

Attitude that Matters

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In this article, I compare the operativity of radical avant-garde and new dialogical art forms from one selected viewpoint.¹ I discuss the issue of the artist's attitude as a significance-producing element in the artwork. For decades, artist-issued interpretation of art has been problematic. Thus it is interesting to question the significance of the strong definition of the artist's attitude, inherent in the theories of the new dialogical art. New dialogical art-forms are for example new genre public art,² community art,³ socially engaged art, public engaged art, littoral art,⁴ activist art,⁵ dialogical art,⁶ and conversational art.⁷ In the Finnish discussion, the concept of community art is the one most commonly used.

Behind the theory of dialogical art we find the views of postcolonial philosophy and institutional criticism. Thus, it motivates a criticism focussed on the production of spaces for otherness and the western, culture-building discursive separation of subject and object. According to the American art historian Grant Kester, the art of the modern tradition lingers on the ruins of its

¹ The radical avant-garde emphasized the relations between art and everyday life, it questioned and rejected the ideological terms of reference of art making and reception. The movements emphasize the institutional character of the art. Peter Bürger talks about historical avant-garde instead of radical avant-garde. In the formalistic avant-garde the emphasis is on the renewal of form, thus an internal movement. Sederholm 1994, pp. 66–68. The formalistic avant-garde, formerly seen advocating the universal value of art, has recently been scrutinized and found containing features of cultural critic. See i.e. Craven 1999.

² The term is from the pioneering book: Suzanne Lacy (ed.). *Mapping the Terrain, New Genre Public Art*, USA: Bay Press, 1995. The word “public” refers both to the general and to audiences.

³ In Anglo-American context this concept is associated with left wing political art. For more, see Kantonen 2006, pp. 51–52.

⁴ The concept of “littoral art” is used by curator Ian Hunter about art where the border is moving and changing like a shoreline; art occurs in the zone between the borders and appears different, depending on the institutional checkpoint. For more about “socially” and “public engaged art” and “littoral art” see *op.cit.*, pp. 53–54.

⁵ According to the Finnish community artist Lea Kantonen this definition refers to artists whose interest groups are activist groups such as ecologists, feminists, sexual minorities etc. For more see i.e. *op.cit.*, pp. 52–53.

⁶ The concept of “dialogical art” has been used by Grant Kester in talking about art, where conversation itself, not the object or some other outcome, is in focus. Kester 2004.

⁷ The term “conversational art” has been used by culture researcher Homi Bhabha. Bhabha 1998, pp. 38–47.

own discourse, stiffened by its own aesthetics. It is an art about the artist's incapability of achieving an emancipatory intercourse.⁸ As the modern and post-modern theories so often ask questions about spectatorship, we need to replace this with an art theory involving the concepts of cooperation.⁹ In his book *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*, Kester suggests that we consider an interactive art with space for open participation, calling it dialogical art. He argues, that the theoretical problems in the dialogical art have their roots in the questions dealt with in avant-garde theory.¹⁰ The theories of the radical avant-garde share the idea that the presumption of the world leans on shared discursive systems producing abstract knowledge and violent objectifications. The way avant-garde art pushes the viewer from her/his self-righteous observer's position is by shock. According to Kester, this shock is a sudden and direct experience. In dialogical art, resistance to objectification-producing systems of knowledge is, on the contrary, a long lasting process involving the cumulativeness of communicative exchange and dialogue.¹¹ Nevertheless, in his reflections about the shock effect, the avant-garde theorist Peter Bürger sees the dislocation in the thinking mechanism, occurring when facing the avant-garde artwork, as a step-by-step refinement of the ways of thinking.¹² Thus the avant-garde operativity can also be considered to be based on process and duration. Likewise, according to Renato Poggioli, whose theory on attitudes I will discuss in the next chapter, duration generates the avant-garde change-producing power.

The Sacrifice

In his book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Renato Poggioli presents a model for a psychological and sociological explanation of the avant-garde movements. He describes four artistic attitudes, moments, where the role embraced by the artist-subject – submerging the “the self” into the avant-garde process – brings about a change. The change-bringing feature in Poggioli's categories of attitude lean on

⁸ Kester 2004, p. 31.

⁹ *Op.cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁰ Kester is not clear about what kind of avant-garde he talks about. Probably he follows the American formalist tradition, but he brings up themes from the European avant-garde – the connection between art and everyday life, the critic of object and discourse and the shock theme. Yet I believe that the art and the theory originating from the thoughts of Allan Kaprow are closer to the avant-garde adopted by Kester. Kaprow contributed in uniting the European and the American counter-art.

¹¹ Kester 2004, pp. 12–13.

¹² Bürger 2004, *passim*, esp. pp. 80–82.

the idea that changes in the system of exchange between spectator and artist make it possible also for the (art) world to change.¹³ In the English version of Poggioli's book, the term "moments" occurs in parallel with the term "attitude". According to Finnish philosopher Irmeli Hautamäki, the symmetry of concepts can be explained by the fact that instead of target-rationality, avant-garde ideology presents a strong emotional loading.¹⁴ On the other hand, using the word attitude we lose the time dimension implicated in Poggioli's – dialectic and Marxist – concept of "moment", which attaches his thinking to utopia, the significant feature in operative and political art.

The four attitudes, "moments", presented by Poggioli are activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism. According to Poggioli, we deal with the activist moment when "movement takes shape and agitates for no other end than it's own self, out of sheer joy of dynamism, a taste of action, a sportive enthusiasm, and emotional fascination of adventure".¹⁵ "Of the four 'moments', the activist is perhaps the least important", he continues, it is "the cult of act rather than action".¹⁶ Antagonism means "spirit of hostility and opposition" against common taste or acting by negative reaction.¹⁷ Antagonism expresses the aristocratic spirit of avant-garde, like the roles of dandy or bohemian, and it assumes individual attitudes instead of group-orientation. Poggioli doesn't appreciate the first two moments as such, but, being a kind of rational elements, they constitute the logic of the art and revolutionary movements. He writes "the third and fourth moments are unthinkable except in the dimension of time and history",¹⁸ referring to the Marxist dialectics and its revolutionary spirit implemented through art. The third attitude, nihilism, is psychological. Poggioli's nihilism refers to the Latin word *nihil* – nothing, and to the cult of *tabula rasa*. It

¹³ In her lecture, "Performing the Wounded Body – A New Political Agency in the Visual Arts", held at *Centre – Periphery, the Avant-garde and the Other*, Tromsø, 23–24 November 2006, art history professor Amelia Jones compared the political artistry in the avant-garde and body art by conceptualising the relationship spectator-viewer, and the operativity of this relation with the concept "system of exchange". Furthermore, Jones presented the idea about a new viewer position based on empathy. This idea stayed alive in my mind and kept restive between the lines in this article.

¹⁴ Hautamäki, 2003, p. 26. Reading Poggioli it is still difficult to understand if he means art movements or individual actors, when the attitude has history-changing powers. The same irresolution and tension between the individual and the collective exist in the dialogical art forms and their theories.

¹⁵ Poggioli 1968, p. 25.

¹⁶ *Op.cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁸ *Op.cit.*, p. 27.

is an attitude, where a non-doing state is attained by doing and everything is forbidden. Agonism is closest to the core of the logic of dialectics, i.e. the concept of history changing itself through conflicts. According to Poggioli, agonistic artists are those who sacrifice themselves for the good of history and future. He writes: “the agonistic attitude is not a passive state of mind, exclusively dominated by a sense of immanent catastrophe; on the contrary, it strives to transform the catastrophe into miracle. By acting, and through its very failure, it tends toward a result justifying and transcending itself”.¹⁹

The tinge of pure actuality in the activity, presented especially in nihilism as characterized by Poggioli, holds the potential of change as one possibility. On the other hand, Poggioli criticizes the empty, instrumental doing of the activist and the antagonist. As I see it, this critic ranks in the same category as the attitude of the artists working with the dialogical art forms, an issue I will discuss in next chapter.

The Art of Caring

To search for good and make it matter: this is the real challenge for the artists.²⁰

Susanne Lacy

More than thirty years after Poggioli, the feminist artist Suzi Gablik writes about her personal attitude, calling it re-engaged: “Much of the new art focuses on social creativity rather than on self-expression and contradicts the myth of the isolated genius”.²¹ According to Gablik, the artist had to step out of her enclosed studio, unable to go on in her distanced isolation. The artist should face “the other” and demonstrate feminist values such as caring and care taking, recognizing and responding to needs. She criticizes the observer artist, writing: “The model of the artist as a lone genius struggling against society does not allow us to focus on the beneficial and healing role of social interaction, nor does it lend itself to [...] ‘enlightened listening’ listening that it oriented toward the achievement of shared understanding”.²² The operative attitude suggested by Gablik gets its energy from a strong, emotionally loaded attitude, as do the moments presented by Poggioli.

¹⁹ *Op.cit.*, pp. 65–66.

²⁰ Lacy 1995, text on the cover of the book.

²¹ Gablik 1995, p. 76.

²² *Op.cit.*, p. 80.



Illustration: Photograph from the work *The Nun*, Elina Saloranta 1997.

In accordance with Suzanne Lacy's conception, the artist's position is separated from society. The artist has lacked function in society, a situation implicated into the social critic within the new works of public art.²³ According to Gablik, modernism turned the artist into a separated and emotionally distanced observer. Furthermore, she claims that the aesthetics of modernism was a cultural project producing objectifications, a project which taught the artist to canalise her perception according to abstract models and where the gaze forced her into the position of separated observer.²⁴ Thus the dialogical conception of art aims at a re-evaluation of the interaction between artist, artwork and spectator, and this re-estimation happens in relation to modernism.

Where avant-garde, performing monologue, initiated the critical dismantling of the gaze, the new genre public artist replaces the eye by the ear, metaphorically speaking. According to Lacy, behind the role of the listener-artist there is the desire to find a connection with "the other", and to overcome the duality between the serving and the isolated "self".²⁵ Gablik characterises the

²³ Lacy 1995, pp. 32–33. Peter Bürger analyses the lack of function experienced by the avant-garde artist, referring on the one hand to Walter Benjamin's "baroque allegorist", on the other hand, to the melancholy of the modernism. Thus Lacy's discussion has its implications. Bürger 2004, pp. 70–72.

²⁴ Gablik 1991, p. 99.

²⁵ Lacy 1995, p. 36.

artist's new kind of attitude in words, where we can read a political, (world)-reforming reservation given to the attitude: "It [re-enchantment] also refers to that change in general social mood toward a new paradigmatic idealism and more integrated value system that brings head and heart together in an ethic of care, as part of the healing of the world".²⁶ According to Gablik, the artist's dynamic participation, where the shapes are given a formulation experienced not only as something visual and separate, leads her/him towards an experience of relational listening. The egocentric, Kantian-Cartesian self-experience is transcended, and the identity turns, through the experience of listening, to a communicative, inter-subjective relationship.²⁷ In a processing artwork, listening can signify several tangible things, i.e. the preparation of a workshop, where the artist turns her/his sensibility to listening to the audience and then lets the wishes of the audience guide the content of the artwork. On the other hand, it can also signify dialogical listening to the other in an artwork based on conversation. Listening as a form of social intercourse is a method used by dialogical art-forms when dealing with challenges concerning community, meeting "the other" and the identities discussed by postcolonial criticism. Thus, the utopian operativity of art and its possibility to change the world and its conditions through art, are present in the views of community art.

Pondering over the role of the artist working within the fields of community art, a central question is the artist's responsibility for the project s/he has initiated; the degree of commitment and responsibility becomes an evaluating element for the art critic, comparable to criteria for quality determining.²⁸ The project should continue even after the artist has left the place.²⁹ The creator-paradigm and the new conceptualism of audiences are tightly intertwined. Audiences and societies are, as Jacob writes, creative centres.³⁰ In a way, they are the artist's material, emerging through the relation with the audience, through the responsibility, the aesthetical goals and the project's building skills defined by the artist. The change of paradigm within the discourse of community art especially concerns the relation between the artist

²⁶ Gablik 1991, p. 11.

²⁷ *Op.cit.*, p. 114.

²⁸ Cf. Lacy 1995, p. 45; Hannula 2004, pp. 65–97. In her book, Miwon Kwon who has criticised the institutionalisation occurring in community engaged art, also talks about the cases where the artist's commitment or attitude towards societies did not work. Kwon 2004, *passim*, esp. pp. 100–137.

²⁹ Lacy 1995, p. 34.

³⁰ Jacob 1995, p. 59.

and the audiences; through a responsible relation to the audience the project can function in an ethically correct way.

According to community artist Lea Kantonen, the starting-point for the community art is its nature of joint venture, involving audience and artist in the creation of the artwork, and making the audience participate in the process of giving the work its significance. Ethical questions are linked to the project throughout the process, from planning to exhibit to eventual follow-up. According to Kantonen socially engaged artist can be committed to i.e. art institutions but if so, s/he has to clearly declare this obligation; this is an ethical principle.³¹

Elina Saloranta's works *Muslim Trousers*, *The Nun* and a refugee camp workshop in Lebanon

Generally, we meet community art in the shape of artworks, workshops, working process reports, photographs, objects or stories told by the artist. My personal process toward the questions in Elina Saloranta's works has followed the same path: first I saw pictures of *The Nun* in an exhibition, and then I met the artist who told me about the process resulting in the pictures. She told me that *The Nun* was one part of a tripartite whole, and part of a process during which she took an interest in the possibility to work with audiences.³² At the time, she was still an art student and the interest for community art was quite new in Finland.

Elina Saloranta's tripartite work entity *Muslim Trousers*, *The Nun* and the refugee camp workshop in Lebanon was a process that started in 1995 and was presented as an exhibition in a gallery in 1998. Saloranta finished the project during her years as an art student. *Muslim Trousers* was the first part of the project. It was published in *Valokuva*, a Finnish photography review, in 1995. It consists of a series of photographs, all of which show shirtless Saloranta wearing the pants, and alongside the pictures a text telling the story of the pants and the family's relation to Elina, who wears the pants every day. Another version of *Muslim Trousers* was exhibited in the streets of Geneva in 1997. The work was spread in advertising stands around town, in the shape of posters among other advertising. In this version, the text in Arabic runs over the picture.

³¹ Kantonen 2006, pp. 62–63.

³² Elina Saloranta to the author 13.5.2006.



Illustration: From the series *Muslim Trousers* by Elina Saloranta. Source: Valokuva 7–8, 1995.

Additionally, the pants were hung in a glass showcase. The idea to part two, *The Nun*, was born during a period when Saloranta worked with a project with homeless people in Paris. During the time she was working in Paris, she took an interest in charity and felt an urge to work outside her studio; thus was born the idea about *The Nun*. She prepared herself for this trip by corresponding with a real nun, purchased a nun's dress in a shop in Paris and acquainted herself with the collection of photographs in the Finnish Mission Museum. In 1997, Saloranta left for a two-month travel in Zambia. For Saloranta, *The Nun* was the first attempt to implement a community artwork, but the result was also a photographic work. She moved around in the village and its environments in her nun costume, but told people she was an artist, and presented her process.

The pictures, published as snapshots, were born as quickly staged situations that she herself calls photographed performances. Occasionally, she put the camera in the hands of anyone, but she also staged situations and arrangements. Many of her pictures seem to apply the compositions found in the Mission Museum's photographs, in which we recognize the common western way to photograph missionary work. Saloranta has shown a 14-minute video document about the workshop in Lebanon in her exhibition. All three parts, including photographs, the video and garments were shown in Kluuvi Galleria, Helsinki, in 1998.

In 2002, Saloranta returned to Lebanon. Together with the children in a refugee camp she implemented a museum project. The children made pictures of everyday objects that they found in their pockets, and told her their stories. Saloranta wanted them to tell the stories in a way that differed from the nationalistic rhetoric to the kids were used. The stories were archived in the local museum for Lebanese history.

In addition to making community art, Saloranta took inspiration from the ideas that in the conceptual sense art is a deed. Art can be created also by moving around and by travelling.³³ In *Muslim Trousers* the idea of moving is implemented on the level of the stories connected to Saloranta's pictures:

In the nineteen-eighties my father, a state official, made a journey to the Finnish United Nations Division in the Near East. As a gift for me he brought back a pair of Arabian trousers. [...] I was then at school. I began to wear the trousers at school and soon refused to use any others. "An independent woman like you, how can you walk around in Muslim trousers?" my mother used to say. But for me this strange piece of cloth meant something quite different. In my Arabian trousers I felt like an outsider, free. Meanwhile I made my first journeys abroad. I bought an Interrail ticket and took a boat to Europe.³⁴

In *Muslim Trousers*, the idea of movement has been attached to the object afterwards, unlike in *The Nun* and the Lebanese workshops. Saloranta tells her own, personal story associated with the pants dealing with her identity and maturity, which seems to be built on the mother's perspective, having "the other" intruding in the family. For Elina herself, the pants are a fetish-like, deliberating garment: they are the garment she wore during her growth to

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Saloranta 2005.

independence. According to Lacy, the references that artists working with the new public art do to memories, ethnic traditions, gender or family are the way in which the new public art shapes its relation with the world.³⁵ Likewise, Saloranta's autobiographical writings are, alongside her ponderings over her identity as an artist, a shaping of the relation to the world.

The following quotations are also autobiographical narratives, where Saloranta ponders over the series of significations through which she built up *The Nun*. The tone in the quotations is clearly one of emotional and ethical participation, where the autobiographic and other people's interpretations are mixed together:

My classmates started calling me Jesus when I took sides with a boy who had stolen something. In secondary school the name changed to Saint Elina. Many years later, I was helping a friend to move house. The flat was already empty when we found a towel in the kitchen. It was an ordinary white kitchen towel, with three red stripes around the edge. I put the towel on my head. "You're Mother Teresa, my friend said".³⁶

Over the year, I had read everything I could find on the subject. I had been to meet nuns and tried writing as a way of getting a grasp of what made me feel drawn to them. After one visit, a card came in the post, on which were written the words of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: "I will spend my heaven doing good on earth". The words touched me, I felt I had finally hit on the crux of the matter. Without my various efforts being linked together, I had simultaneously applied for teaching work in Africa. I now understood that these things were connected.³⁷

Saloranta's stories convey a position where the artist refuses to be a distant observer in relation to the objects – here garments and a kitchen towel – through which she has defined herself in relation to others and through which her charitable identity shows itself. The encounter with "the other" occurs in the garments: the nun, the artist-role and "the self" manifest themselves in positions which are alienated and actual by turns. The complex of problems concerning charity is strongly present in the discussion in community art. Charity is discussed in relation to the artist's responsibility, but it is also a counter-part to

³⁵ Lacy 1995, p. 36.

³⁶ Saloranta 2002, pp. 42–44; also in: Saloranta 2005.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

the “modern cynical eye of the artist”. Saloranta’s personal thoughts were, as I see it, connected with this new paradigm of artist charity and activity at the stage, when artists were only looking for the basis of community art.



Illustration: Photograph from the work *The Nun*, Elina Saloranta 1997.

Saloranta’s workshop projects match up to the principle of commitment inherent in community art. The fact that she returned to Lebanon bears witness of her commitment and desire to work specifically with Lebanese children and young people. As to *The Nun*, the implementation of commitment raises questions; Saloranta has given an equivocal description of the project: on the one hand, she deeply pondered over charity and how it can be connected with the artist’s work, on the other hand, for her, the project was a thrilling game.³⁸ According to Miwon Kwon community art has developed from the site-specific art. This brings up the question about the artist’s ways to act in an ethical way when s/he travels from one place to another, to meet and work with communities.³⁹ *The Nun* is a site-specific work both in relation to the Mission Museum and the Zambian village. The photographs consider and propagate the uncertain position of the artist implementing site-specific art: this is shown in their easy and playful atmosphere.

³⁸ Elina Saloranta to the author 13.5.2006.

³⁹ Kwon 2004, pp. 100–117.

By making the Lacy' an artist collide with Jesus' bride, Saloranta treats the reflections concerning her artistic activity. Her game with the role of charitable artist is the auto-analyses of the artist and her autobiographical identity, a multi-dimensional game of a kind similar to the role-and-gaze game present in Marcel Duchamp's *Rose Selavy*. Saloranta's pictures manifest the establishment of the artist's role. It is expressed through the straight-backed attitude, the smile thrown to the camera, the ease and the restrained arrangement. Saloranta is as reluctant to transference – which would entail a move towards a dialogic expression – as is *Rose Selavy*. If we stop our interpretation on this level, then the pictures will, from a postcolonial viewpoint, appear as a contradictory game with identity. As spectators we must, however, notice the performative level of the work. This makes us scrutinize its duration and its site-specific features – references to the places of discursive structures in the picture collection interpreting the missionary work.

Conclusion

With his four moments' classification Poggioli wanted to point out how the emotional loading and its potential energy was harnessed for the avant-garde revolution, simultaneously trying to solve the *vanguardism* and the paradox of "the self". In the dialogical art forms, meeting "the other", with all the conflicts that meeting may bring, is seen to produce change. The artist of the avant-garde was a teacher who knew better. This is the attitude in i.e. Bürger's theory on thought models and art's renewing shock effect leaning on the idea that the spectator's life is questionable and his life practices should be adjusted.⁴⁰ According to Bürger, avant-garde works appeal to the receivers' productivity, aiming at freeing their life practices. This attitude could ultimately lead to the disappearance of the categories of producers and recipients.⁴¹ The idea of "the art work working in us" is very similar to the openness and character of process in dialogical art forms, its healing effect in the process of rendering significance, and the temporality in which these elements are enclosed. The avant-garde art did not succeed in doing away with the categories of producers and recipients. The dialogical arts have seized this failure with the concepts of listening and respect.

In the history of community art and the genealogy of the concepts that Saloranta chose to work with within that specific discourse, *The Nun* is an interesting border case. It propagates more alienation and instability of identity than encounters or transference. She, just like the *Muslim Trousers'* Elina,

⁴⁰ Bürger 2004, pp. 80–81.

⁴¹ *Op.cit.*, p. 53.

struggles with “the self” as well as with integrating the role of the new, communicating artist. The workshops implemented in Lebanon might have changed the world a little bit – through the dialogues that took place within its frames, it enabled the participants to move towards the utopian dimension of community art.

The avant-garde initiated the debate on the position of the autonomous artwork; according to Bürger avant-garde criticised the autonomy of art as a category and ideology of the bourgeois society.⁴² So, the avant-gardist’s submerging into the object is to be understood as a political ill being and healing, simultaneously, leaving the twofold state of modern identity which Poggioli considered the avant-garde sacrifice to the future. The dismissing of the object in the dialogical art forms manifests the questionability of the submerging into the object, thus moving the corner stone of ignorance from the objects to the identities between us.

Translation: Bianca Gräsbeck

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