

**Artist and art being Politically and Socially Engaged - Threat or Possibility
(some concrete/ opinions)**

Introduction

During my trips to Russia between 2007-2013, I saw the political history of Finland and Russia in relation to communism and capitalism as social constructions, or as distinct terms defining the value systems. For me, communism was a socio-economical and a political system, which aimed to achieve a class free society, equality and communal ownership. I recognized some of the same goals in Finnish society, for example equality in education and health care, as well as the role of the government as the owner, dealer and controller of equality. We have called this social democracy. For me it is clear that social democracy as a political ideology has been pushed aside while neoliberal capitalism has sneaked in like an "emperor in new clothes". But every now and then it is possible to see that the emperor is in fact naked.

After examining capitalism both in Finland and Russia, I started to see it more as a counter movement against communist and socialistic energy. My understanding of capitalism was that it was a part of an economic system, in which the capital and production are privately owned while working for the ideology of the neoliberal economic policy. According to these ideologies private ownership, free trade, and free market, are the most effective in promoting wellbeing and happiness. Soon I started considering neoliberal policies such as lowering the taxes; promoting the private ownership and competition; replacing political activism with market regulation; welfare society financed by the redistribution of income; and breaking down international trade barriers, as an integral part of an ideology. That is if an ideology can be defined as a value system or a structure based on individual and community world views, and ideas can be considered as impulses and ways of thinking, for example developing solutions to problems. (See for example Wikipedia: communism, capitalism, social democracy, neoliberalism, ideology and notion) In my art, I have wanted to examine, question, and highlight these ideologies by, for example, casting them in concrete.

1. The theoretical and social starting points of my artistic work

My interest in politically and socially engaged art has been present in my exhibitions and art works since 2007. At the time I am writing this, politically and socially engaged art is up front more than it has been for a while. The Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki is presenting *Tottelemattomuuskoulu*, or in English *School of Disobedience* by Jani Leinonen, and a theme exhibition *ERI MIELTÄ – Nykyaiteen toisinajattelijoita*, or in English *Demonstrating Minds* by 19 international artists. We are in the middle of a crisis, and the artists in *ERI MIELTÄ* are addressing current issues in many ways. The exhibition has a scale model of a protest as “photos of socially engaged photos” as Kiasma website describes the work of an Irish artist **Tom Molloy**. Kiasma museum assistant Kati Kivinen describes Molloy's art work *Protest* (2012). She writes that the photos from various decades are squeezed in on a narrow shelf, where paper dolls cut out from newspapers and internet prints are all demonstrating their opinions. The result is a mishmash of contradicting opinions: protesters are supporting causes from women's rights to local disputes, from pro drugs to against drugs. (Kivinen, 2015: Kiasma_blog/ <http://blog.kiasma.fi/blog/?p=2389> / 4.3.2016)

It is refreshing to see art work that shows that there are still artists who are genuinely interested in what is happening in the world, and who as artists want to comment on, and highlight important issues. The European economy is struggling, and this is not made – at least emotionally – any easier by the flood of refugees heading to Europe. No one knows where we're headed to. But is a photo of a photo enough? For example, is *Tottelemattomuuskoulu* by **Jani Leinonen** credible when it is presented in an obedient institution of Kiasma? Do we as artists have any other options? What is the role of an artist? **Teemu Mäki** has made his artistic work easier for himself by stating that art indeed has a job instead of scrabbling in the darkness. He explains that the most important job art has is philosophical, political and social reflection. This doesn't mean that art is a sub-field of philosophy or politics, and it is not their tool. Art messes around the same questions as politics and philosophy but in it's own way. Art deals with the most important, hurtful, and disputed questions. It asks: How to live? and Why to live?

(Mäki 2005/2009: *Näkyvä pimeys*, 69-70) In his *Interventionistinen manifesti* (2012),

Kalle Lampela makes artistic work more difficult by presenting seven reasons not to make art. According to Lampela, the first reason not to make art is the unclarity. He explains that even

though he is an artist and makes art, he is not sure how to make art, and what makes one object or visual experience art and the other one not. There are no general or clear criteria to define artifacts as art. (Lampela 2012, *Taiteilijoita tarvitaan ihan toisenlaisiin hommiin - Tutkimus kuvataiteilijoiden asenteista ja taiteen yhteiskuntakriittisistä mahdollisuuksista*, 173).

I guess it is impossible to be sure if the definition by Mäki is the only correct definition for art but if artists know the starting point and reasons for their art work, it makes it easier to rely on possible professional principles. Often artists seem to have difficulties finding these principles. I want to refer to a Finnish sculptor **Pekka Jylhä** and his plans to erect a look-alike sculpture identical to the refugee boy who died in the coast of Turkey. My question is: why? Pekka Jylhä answers by explaining that he thinks it is the artist's job to bring these kind of issues up. He continues by stating he doesn't have answers to difficult questions but his way is to bring them up so that the issue is not forgotten or hidden. Jylhä's reasoning behind this artistic act is clarified by the way he thinks about his possibilities of making an influence in the society. Jylhä describes that he sees the world visually. Until he saw the photo of a drowned child, he had felt indifferent about the events but the photo "woke him up". He wondered what he could do. (Koppinen 2015, HS: <http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/a1444886663832/> 4.3.2016). Jylhä's comments leave me wondering if an artist, who apparently doesn't seem to have delved into the subject more than by looking at one photo in the media, can have so much power that if he wants to, he can use his fame (and money) to gain visibility for his own conclusions of the refugee crisis. Money and fame create more money and fame which enable the artist to continue presenting one point of view while ego-tripping inside his own bubble of power. In my opinion, it is worth asking if making a look-alike sculpture in the coast of Turkey or a gallery (<https://helsinkicontemporary.com/> 4.3.2016) is a constructive way to make an influence, for example on the asylum seekers' situation? How much does the artist benefit from the dangerous situation the refugees are in, and to which extent do the distressed people create the whole content of Jylhä's art? Jylhä's exhibition in Gallery Contemporary is titled "We Have Inherited Hope – the Gift of Forgetting". Does Jylhä end up reinforcing the unspoken and forgetful practices with the title? How important or creative is art that reinforces old ways of thinking? In my opinion, **Timo Wright's** installation *Kharon* (Galerie Anhavassa 2-28.2.2016) represents similar kind of art that points fingers at the faults and repeats the facts. The installation consists of life jackets collected from the Greek island of Lesbos. The content of this art work is also created by the distressed people and the artist doesn't offer any alternatives, solutions, and doesn't even tell who or what could be the cause of the distress. Compared to Jylhä's look-alike sculpture of the

refugee boy, Wright's installation is more sophisticated but on the other hand, I don't think even the more sensitive approach can rescue the art work, let alone the people needing to be rescued.

In her article *Taide nykypolitiikan välineenä (Art as a tool for contemporary politics)* in *Taide* magazine, artist **Jaana Kokko** states that political contemporary art can be made by either making art that points at the faults in society so that the critical content itself has enough of a political message; or by artists borrowing the practices of direct action from activists, and as an individual or a group modifying socially engaged action so that the action has a clear political and a change-making goal. (Kokko 2012, *Taide-lehti*: http://www.taidelehti.fi/arkisto/taide_3-12/artikkelit_3-12). The latter represents activist art, which according to **Ulla Karttunen** was born as a hybrid of art world practices and communal change at the end of 1960s, and has since, in 1990s at the latest, formed into its own form of art. (Karttunen 2008, *Aktivistinen taide, aikamme rappiotaide?* *Taide-lehti* 4-08, 40-45) Lampela (2012, 76) considers artist **Joseph Beuys** as the pioneer of activist art. Lampela highlights Beuys' idea that through creativity it is possible to achieve a society that functions in a morally right way. According to Lampela, for Beuys creativity meant being awake, thinking, and alertness. Beuys was concerned about the mute surrender to expectations of any power regimes. Lampela concludes that contemporary activist art deriving from Beuys, Fluxus movement, and Situationists International, can be seen as a special expression of aesthetics of the 2000s. (Lampela 2012, 76-77) Activist opinions can be seen in the interviews of Lampela's research but the artists representing these ideas are situated in the traditional institutional art scene. The results of this kind of thinking are often art works not connected to reality, described by Kokko in her first definition of socially and politically engaged art. It would be fair to assume that activist artists could try to make a difference by their art work and also as citizens, according to Lampela (Lampela 2012, 79).

According to Ulla Karttunen (*Aktivistinen taide, aikamme rappiotaide?/Activist art, the contemporary degenerate art; Taide* magazine 4-08, 40-45), activist art is focused on the reality and process instead of the art world and the artifact. Thus the main goal is social change and art that is not merely art but tries to have an influence on the surrounding society. Karttunen thinks that activist art has been born as an opposition to the art view that trusts ready-made artifacts; that is aesthetic and static; and that is focused on objects and markets. Whereas Leinonen tries to challenge the traditional way of making art and focusing on the objects, I think he fails in his attempts already because it is not possible to enter Disobedience School without money. Kiasma

only has free entrance the first Friday of every month, and the live events of Disobedience School where the audience had a chance to meet the “disobedience teacher” all cost money.

According to Jaana Kokko, the curators of the 7th Berlin Biennale, Polish **Artur Z. Mijewski** and **Joanna Warsza** as well as the Russian group *Voina*, see art mostly as an active tool of contemporary politics. According to the curators, artists should harness their creative capacity for social action, and art institution would be mostly a place for political gathering. Both artists and activists took part in the 7th Berlin Biennial in 2012. As Kokko sees it, *Forget Fear – 7th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Politics* was an exhibition concept that tried to wake up the sleeping viewer to see global power relations and make him show his solidarity. (Kokko 2012, *Taide* magazine: http://www.taidelehti.fi/arkisto/taide_3-12/artikkelit_3-12). I think that if Kiasma in its socially active-passive role is able to do something important, that is to wake up the sleeping audience which includes the school students who are also the future of our society. From an educational point of view, it can be meaningful that in Kiasma the youth will see socially and politically engaged art as well as art representing international crisis instead of any other kind of art. Leinonen might actually be right in stating that our only option might be disobedience because that's all we have left. In that case Tom Molloy's *Protest* can be seen as an image of one kind of disobedience, and based on that the audience can continue their own independent and perhaps even disobedient thinking.

In Leinonen's Disobedience School the teachers and authority figures were politician **Li Andersson**, musician **Karri "Paleface" Miettinen**, TV characters **Riku Rantala & Tunna Milonoff**, theologist **Marjaana Toiviainen**, and a street artist **Sampsa**. Some of these disobedience school teachers have received a lot of publicity but who were missing among them were the real contemporary disobedients such as anarchists, environmental and animal activists, and volunteer workers. I think that the true activist art as an extreme process is a risk for a traditional artist because in relation to the mainstream cultural politics, the activists represent the voice of minorities in the society, and are often outsiders when it comes to political parties and power structures. According to Karttunen (2008), activist art that has strong aspirations of change and having an impact is close to "tendence aesthetics" (tendenssiestetiikka); and when it turns into direct action, it breaks outside the concept and ceases to be art in its strict definition. Why is Jani Leinonen's disobedience school participating in a strike-like demonstration wearing costumes of *Kinder egg*, *Hello Kitty*, *Ronald McDonald*, and the Finnish *Elovena* girl? Does Leinonen believe that if he

participates in the demonstration as a part of his art work (without having to physically be present), he can have more of an influence than if he participates as himself? Apparently Jani Leinonen doesn't want to take a risk that activism stays but art disappears. Why not? I will answer this question for Leinonen: because he thinks about his status and income. What's in common between Jani Leinonen's public character and a Kinder egg? They both want to make money at other peoples' expense. Is it possible that the *Kinder* egg is accidentally mocking the demonstration on September 18th, 2015 in Helsinki? Should Leinonen be concerned about this possible misunderstanding? Leinonen explains that he has received some negative comments saying that he was like youth from the National Coalition party, which he finds an amusing interpretation. He says 90 % of the comments were positive. (**Linnankoski**, *Metro* newspaper 18.9.2015/ <http://www.metro.fi/uutiset/a1387814386639/> 26.10.2015) If I was Leinonen, I would be concerned because the comment might have been a healthy and on point observation from the margins.

If I make socially critical art, what are the starting points and thought processes behind it? I have made socially and politically engaged art between 2007-2012 mostly according to Kokko's (2012) first definition, that is producing art works for the traditional context such as an art gallery. The content of the art works is mildly implying that it has a critical position when it comes to a certain social phenomenon. Part of my degree art for the Academy of Fine Arts, *Kaatumaton, Kommunismin ja kapitalismin muistomerkki* (in English: *The Unfallable, The Memorial of Communism and Capitalism*), shows signs of me trying to move away from the traditional settings, to a non-place, or at least to the backyard of art institutions (see **Levonen-Kantomaa, Hanna ja Kantomaa, Taito** (2013): *Mikä ihmeen kapitalismi? Tai ihmeen suuri betoninukke (tai joku muu)*. ½ magazine no: 2/ 2013. <http://www.puolilehti.fi/2013/11/16/mika-ihmeen-kapitalismi-tai-ihmeen-suuri-betoninukke-tai-joku-muu/>). Also the second part of my degree art, shown in *Kuvan Kevät Degree Show* (2013), was a step towards certain kind of direct action. Direct action in a gallery space was mostly about exposing myself as an artist to direct interaction through conversations and activities with the audience. After my degree shows I have moved little by little towards activist art. I have felt the need for social change and action. In practice, I have found myself being a part of the political demonstrations as an artist, who in one hand should try to make herself and her thoughts visible, and on the other hand should remain as one with the group and support it without standing out too much. Artists should be aware of the fact that they can, even unwittingly, end up using disadvantaged people to promote their career (an example of this is

Leinonen's art work *Anything Helps*, in front of which he paid Romanian beggars to pose).
(Viljanen 2015,HS:<http://www.hs.fi/kulttuuri/a1441166869447#/26.10.2015>).

As an artist I have wanted to fill the physical space and mental hollowness of socially and politically engaged art. The way Teemu Mäki defines critical art supports my view. Mäki explains that critical art is never-ending questioning. Critical art is made if one sees a state of the matter, a way of thinking, or a phenomenon untruthful and shady. Critical art aims for the truth, even though truth is relative. It thrives to be the opposite of escapism. The aim for the truth can be called a certain kind of realism. In either way it is about art that has a critical approach to the prevalent reality and the way to experience it – no matter if the prevalent reality is inside one's head or the social reality. Mäki adds that artistic questioning is questioning which has a starting point as a switch in the point of view. For example the faults of economically well justified structure are only seen when the structure is being examined by another point of view than the economics. This is why Mäki thinks that critical art is always using language that is uncalled for and inappropriate. (Mäki 2005/2009: *Näkyvä pimeys*, 121) I assume Mäki also has a critical approach to art works by artists such as Jani Leinonen and Pekka Jylhä that in my opinion merely borrow the images of prevalent reality and try to make it look questionable – while at the same time strengthening the power and pompousity of it by giving it more visibility and attention.

According to artist **Minna Henriksson**, **political art** is made but it is often not seen by the large audience. She explains that political art isn't mostly in Kiasma or other big institutions but it is in the margins. She goes on to state there is art that looks like political art but that at the end is not political but only strengthens the existing hegemony. According to Henriksson, many artists are political because they decide to stay in the margins. (Helsingin Sanomat/ Kulttuuri 3.11.2010:http://yle.fi/uutiset/poliittinen_taide_ei_kiinnosta_museoita_ja_mediaa/5662871) This makes me ask myself why I constantly agree to stay as a part of the silent opposition, and try not to be loud and tireless in getting attention to myself and my art. Is it because I am incapable and lazy, or because I am indifferent when it comes to money, and this is a part of a self-destructive behaviour without the will to survive, and because I am

unable to adapt to the capitalist society? Maybe I feel stronger hiding in the bush where I can set traps to capture the big guys, and process the surrounding world at my own pace.

Henriksson determines that contemporary art discussion doesn't really discuss political art but **socially engaged art** because the term "political" can be seen as frightening. Henriksson continues by explaining that political art can be linked to social realism – when art is working as a part of politics. She says even now the cultural politics set many expectations to art, and these expectations strengthen certain kinds of politics. Art is made instrumental as a part of neoliberal capitalism. (Henriksson 2010, HS) I find this an obvious fact in the modern society. It is amazing that even though the signs of tying the processes and goals of art into the prevalent ideology of continuing economical growth are so obviously visible, most artists still believe in the autonomy and self-sufficiency of art. In his doctoral thesis, Lampela asks if art is an island of freedom in the society of necessities; and if the free arts represent anarchist-individual ethos which is per se against prevalent governing politics, and emphasizes personal independence. According to Lampela, most of the artists he interviewed for his research represent this anarchist-individual ethos and believe that art has a historical intrinsic value. Lampela emphasizes that adopting this discourse of supporting the autonomy of art doesn't tell that most of the interviewed artists support so called freedom of artists, but only a few talk about protecting or building the automic status of art, or bringing it back to society. Lampela rightly asks how art can be autonomic if it's not guaranteed an autonomic status in the society, and answers his own question by stating that only by individual resistance. (Lampela 2012, 124)

What does Henriksson mean when she criticizes the cultural politics? I interpret that it is about the ways neoliberal capitalism and our economic structure defines the values that also affect art. For example artist training workshop organized by The Artists' Association of Finland and Haaga Helia University of Applied Sciences (pvm.12.2015) had many different presenters and guests who seemed to have one very one-sided message: brand yourself and your art, otherwise the media isn't interested, and if the media isn't interested, then also the large audience isn't interested. But above all: if the large audience isn't interested, then the media isn't interested. I see that the artists are encouraged or even pressured to brand themselves.

Am I being naive when I'm scared that if I brand myself and my art, I become a product and turn into a low and cheap fast food, quick and easy to consume? I don't want to be easy and predictable. What do I want? I want the viewers to step out of their comfort zone when they get close to my art. I want my art to challenge the viewers to think and question. Art can show what brands are about but if art itself turns into a brand, I think it ceases to be art and turns into something else. As an example, I want to bring up Jani Leinonen and especially his art work *The Most Terrible Things* (Kiasma, 2015) that criticizes brands. Jani Leinonen himself describes his work in relation to brands by saying that there are products for every ideology. He continues by stating that products and the brands representing them have a huge role in our lives, and that's why it is interesting to use them in art, and use them for art, and through them tell stories that the companies won't tell. (<http://www.kiasma.fi/nayttelyt-ja-ohjelmisto/jani-leinonen/> 20.3.2016) If I know what is expected from me, I am strong enough to be what I want to be, without making unconscious compromises. In my art, I want to give room for the margins instead of the ones that are already too visible. I want to make invisible visible, and give silence a voice. But that can't happen by abusing the margins, invisibility, and silence. In my art I can create new situations and practices that represent and make other ways of thinking and existing visible and heard, doing my small part to emphasize the status of humanity instead of money-talks. That's also when an artist takes a risk to question her authority and engages in an antihierarchic action.

Brand is power. According to Rastenberg (2006 *The Helsinki School – täysi oppimäärä brändäyksessä. Kulttuurintutkimus* 23 (2006): 4, 13–26.), branding means separating an idea or a product from other similar ones by using a marketing strategy based on images. Rastenberg continues that the consumers are committed to this strategically constructed identity and story and the more committed they are to a brand, the more global and political power it has. I see that when a consumer buys a product, he thinks he knows what he gets. Even the process of buying plays with the feeling of power: the consumer thinks he has the power, and knows where he is spending his money. More likely he ends up buying a piece of subconscious shame, the sin of hyperconsumerism, and the acceptance of abusing the poor.

Are brands born in a different way from art works? Don't art works also have their stories that the artist hopes the art audience will "buy"? There are artifacts that are easily and predictably produced in certain numbers, and have a standard of quality to them. Artists can brand their art work and themselves without a problem.

But how is my art different from, for example, the art of Jani Leinonen? I feel like good art has aspects of surprise, physical and mental roughness, uncertainty, unpredictability, risk-taking, and braveness. And of course criticality. Good artists continue to take risks, and also risk the success of their so called "brand". When artists become secure and predictable, as Jani Leinonen might have become, they easily turn into boring, and their art works turn into products reproducing the old, even if they are unique paintings and not reproducible graphic art prints or stickers for instance.

When I organized the exhibition *Picnic For The Sad* in 2013 as a part of the Kuvan Kevät graduation group exhibition, I consciously took a risk that maybe no one would buy my idea, the story of my art, because it was thematically unpredictable and dubious (death, sorrow and Russia). Finally the exhibition wasn't a money maker but the audience embraced the idea. It is probably hard to consider to own photos of dead people as well as concrete sculptures, which are actually also an integral part of a whole-room-installation, and an arena for comprehensive performance and participation. As well The sculpture *The Unfallable, The Memorial Of Communism and Capitalism* (2013), that was a part of my other degree exhibition, and that already sits in a public space, is probably not an interesting thing to own as it is already publically owned. I think that when art consumers face my art work, they get the most out of it when they don't have to pay for it. In the prevalent economic system this kind of utopistic thinking will more than likely end up being an economical suicide for me.

2. Kaatumaton/ The "Unfallable" (2012), Degree Exhibition, Part I

Kaatumaton (*The "Unfallable"*) consisted of two parts: an exhibition in the Academy of Fine Arts Gallery *Fafa* in December 2012, and a 2-meter tall concrete sculpture *Kaatumaton, Kommunismen ja Kapitalismen muistomerkki* (*The "Unfallable", The Memorial of Communism and Capitalism*) behind the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi. My artistic process has been long: I started the sketching of *Kaatumaton* exhibition already during years 2008-2010. The art works of *Kaatumaton* didn't find their final form without difficulties even though the elements seem to be mainly the same as in my other productions in 2007-2012: concrete sculptures combined with other media (video and photographs).

The exhibition in Gallery *Fafa* consisted of two art works. One was an installation called *Ka(a)tumattomat (The "Unfallables"/ The ones who won't regret)*. On the back wall was projected a video about huge *Nevaljashka* doll swaying from one side to another, and in front of the projection, on an oriental rug on the floor, were *Nevaljashka* dolls (casted in concrete) arranged in a triangle form. The other work was a photograph of a similar doll figure as a 2-meter concrete sculpture in the woods in Rovaniemi. Next to the photograph was a miniature model of the planned sculpture. These two art works were brought together by the sounds on the background of the video, that was the swinging sound of the *Nevaljashka* doll that I had recorded and slowed down. In the installation the swaying doll is in a way trying to hypnotize the viewer, and many people did find the art work somewhat numbing. (see the attached dvd)

After Kuvan Kevät degree show in 2013, I cast a 2-meter tall *Kaatumaton, Kommunismen ja kapitalismin muistomerkki* in the back woods behind the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi. This sculpture is a part of the exhibition shown in Gallery *Fafa*, and the conclusion of my artistic process or this research to Russian culture and reality. Through this sculpture I disclose my conclusions of Russia, its history, the changes in the economy in Finland and Russia, as well as the shared destiny of our countries face capitalism. In my opinion, it would be irrational to resuscitate the capitalistic system that believes in the utopistic, endlessly continuing growth ideology with its banks and imaginary money. It would have been as irrational to continue lying to oneself and continue the communistic government, as it is to continue following old capitalistic doctrine in the middle of an economic and environmental crisis. With my sculpture I try to provoke passers-by to ask themselves: What communism? What capitalism? What memories? The sculpture in Rovaniemi has made the people, from children to elders, passing it by on the trail to stop; smile; and wonder. That is perhaps the best I can achieve through my work. People have also been thankful that art is brought to them, instead of placing it in the ready-chosen, ready-made squares of city centres.

In *Puoli* magazine (2/2013: <http://www.puolilehti.fi/2013/11/16/mika-ihmeen-kapitalismi-tai-ihmeen-suuri-betoninukke-tai-joku-muu/> luettu 4.3.2016), **Hanna Levonen-Kantomaa** and **Taito Kantomaa** write about their trip to see the concrete doll in the woods, with their goal to write a whole family art critique. In the critique Taito Kantomaa wonders about the relationship between my art work and the place around. He writes that the place is a starting point for the interpretation. The sculpture is in the backyard

near garbage containers, surrounded by service truck routes, and behind of it is a small wooded area, and beyond that a swamp, a pond, and in the background the silhouette of the city. Kantomaa asks if this is where a memorial belongs. Tucked away, hidden, forgotten in the backyard of a university. In the backyard of not only knowledge and the institution of knowledge, but also of the culture of knowledge. As if it was brought up there inside the institution, but when it grew big, it was tossed away. And there it stayed, provoking thoughts of passers-by.

My sculpture is not alone in the woods. Across from the sculpture stands Kalle Lampela's and **Eemil Karila's** (*Santa Claus association*) concrete sculpture called *Mr. Confectioner*, a Santa Claus figure covered in tar, criticizing the western neoliberalism. I wanted to cast a young lady representing the eastern exotics as a companion to *Mr. Confectioner*, and I believe they have a lot in common they can discuss about. Hanna Levonen-Kantomaa wonders what the relationship between my art work and the Santa Claus is. She is bothered by the closeness to the capitalistic caricature resembling the Santa Claus. She feels like content-wise the art works are engaged in a discussion with each other. She sees that both of the art works are about consuming, and the conflicted relationship between Lapland, Finland and Russia. (Levonen-Kantomaa Hanna and Taito, 2013) When Levonen-Kantomaa highlights the conflicted relationship to Russia, she hits the nail on the head.

I have tried to display conflicts by choosing the topics and materials of my art works. Typically I contrast conflicting topics and materials, such as heavy concrete to display the culture branded by heavy history, for example by using children's toys as a theme for the work. This is how masculine material faces feminine care, childhood and motherhood. I am fascinated by the culture offered to children because I see it reflecting the values of the surrounding society and the goals adults have. The cartoon movies from the Soviet era show how the artists were trying to emphasize the communist virtues and ideals that they wanted to support. Some of these ideals were beautiful and worth thriving for, such as solidarity, empathy, caring, loving, and working together as one. But at its worst, even these cartoons show the ideals as blatant propaganda. What does the modern toy industry offer to children? Girls learn from a young age that the more you look like a *BRÄTZ* doll, the more popular you are, and everyone – including the toys – spend their time consuming: shopping at the mall and stores. Children are naturally open-minded when it comes to a variety of practices, and they could be inspired to adopt practices where their dolls and teddy bears are active agents and spend their time doing other things than consuming ready-made concepts.

Children are extremely sensitive and absorb information like a sponge. The TV ad jingles get stuck in their heads, and will be remembered even when they are old, the same way Soviet era children remember the songs and the few toys that were around at that time. *Nevaljashka* doll, *Kaatumaton*, is one of those toys: the first toy of the Soviet era, designed to teach a baby coordination and other good and healthy characteristics. Of course people living during the era didn't see the doll as a memorial for communistic (let alone capitalist) era, but as plastic product of the 60s, beginning of the mass production era, I found it suitable for my artwork. Hanna Levonen-Kantomaa writes that she remembers bringing this nostalgic toy back from her trip across the border, but the story of the toy ended tragically. Her kid remembers mother fixing the toy with tape. It could not withstand play time. (Levonen-Kantomaa Hanna and Taito, 2013) This is true, *Nevaljashka* dolls can't withstand play. During my trips to Russia I have found numerous broken *Nevaljashka* dolls. The inner mechanism (of fear) in the dolls is broken and they are incapable to stand up, or are forever crooked, like my sculpture in Rovaniemi too, in the stable 10 degrees angle. Capitalism like communism takes itself too seriously, and ends up being the one that "can't withstand play", totally inflexible. I hope my sculpture can withstand time, and if it doesn't, I hope it crashes slowly like capitalism, not all suddenly like the Soviet Union did.

Because I found the exhibition in Gallery *Fafa* aesthetically unfinished in a way, I worked on the shortcomings in 2013 Gallery *Napa* exhibition called *Heijastuksia tai kangastuksia (Reflections or mirages)* in Rovaniemi. The timing of the exhibition was right before I planted my big doll sculpture in the woods. The purpose of the exhibition was to inform the art audience of the upcoming sculpture in Rovaniemi, and I showed the same photo and the miniature model of the sculpture as in Gallery *Fafa*. Downstairs in *Studio Mustanapa*, in addition to my installation *Ka(a)tumattomat (The "Unfallables"/ The ones who won't regret)*, I had also graphic art prints, so called *Lenin* posters (like Stalin posters); silicon printed *Nevaljashka* doll portraits with children's plastic letters to print quotes from Lenin from the book "Kirjallisuudesta ja taiteesta" (1973). There were quotes like "Artist produces products for the markets" and "A talented person is a rarity" (Lenin 1973, 331 ja 219). With the Lenin posters and quotes I wanted to contrast my installation to something concrete, to the visions of the future art scene by the founding member of the communist party. I think the juxtaposition worked well; the happy, colourful and playful posters also made the entire exhibition less grey and melancholic. My

experiences from Russia weren't that negative that I couldn't have included something happy, colourful and humouristic in the mixture. In fact, the humouristic vibes of *Kaatumaton* (*The "Unfallable"*) memorial are suitable for my analysis of Russia: you need a sense of humour to survive in Russia.

3. Surullisten Piknik/ Picnic for the Sad (2013), Degree Exhibition, Part II

After my heavy Soviet Union-communism-neoliberalism-capitalism reflections, it was quite natural to delve into the theme of mortality. How many died and suffered during communism, how does the mortality look like in Russia, and how do people grieve their loss there? *Surullisten piknik* (*Picnic for the Sad/ Kuvan kevät 2013, Gallery Kasarmikatu*) started as an idea of the collective and inherited grief, and had accompanied me as ideas and experiments since year 2008. My exhibition *Mortus non Multus* (*Elävä kuollut/ The living dead*) in Petrozavodsk, Russia, in 2009 was my first experiment towards *Surullisten piknik*. It consisted of spatial video art works and an online performance that people could watch across the border in Finland too.

I considered many options before I decided on the final art works. *Surullisten Piknik* turned into a place where people could come to be quiet and grieve, where they could commemorate their losses, and also cherish the change. The floor of Kasarmikatu Gallery was covered with oriental style rugs so that the guests' footsteps were muffled like at home. On the walls I hung the photo boxes (casted in concrete), and the visitors could turn on the lights from the switches in every box. With the lights on, it was easier to see the photos of the deceased and the graves that I had photographed in a Murmansk graveyard in 2008. The concrete architecture of Soviet Union era has inspired me a lot, and the influence of the Russian (city) landscape can be seen in my photo sculptures too: the grey cubes are like the residents' last Soviet apartments. During the exhibition I organized also picnics and "Vodka performances", where everyone was welcome to join to drink vodka, eat, and talk about life, art, and death. Exhibition visitors were also invited to paint blue stones of sorrow, which I arranged as part of the installation. I don't care if there is "too much" in my exhibitions, I want them to overflow. Many times I have been told "This is kitsch!" I trust my instincts and do what I like. I don't have any energy to flirt with the contemporary art or artists, or to play tricks to entertain the capitalists.

I feel the best when I receive feedback from the audience, have conversations with people, and see the exhibition visitors taking part in my process. It is wonderful when people don't just want to own something, but want to empathize, and understand their own lives and life history too. Audience participation seems to be both threat and possibility in contemporary art field. For me, it's a natural part of my artistic process and a part of my art, without having to compromise. If a viewer wants to participate in my art work, it is a sign for me of me succeeding in what I do. The large audience has described *Surullisten Piknik* as interesting and intriguing, and I have not heard the typical comment "I don't get it" or "what's that?". Most of us understand what sorrow and death are about, unless they have become totally estranged from it.

For a westerner, accepting one's own mortality can be a difficult thing to digest. In his art, Teemu Mäki has dealt with mortality and the taboos surrounding it. In a column in *Voima* magazine, Mäki writes about mortality. He thinks mortality is a good and important thing. We all die, and everything else is limited, temporary, indeterminate, topped with disappointments and embarrassing shenanigans. He thinks this is the essential source of passion and significance. He writes that trying to make sense of things is not enough. It's a long way from a holistic experience where mortality offers vitality and joy of life. According to Mäki, art can make values, that we otherwise only seemingly embrace, physically and experimentally true. (*Voima* 6/2013, <http://uusi.voima.fi/blog/arkisto-voima/taiteellista-laaketta/>). *Surullisten Piknik* is not a way to comprehensively understand and accept one's own mortality as a part of a meaningful and complete life, but at least it encourages an exhibition visitor to think about other things than the next thing to consume.

4. Life After The Death? (Conclusion)

My work process is a long-term process of cultivating, maybe not what is expected by the fast and competitive mindset focused on consuming. I think that concentrating on sustainable contents and long-lasting topic can end up being more valuable to the society than superficial scratching of the surface here and there. After years of thinking and hard physical effort too, I hope to see my art

works withstanding time, so that they're not disposable or one hit wonders. In my art works, I try to achieve a holistic atmosphere, and a multilayered experience and feeling, so that the art works become a part of life, and not merely a curtain of observation between the audience and reality.

After my degree show exhibitions in spring 2014, my father died suddenly. After that I decided to continue with *Surullisten Piknik* concept but move it towards more action. After *Kuvan kevät* (2013), the exhibition has grown by the addition of new video sculptures, more experimental art works such as the discussion art work *Death Office*, *Death workshops and Death seminars* led by me, and other social events. The exhibition has toured galleries around southern and middle Finland in 2014-2016: in Gallery Rajatila in Tampere, Gallery Becker in Jyväskylä, Photography center Raasepori in Karjaa, and last in Gallery Huuto in Helsinki in December-January 2015/2016. In Huuto Gallery I led *The Death Seminar* where I invited artist Teemu Mäki, professor of Finno-Ugrian languages Janne Saarikivi, and death researchers Maija Butters and Johanna Sumiala. In Huuto Gallery I also led workshops for asylum seekers from Iraq. In the workshops we had discussions about the ways how people in different cultures grieve and encounter death. After the exhibition I have continued my artistic work with the asylum seekers through a variety of different projects. For me, it is morally and ethically important that what we do mostly benefits and empowers the asylum seekers, and not only me, the artist.

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ATTACHMENTS:

- The Photography gallery (print and cd), with press release and material for Kuvan Kevät 2013-catalogue
- The 1. part of the final show: *Kaatumaton /The "Unfallable"* (video loop) 2012 (cd)

