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Seeing in progress:

Thoughts on the current state of Visual Culture and Art Education in the Aalto University

Introduction and historical context

I begin by describing the context of the current paradigm and a little bit of the history of the Finnish Art Education and Visual Culture.

Visual art education has been an independent subject in teacher education and a special area of pedagogy for 100 years in Finland. Its special character has grown independently, as it has not been a part of general education inside an Educational University, and on the other hand by not being part of an art academy (which are both typical in Europe). Instead, the department has been belonging to an art and design university and that has brought some special characteristics into it (Pohjakallio 2005, 25). The context of applied arts has created a link between art education and design, and through that Art Education has a connection to a larger context of visual culture.

Visual Culture Education is the name of the main subject studies in Art Education. Visual culture is therefore a concept that covers all art education studies, meaning that all art education belongs under visual culture studies. I find that approach very different from for example how visual culture is understood in the US. In this paper I try to describe what we in Finland understand by visual culture, and what are the contexts and concerns that different interpretations of the notion brings along.

Recently there has been going on tremendous university reform process in Finland that has influenced the identity of Art Education. Aalto University was built up couple years ago from a combination of three Universities: The University of art and design, the Technical University and the University of Economics. Also the departments inside of the schools were combined in the same process. Art education fused together with art programs and is now called Department of Art. During the process art education as a program has been under constant reconsideration and art educators in higher education have been going through a kind of an identity crises, trying to figure out what is the core of art education in the new University and in the contemporary Finnish society. The idea is that the Art Education program's future competences are formulated in continuous dialogue with the changing needs of the society, school system and phenomena of contemporary and interdisciplinary art and visual culture. For a small country as we are, this task requires noticing both local and global perspectives.

One big change to the past is to see art educators working in different cultural contexts rather than narrowing the work possibilities only into schools. Finnish art educators are working more and more in museums and in other institutions, and communities. At the same time there is a need to strengthen art education in the schools.

I shortly describe the historical context of the 100 years of old paradigm and actually jump straight ahead to the 1960' and 1970's.

In the end of 1960's and beginning of 1970's the societal activism challenged art educators and students to contemplate images as means of interpreting and influencing the society. The analysis of visual culture at that time was called polarized method, and it leaned on semiotics and Marxism. This method was openly political and was linked on one hand to socialist revolution and on the other hand to an ambition of influencing the environmental issues. It was heavily influenced by critical study of mass communication and on the idea of art education as social activism. The method itself was developed in Sweden and was spread out to all the Scandinavian and Nordic Countries. The idea behind this method was to show that exploitation of both people and the nature really exists and it was possible to expose and visualize through a critical study of mass media (Räsänen 1990).

At 1980's and 1990's the emphasis moved on to concern art making and self-expression, art therapy, environmental art education and initial design education. The influence of that is still partially rather strong. At the same time theoretical thinking was not popular, except for that which DBAE emphasized; aesthetics and art history. At 1980's and 1990's the contents that dealt with popular culture and media in art education were viewed with suspicion and they were thought to represent propagandist political views from 1970's. This history can be described as a burden to contemporary Visual Culture, even as a trauma, that partially still influences the Finnish Visual Culture. There are still some who associate contemporary Visual Culture, that includes popular culture imaginary in addition to the study of art works and art practices, with the 1970's image representation and interpretation, propaganda and manipulation and with the politics that were build that time. However, to many, Visual Culture's "comeback" is obvious and very welcome.

The current debate deals with the relationship of Visual Culture and Contemporary art. Questions, such as, which one is the hypernym, are raised, and worries like: does Visual Culture challenge the meaning of art in our field, are brought forward (Varto 2009, 35, 41). A strong interest towards contemporary art research seems to be one reaction to this concern. While struggling with this dualistic position, there are also views and visions of

these two perspectives to Art Education and its research, arguing that they are not competing with each other, and that they need not be seen opposing one another. Instead of only looking at art from the high culture context and visual culture from the popular culture context, they can be seen representing two different perspectives into the same discussion, where both are needed. Where contemporary art is understood as a subjective cultural strategy, Visual Culture deals with the visual and social structures, and the influence they have on subjectivity (Varto 2009, 36). Peculiarity in the Finnish Visual Culture comes from the idea of the importance of experimental learning in the use of multi sensorial and embodied methods. There is a strong emphasis to see the possibility to search the visual phenomena by using arts-based methods.

The theoretical context of Visual Culture

The theoretical context of the Visual Culture studies in Finland comes from the fields of culture and media studies. Media education and media literature has been strongly and interdisciplinarily emphasized in Finland, and this is the perspective the current understanding of Visual Culture mostly is linked with. Visual literature is understood as a metaphor to interpret and analyze visual representations and their meanings. However, the term literature has been somewhat problematic to art educators, as it refers to reading and writing, and therefore it is often taught in schools within Finnish language curriculum, not within art education. (Seppänen 2001, 15, 18.)

The theory of cultural studies is based on the so-called British culture research of 1950's – and on the other hand of the French 1960's research. The French influence has been more emphasized in the Art Educational context, while the British perspectives are stronger in the field of cultural studies of media research and communications theory (Seppänen 2005, 25, 35). The connection between the cultural studies and art education is somewhat unacknowledged but still clearly existing. This is evident by looking at the theoretical framework that guides the student's thesis works. Another important perspective to the Finnish VC is understanding it in relation to non-verbal communication (Seppänen 2001, 19), and to embodied and sensorial interaction between people. Embodiment is seen as an essential factor in constructing subjectivities.

Phenomenological theory, and more specifically embodied phenomenology, is strongly emphasized. The notions from Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty are taken seriously: meaning that a subject is his/her body and that we perceive our world through our bodies (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 408). In that sense it means that body is not material that the mind is trying to control, but a gesture of the personality (Heinämaa 2010, 113) and a way of existing in the world. The idea is that we are in a firm contact with the world

through our bodies. We are part of the world before we are able to think what the world is like. Since we are both embodied subjects that gaze, and embodied subjects to be gazed at, the inter-subject perception, which is always same as inter-bodied perception, is in the key role of phenomenological research attitude. (Hotanen 2010, 135.)

In research this shows as a notion of being part of the research body or research flesh. It means, instead of looking at things from a certain distance, acknowledging the important viewpoint when looking at things from inside, sometimes participatory, sometimes researching own artistic project. This viewpoint is called the inspective, which is contrary to the perspective research attitude (Varto 2000). Looking at the phenomena from inside and acknowledging the researcher's singular and subjective nature is much more interesting than an effort to accomplish a distance to the phenomena.

Another valued aspect to the embodied knowledge is emphasizing the knowledge we gain through the other senses than vision. Surely the visual is in the center of our field. However, focusing only on that would be narrowing off the experiences we discuss about. We are not only one big eye, as we are not just a computer-like mind. Sensorial knowledge is difficult to verbalize and therefore it is often been left aside in the visual culture research. Fortunately we have the French philosophers that have no difficulties with verbalizing that what the rest of us might struggle with. Jean-Luc Nancy writes about touch and how that is overpowering sense compared to the others. As, when we touch we are always touched at the same time. Jacques Derrida goes even further with Nancy's idea, asking if gazes could touch. His question goes: "If two gazes look into each other's eyes, can one then say that they are touching? Are they coming into contact – the one with the other?" (Derrida 2005, 2).

Finnish culture researcher Janne Seppänen has published two books about Visual Culture in Finland: *The Power of Gaze* (2001) (*Katseen voima*) and *The Visual Culture* (2005) (*Visuaalinen kulttuuri*). The author looks at Visual Culture through the notion of Visual Orders that steers all that is visual: from images that openly use power, to home videos, for example. He lists the Visual Order to include 1) Physical environments and all the objects around us, 2) the different visual representations and their contents, 3) the ways of looking, seeing and to be seen 4) the mechanisms that constitute the significations as part of representation of culture, 5) the interaction of gaze: gazing and to be gazed as a normative act that mediate different significances. The bidirectional meaning of gaze is to understand the effect and the power of other people's gaze in the construction of subjectivity. The visual and social orders are in interplay with one another. One does not just adjust to visual orders. They are actively and constantly being generated. The concept of Visual Order can

be connected to Jacques Lacan's concept of Symbolic Order, Michael Foucault's Discursive Order (Seppänen 2001, 230), and Jean Baudrillard's concepts of authenticity.

Introduction to Visual Culture

Next, I will briefly discuss about how Visual Culture is represented to our first year undergraduate students through a class that was taught in our department this semester 2009-10. This class was called Introduction to Visual Culture and it was taught by several teachers. My interpretation bases partially on my interview of lecturer Marja Rastas, who was in responsible of the course. The idea was to lead the first year undergraduate students to critically contemplate the methods of Visual Culture and how they communicate with children and adolescents in and outside of school context. Beside the institutional, the role of informal learning is understood important. Learning that happens in everyday life through different actions, without intention, is looked at with special interest. This kind of learning is understood active, multi sensorial, multimodal, communal, as immersion, and as something that creates and forms identities and symbolic orders. The children and adolescents Visual Culture are analyzed through critical theory and practical work, and through students' own experiences. As a pedagogical method there is a notion of learning as a hermeneutical circle that takes the students back and forth between subjective experimental and multi sensorial learning, critical theory, collaborative work, and art practice. Arts-based methods are in use through experimental learning.

The essential viewpoint is to discuss how the Visual Culture changes our identities. Visual Culture reflects that what we are and vice versa. Stuart Hall's concept of suture stitches subjectivity together with visual culture. Beyond that, there is an idea of identity that is connected to the social with discourses and practices (Hall 2005, 253, 255), and how we practice looking through visual orders. Understanding one's subjective role and significance in the culture of visibility shows us the reality where we live in.

Jean Baudrillard's concepts of the authenticity are based on looking at the reality through the Visual Orders. To Baudrillard, false is more genuine than authentic and the idea of trueness can be found from that what can be called "fake". The Visual Orders that the media creates are as real as any other and they do not reflect anything that could be described coming from reality. In that sense the meaning of representation has faded and the Visual Culture is just as material as the material, and the reality that the Visual Culture creates is more real than the reality itself. (Seppänen 2001, 67-68.) The spectator is always the Other, who dominates the one who is to be seen. The exploitation of freedom, shame, and feeling of nudity, belongs to this idea of submission to other people's gaze. The constant consciousness of the possibility of being seen has transformed from Foucault's

ideas of panopticon into our contemporary visual culture's reality with digital cameras, surveillance cameras and the reality shows on TV. These kind of visual practices, as part of personal subjectivity creation as well as more distanced media representations are studied.

The constant changing perspective combines critical thinking into developing understanding, and realizing that they need each other. Phenomenological and hermeneutical attitude brings the students to have a close and personal look at cultural phenomena in order to understand their multiple characters. The students' own experiments of their childhood Visual Culture brings vivid material into the learning and contextualizes the culture of visuality. The students bring images from pornography to games and collecting pictures. At the same time they contemplate the larger critical societal context, in order to understand who's interests are maintained and where they come from. This bricolage attitude used as a method brings the students to look at the larger contexts to cultural phenomena and sutures the students' subjective and critical thinking into it.

“Our thunderstorm”

As an epilogue to this text I present a student's work, Varpu Eronen's master thesis “Our Thunderstorm” from spring 2011, that takes into consideration the concepts, theories, and practices I have been discussing thus far. The work considers and combines embodied phenomenological and arts-based research, and visual and social structures of Visual Culture. The student work seamlessly incorporates these ideas as they relate to strategies of contemporary art-making and shifting subjectivities.

Varpu started her project after a shocking experience: her family's summer cottage burned down due to a thunderstorm. Lightning struck their summerhouse when she was spending a weekend there with her family. Luckily they were in a sauna building at the moment when the lightning struck. She searched the phenomena of an extraordinary experience through different visual, narrative, and theoretical methods. She also had an exhibition that she named “deus ex machina” that means God from a machine. Interestingly, she had already planned beforehand to research extraordinary experiences for her thesis. That is why she observed, documented, and photographed her environment during that particular summer weekend, more than usual. Her father was sick with cancer and they knew he would not live much longer, which made the weekend together already extraordinary.

The singular nature of research does not mean that it would be out of reach to other people — quite the contrary. When something is deeply singular it usually makes most sense to us. Not all of our summerhouses need to burn down, for example, for us to understand the

nature of Varpu's thesis: that is the essence of the experience and the meaning of place and processing through visuals and narratives. As is characteristic of art, the knowledge that stems from human experience and expression is something that can be shared among people, and it is therefore possible for others to understand.

Varpu used narrative and auto-ethnographic methods, alongside with knowledge that she gained through art making, photography, painting and installation art, and through theories of place and memory, and psychoanalytical theory. Following the Finnish Artistic Research paradigm, she gave herself as an instrument to the research project (Hannula et al, 2003; 2005). This is especially apparent in Varpu's project, in her performative images where she is using her own body. She is not taking pictures of herself as much as she is using herself as in instrument to bodily explore the phenomena she is studying. Photographing was a way to try to organize that what she could not completely understand or control. As everything else was burned down, she found her white summer dress that was buried inside of a carpet and survived from the flames. She dressed up in that and started to take pictures with her dad's help. The images turned out to be beautiful and poetic, although to her living through the tragedy explored by performative methods was most meaningful. The pictures played an important role in her thesis, as they documented, explored, and generated the Visual Order of the event and her own changing subjectivities.

Varpu explored time related experience through Alain Badiou's theory of time. The lightning experience, for example, constructed time in a new way. Suddenly there was a time before and after. The before time was a lost history, a different kind of history, and more lost that it would have been without the incident. The future was considered in relation to the fire. The moment of the incident itself was somewhat disconnected to time. During the experience time seemed to slow done, but afterwards it seemed to be completely frozen.

The use of narrative method led Varpu produce different materials from the same experience, and in that way process and construct the experience. She used narrative method in her five stories 1) her own narration of that what she felt that happened, 2) her mother's story that she calls a "sad story", 3) a thunder report from the meteorological institution about that specific lightning strike, 4) local news of the thunderstorm and how it hit into a summer cottage, and 5) a so called "weird story" that she also wrote herself to emphasize and exaggerate on purpose the coincidences and significance during that weekend. Through psychoanalytical theory and the notion of objet petit a, she analyzed these narratives and a short documentary video clip from the fire. That what was a simple tragedy in the beginning transformed a trauma with nostalgic memories toward jouissance

— enjoyment with pain. The burned down summer cottage grew as an important part of the subjectivities of the family members, an object of their desires and fantasies.

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