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Occupying Non-Place – Art Education Disturbed

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Abstract

In our ongoing study, we ask: How does site-specific art and activism reveal norms and power structures within urban spaces? In our study, art and art education are perceived to be in a dialogue with the multidisciplinary framework of urban studies, humanistic geography, and youth research. Thus, we perceive our research to be arts-based (see Kallio, 2008; Suominen, Kallio-Tavin, & Hernández- Hernández, 2017). In this visual essay, we approach our topic from two angles: First, we begin by introducing the shift in art education that is taking place as a response to changes in art and in the Finnish national curriculum for elementary and secondary schools. Second, we discuss our process of understanding the phenomena domination and normative use of public spaces and their disruption through four artistic or activist projects.

Bios

Tiina Pusa (b. 1972) works as a university lecturer in the Department of Art at the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Helsinki. Her tasks include teaching, developing the curriculum, and conducting research. Pusa's doctoral thesis on art and the elderly (2012) was situated within the discourse of phenomenological-based research in art education. Her present research interests include art and pedagogy, early art education, gender issues, sports, and urban art.



Bios

Minna Suoniemi (b. 1972) is a Helsinki-based artist working with moving images and video installation. She is interested in how disruption and failure can make normative structures and models visible, and she has worked on such subjects as gender roles, motherhood, and power structures. Her latest project, *Practical Ecology*, examines the possibilities of an ecologically sustainable future. Suoniemi has exhibited internationally in Europe, the United States, South America, and Asia, including at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki, Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Preus Museum of Photography in Norway, and Moscow Biennial for Young Art, and her work is in the collections of major Finnish art museums. Since 2014, Suoniemi has worked as a lecturer at Aalto University, Department of Art.

The focus of our research is on Finnish artistic practice, as our study specifically reflects Finnish art education. Traditionally, art teachers have decided how and whose art is presented to students in schools. The new national curriculum for Finnish secondary schools was approved at the end of 2014 and went into effect in the autumn of 2016 (OPH, 2014). The curriculum demands teaching and learning at schools to build a stronger relationship between art and the students' own visual cultures. Thus, we ask: Where do the visual cultures of young Finnish students appear, and what forms do these assume?

One suggestion is that the expressions of youths' visual cultures could be found in non-places, such as tunnels, construction sites, wastelands, and shopping malls (Augé, 1995; Siitonen, 2016). Non-places can be occupied through various approaches, which can be sensitive, provocative, or even illegal. Hanging around as individuals or as groups in public places may be understood as a way in which to occupy or claim space beyond one's adult control (Tani, 2010). Site-specific art and activism challenge the norm and rules of the normative use of urban space and evoke the following types of questions: What and who is disturbed by this art or action? From whom and for what do we need permission, and who holds institutional control over these spaces? Who has control over urban space and non-places, and how are they maintained?



Image 1. Minna Suoniemi: *Metropolis 2012*. Photograph by Minna Suoniemi

Our starting point was Minna Suoniemi's video piece *Metropolis 2012*, a video installation that depicts young men parkouring at a construction site. With the title's reference to Fritz Lang's film from 1927, Suoniemi created a play with the capitalist use of the urban environment and boys' leisure activities. To explore this piece, we followed Ortuzar's (2009) definition of parkour as *the art of a non-place* and asked the following: What familiar phenomena may be recognized in the context of art and activism? To investigate the complex phenomena emerging from the initial analysis of Suoniemi's piece, we chose to study it more closely by selecting four other artistic or activist cases for analysis. Placing *Metropolis 2012* in thematic relationships with four other art or activist cases opened up various new angles for comprehending the phenomena that *Metropolis 2012* presented. The cases in our study are as follows: *Security Flip Shifty* by Otto Karvonen (2005); *Wash Graffiti* by Jukka Silokunnas (2009–2015); *Bench-case* by an anonymous artist/activist (2016); and *Pixadores-case*, a documentary film by a Finnish filmmaker, Amir Escandari (2014).

These four cases selected for closer study span a period of 10 years and share a performative nature. Documentations of the performances and the conse-

quent internet conversations have played an essential role in analyzing and conceptualizing these cases. The cases, undefinable within a certain context, form the core of the phenomena, which we have come to conceptualize through the close study of the four cases. All of these artworks or acts of activism gained their meaning and significance within their contexts; they are time and location specific in meaning.



Image 2. Otto Karvonen: *Security Flip Shifty*. Photograph by Petri Summanen / KKA

Security Flip Shifty (2005) is a performative happening that we investigated through video documentation. This intervention presents a disturbing twist related to the city culture that took place in Helsinki in 2005. In his work, the artist, Otto Karvonen, dressed skateboarders in security guards' outfits to construct the situation by evoking contradictions and questioning the normative thinking of authority and power. The art work generates new formulations of the ownership of public spaces and presents a performative way of highlighting the roles of the skaters and the security guards and, as a result, asking significant questions through art.



Image 3. Jukka Silokunnas: *Wash Graffiti*, 2015. Photograph by Jukka Silokunnas

Wash Graffiti (2015) as an art or cultural genre flirts with the tradition of graffiti being washed away from public surfaces. This genre also questions the illegal aspects of visually occupying a public space, as it disrupts the normative thinking of graffiti and other illegal forms of marking public spaces seen as generating disturbances and staining existing surfaces. Although commercial messages cover and govern urban spaces to the extent that we do not even recognize their effects on us, noncommercial messages, such as wash graffiti in our study, intervene in and disrupt these same spaces, thus making the habitual use of visual public spaces visible and questionable.



Image 4: *Bench-case* by anonymous artist. Photograph by TampereUutiset newsletter

The Bench-case (Paikalliset & Tamperelainen, 2016) by an anonymous artist is physically located in Tampere and has gained media exposure, mainly in the *Tamperelainen* newspaper. Through this project, old and dirty benches located in various cities in the city received shiny new surfaces and led to people asking if it is allowed and acceptable to paint a bench located in a public space. Journalists, the police, various citizens, and the regional artist of the Tampere area joined the conversation on the case. As a result, the authority over the governance of public spaces was questioned.



Image 5. Pixadores. Photograph by Aga Szreder

From our study's viewpoint, the most interesting aspect of the *Pixadores-case* (Escandari, 2014) is a conflict that emerged between the established and respected art institution and the activists. The Pixadores activist group was invited to the 7th Berlin Biennale (2012) as part of the official program; however, this group did not remain within the assumed limits and norms of the established framework, thus resulting in a conflict involving the use of exhibition space between the curator and the activist group.

As researchers interested in the topic of artists and activists using art to disrupt normative spaces and practices, we perceive ourselves to be curators of research: We have chosen specific artworks to illuminate a topic or phenomenon of interest. This type of inquiry would be difficult to carry out and present in any other form or by using other approaches. Thus, we now call our research approach an arts-based curatorial research.

Within the structures of society, art has an unusual freedom and opportunity to ask tough questions and to examine dominant normative values and practices. Through curating the selected four cases for discussion, we hope to initiate further discussion and inquiry into how art and artistic activism within public spaces brings forward and evokes a public debate concerning institutionalized and normative practices. Although artists created the artworks included in this essay, art education in schools may be refocused to explore and study art that occurs in diverse places where it is formulated or where youth and adults create it. If art education assumes this profoundly exploratory and contextually relevant role, it can be used to question its own institutionalized traditions and instead become internally renewing.

We agree with Gaztambide-Fernández (2013), who stated that we should open up the concept of art to include situations, acts, and processes. Furthermore, room should exist for these forms of art in the context of education. If we can renew the school art curriculum and base it on the visual cultures and activities of young people, school will be a stage for many interesting questions. Could the school institution transform from a norm keeper to a critical forum? Site-specific art and activism reveal norms and power structures in urban space, as introduced in our study cases. In the school context, such revealing acts may invoke new roles and whole new modes of education.

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Figure 1. Minna Suoniemi, *Metropolis 2012*. Photograph by Minna Suoniemi, <https://vimeo.com/67743641>

Figure 2. Otto Karvonen: *Security Flip Shifty*. Photograph by Petri Summanen / KKA, <http://ottokarvonen.com/main/index.php/action/security-flip-shifty>

Figure 3. Jukka Silokunnas: *Wash Graffiti, 2015*. Photograph by Jukka Silokunnas
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0D7I5HJhZe0>

Figure 4. *Bench-case* by anonymous artist. Photograph by Tamperelainen newsletter
<http://www.tamperelainen.fi/artikkeli/378629-erikoiset-tohrijat-iskivat-tampereella-samalla-tavalla-maalattu-kymmenia-penkkeja>
<http://www.tamperelainen.fi/artikkeli/380044-laanintaiteilija-ottikantaa-penkkien-maalaamiseen-kuka-niiden-takana-on>

Figure 5. *Pixadores*. Photograph by Aga Szreder
Pixadores trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8m-dDNkq0jg>
Pixadores website: <http://pixadoresfilm.com/>
 7th Berlin Biennale:
<http://artmuseum.pl/en/archiwum/archiwum-7-berlin-biennale/1875/110329>