 1st Unabridged edition (January 1, 2012)
- FALK HEINRICH *Flesh as Communication -- Body Art and Body Theory* www.contempaesthetics.org
- DAVID BUUCK *What is performance writing?* <http://jacket2.org/commentary/what-performance-writing>
- PETER OSBORNE Public Lecture, Fondazione Antonio Ratti, Villa Sucota, Como, 9 July 2010 *Contemporary art is post-conceptual art*