

Sari Karttunen

”Kun lumipallo lähtee pyörimään”

Nuorten kuvataiteilijoiden
kansainvälistyminen
2000-luvun alussa



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'It's kind of like a snowball starts rolling.'

The internationalisation of young visual artists in Finland

English Abstract

This report concludes a research project, lasting several years, on the internationalisation of Finnish art and artists. The project as a whole is comprised of a set of sub-studies that approach the topic from several angles, drawing upon multiple data and methods. The publication at hand reports on the final phase, which is based on half-structured interviews with artists.

The main question of the study is: what happens to artists' occupational practices and ideologies in the overall context of post-industrial society, and in the special case of a rapidly internationalising art scene. The assumption is that these two processes combined will cause major transformations in the Finnish corps of artists, both at the individual and collective levels. They will strengthen the position of certain types of artists and occupational practices and weaken others; in addition, new norms and models will be imported by mobile artists from abroad.

The framework for the study builds upon the 'production of culture approach' introduced by Diana Crane and Richard Peterson, among others, which focuses interest on the relationship between the nature of cultural symbols and the conditions surrounding their production. The emphasis here is on changes in the social and institutional contexts in which artists carry out their work. Particular attention is paid to the nature of support and reward systems, and the incentives and restraints they place on artists.

The hypothesis was that internationalisation would boost professionalization among visual artists in Finland. In particular, artists operating in close connection with the global art market were believed

to become more middle-class and bourgeois as regards their values, living standards and appearance. Professionalization was expected to enhance the opportunities for some artists to actually earn their living from art. International visibility was, moreover, assumed to have polarising effects on the earnings and career paths of Finnish artists; thus far social and economic discrepancies between artists have been small in cross-national comparisons.

The study's interest in the evolution of artist types in the post-modern, late-industrial era links it to recent work by Hans Abbing in the Netherlands and Per Mangset and his associates in Norway. In his study of art students, Mangset asked how strongly young artists are guided by 'charismatic ideology' as delineated by Pierre Bourdieu. Roughly put, the concept refers to the modern romantic myth according to which people are 'called' to art from birth, and economic and other external interests should be kept separate of the practice of art.

The population frame was identified as emerging visual artists who come from Finland, or are currently based there, and who have made some headway on the international art scene. 'Young' was understood as being aged 35 or under, and visual art was defined broadly to include not only painting and sculpture, but also photographic, media, video, performance, community and environmental art. Various types of contemporary arts activity taking place at the international level were also taken into account; these range from prominent art fairs to less visible grass roots community actions.

The names for the pool of interviewees were singled out from the Who's Who type of registers of Finnish artists, exhibition catalogues, artists' books, art magazines and other documentary material, including applications for Arts Council grants, as well as on the basis of suggestions from informants in the visual art field. The final sample, composed of 15 cases, may be characterised as targeted or theoretical; hence the findings cannot be generalised to the whole population of Finnish artists. As it focuses on the youngest generation, the study is more intended to indicate future trends in the occupation.

The interviews were conducted between December 2005 and June 2006. The interviewees were between 25 and 36 years of age. Nine were women and six were men, the percentage of women (60%) being slightly lower than it was among all visual artists in the same age group (67%). Fourteen interviewees were born and also raised in Finland; they all had studied art in Finland, and ten had studied abroad as well. One interviewee was an immigrant who had come to Finland after having gained an MFA in his home country. Three interviewees were living abroad and one shared her time between Finland and another European country. One interviewee had just returned after spending five years abroad, where she had originally gone for MA studies.

All 15 interviewees had obtained a master's degree in art or were just about to complete their studies. Some were already preparing for

a doctoral degree in art or carrying out further studies in art history, art theory or criticism. Typical of contemporary art, the majority were using several media in their artworks, most often photography, video and installation, but also painting and drawing. Two interviewees were specialising in site-specific art, making use of any appropriate media. One artist was involved chiefly with sculpture, one with computer art, and one with painting.

The interviews were a mixture of the half-structured and the thematic type. They were carried out with the help of a questionnaire form which contained both structured and open questions (64 in all). The questions dealt with training and occupational activity, with an emphasis on the international dimension. Even though a questionnaire form was used, the order of questions depended on the direction the discussion took with each interviewee. Moreover, a few extra questions were tailored for each artist based on material found in their curriculum vitae, interviews and articles in art journals, newspapers, art books and exhibition catalogues, and the grant registries of the Arts Council. The interviews lasted from two to three-and-a-half hours; all were recorded and transcribed word for word.

The interviews with these emerging practitioners indicated that various changes are happening in the role and finances of artists in Finland. Up until recently, artists have depended to a great extent on the state and other grant-givers for the continuation of their practice; in addition, they have supported their art-making themselves through second jobs. What is more, state working grants have been considered the most legitimate source of income for Finnish artists and have enabled them to resist commercialism. Thanks to increased international interaction, new career opportunities are now opening up for Finnish artists. These often demand that artists agree to new types of employment and financial arrangements and respective alterations in their occupational image.

Foreign galleries, which differ from domestic ones in many respects, appear to play an essential role in the transformation process. Ten out of the fifteen young interviewees had made a contract with a foreign gallery. These galleries teach Finnish artists how to operate on the global art scene, and they also help in moulding their attitudes toward becoming more permissive of commerce in art. First, these galleries transmit new norms and practices through the long-standing relationships they form with their house artists. Second, these galleries are capable of reaching so many and such wealthy buyers that some artists may soon be able to start living on sales alone. Major galleries also provide financial support for the artists' new productions, which rarely happens in Finland.

As the interviewees had 'started to play the game', to quote one of them, they accepted the fact that they needed to make some amendments to their approach to the market. They understood that private

galleries need something that can be sold in order to survive themselves. Most video artists, for instance, agreed to produce stills from their films. Several interviewees became more flexible about accepting commissioned work and even made-to-order work; moreover, they told about this openly and without reference to 'bread and butter'. Even so, money was not discussed much in the interviews except in the pragmatic sense of financing living and work expenses. Money was essentially treated as a means of making more art, and thus a legitimate objective for an artist. Galleries that sold art works and gave production support were seen as god-sends as they gave artists the chance to concentrate full-time on art making. Galleries also functioned as indispensable intermediaries as well as buffers between artists and consumers.

Artists specialising in site-specific art and temporary projects were distinguished from the other interviewees. These artists are often invited to participate in biennials and other art events, which provide them with an important means of realizing their art work. Some biennials offer residencies lasting several months, and include a cost-of-living and material allowance. Residencies often function on a project basis as well, and some 'nomadic' artists apply for one residency after another. It is vital for these artists to gain visibility and make themselves known to curators who design programmes and choose the participants. Still critical of harsh commercialism, however, these artists would have welcomed a suitably-minded gallery owner to take care of their promotion work.

The young interviewees did not represent the average Finnish artist, since only a few of them had to rely on second jobs, as they were mostly financed by grants and sales. Several of the interviewees were teaching art, but only in terms of the odd lecture or workshop. Some artists occasionally acted as curators for exhibitions and wrote reviews for art journals, while others carried out applied artistic work, such as graphic design or commercial photography. As a rule, if any of the interviewees had sales amounting to any considerable figure, the artist concerned was gallery-based and most of the sales came through foreign galleries from abroad. Hardly any of the interviewees had continuous sales that were enough to sustain them without the aid of grants or second jobs. All 15 of them were actually receiving some grant in the year of the interview. International merits improved the interviewees' chances of gaining grants.

Among the interviewed young artists the preference for government money appeared to be fading, although they currently depended on grants for the continuation of their arts practice and their international activities as well. Their reward system could best be described as a mixed one. They all held it as an ideal to be able to live on their art. Many of them saw grants and other public subsidies

as a kind of start-up assistance that could be offset after a few years of practice.

These young artists tended, for the most part, to be professional, disillusioned and pragmatic people. The mental and economic pressures of their careers were currently high. The most successful had already become masters at managing their schedules, often assisted by their galleries. They knew that the competition was tougher at the international level, and they realised that they had only a few years to establish their name. The interviewees nevertheless expected that their careers would advance if they worked hard and persistently developed their own unique artistry, a charismatic notion as such. At the same time, most of them acknowledged the need to be connected, promoted, marketed and branded.

What the interviewees valued most was their arts work, and they struggled hard for the opportunity to concentrate on it. They had to find ways of financing their practice without having to take on second jobs. It was most important for them to save time and energy for producing new works, for if they had nothing new to offer, interest in them would wane quickly. Foreign residence programmes, for instance, were taken as a means to arrange full-time concentration on artistic work, uninterrupted by ordinary social ties and responsibilities.

Instead of proving artistic integrity through economic sacrifices, as has been the habit in Finland, the interviewees were building up legitimacy through the process of selecting venues, invitations and co-workers. Image was an important consideration for them; some even talked about the artist as a 'brand'. Many saw the international art world as their primary audience instead of their domestic colleagues and other gatekeepers at home. Nevertheless, the home scene had to be tended as well, since most interviewees still depended on national financing.

The study on the whole indicates that the charismatic ideology of art has loosened but not totally lost its grip among mobile young artists in Finland. The division between art and economy existed for the interviewees, though they were negotiating the boundary and revising the concept of autonomous practice. Judgmental attitudes toward commercialism were slackening among them, and their reward orientation could be characterised as mixed rather than state-centred. The interviews suggest the acceptance of a more market-oriented type as one of the legitimate roles available to the artist in Finland.