

“There is some kind of idea that the artist after all is not working.”

JUSSI KIVI is a visual artist. He is the winner of the prestigious Ars Fennica prize in 2009 and was representative of Finland in the 53rd Venice Biennial 2009 with *Fire & Rescue Museum*.

He wrote a lengthy text in *Taide* magazine issue 2/2010 about his experiences in Venice and afterwards with the same exhibition travelling to Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki in 2010. The text reveals how his artwork in Venice was used by Kiasma as promotion of the institution, although they did not have any share in the costs or labour of the project in Venice. Also it tells how he was paid little for his work in Venice and even less when it travelled to Kiasma. Kivi writes: “I received an email from the chief curator of Kiasma, Arja Miller, where she said she responds on behalf of Berndt Arell [the director of Kiasma at the time] that there is no artist fee reserved in the budget and it is very seldom that we would pay such, but we will see if we manage to pinch something from the budget...” Furthermore, the exhibition in Kiasma was not properly announced, and even the artist was ignored in the press conference of the exhibition by its very curator, who did not even mention his name nor his project.

JUSSI KIVI had become disillusioned about the art scene already when participating in the São Paulo Biennial in 1987.

Can you briefly tell about your experience in São Paulo?

I had idolised and mystified the art scene, and in a way you could say I was at the gates to it. There, in São Paulo I saw how petit-bourgeois and grand-bourgeois it

in fact is. It's the world's third biggest city, with enormous amounts of poor people. There the upper-class millionaires are organising a megalomaniac biennial for their own amusement. The contradiction between the outer reality and the exhibition hit me there. Due to my social

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background I had not been to such circles before. As an artist you have the ability to jump the class. I was not a fish in the water there, until I changed my role for the duration of the trip. My idealistic conception of being an artist came crumbling down. It was not worth the struggle. I had thought it was something intellectual, social and humane, that there was some kind of connection. But what I saw there were power positions and the purpose of art in society being about status.

The most corny thing was the party the day after the opening which one millionaire organised in his home, on a fenced off area with armed security guards. In the house there were art books scattered here and there. In the party tent in the garden there were paintings placed leaning against the sides. It was completely corny. It was as if Björn “Nalle” Wahlroos, the rich banker and advocate of neoliberalism, would make an invite for lunch.

What got you into boycotting galleries which charge rent?

I had never thought about it as a boycott. Already when on my last years at school in the early 1980s, I had thought that it makes no sense to pay rent for an exhibition, I will never do that, rather I'll stop making art. I thought that because I am bad in making money and not particularly interested in it either, I can live with other means than exhibiting in galleries where you need to pay. At that time there were not any free galleries. In the end of 1970s and early 1980s there were only the galleries of the artists' associations and the Artek gallery. The Artek gallery was more highly ranked as a gallery and I don't know what kind of policy they had toward gallery rent. But the galleries of the artists' associations had different status then

from what they have today. You could say they have now slid into province. They had a bigger role in the art scene which connects with the societal issues, all organising was valued. I am part of a generation that did not like the union. I only joined the Artists' Association MUU ry some six years ago, and I only did it for practical reasons as when you apply for a studio space from the Atelier Foundation, you need to be member in the union. Those days artists' unions were dominated by power games of some artists... and some old farts. They were quite provincial and had a lot of power in the Finnish art scene, but today I understand that artists' unions have done also important work for the field. For example, we wouldn't have such a grant system without them.

Were there any alternative spaces at those times?

There was the Cheap Thrills run by J. O. Mallander, which stopped around that time. I remember it as a very interesting place with an unconventional atmosphere. I liked what was going on there. It was so different from what was taught at school and what the teachers stood for. The group Harvesters were considered as hippies and wackos. That was an alternative space which I think didn't cost. It was off-centre, at Huvilakatu. There was something connecting the people there, which was not just the gallery, but the beat-generation, fluxus, new age-stuff. The front row artists thought they were completely woo woo. In a way the art scene was very “true-finn” at the time.

Asko Mäkelä initiated the gallery at the Old Students' House in 1980. That was also free. In the beginning it was not very much noticed. The real artists were sitting in the Kosmos-restaurant and were not

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interested in what was going on at Vanha. I had my first exhibition in that gallery, when I was still at school. At the time it was unusual to have exhibitions when you are still studying. There was no invigilation, which set some limits to what was possible to be shown there. So that was the starting point for me after which I would not pay to have an exhibition. It felt that it is a bit of a loser's tactics that you pay yourself into a gallery programme and for people to acknowledge your work. I could afford to think this way because I had my exhibition in the Old Students' House gallery and because I was receiving some invites. At the time the art scene was changing quite drastically after the inward turn of the 1970s and an interest toward the tradition of European and American contemporary art just started. When you were interested in it and doing something resembling something of the kind, you were in a way on top of the wave. There were not so many people making that what we think is contemporary art and it was easier probably because of that. When you were on the wave of something new it opened some doors, although the works were not necessarily so good, but rather home-made.

Have you ever paid to have an exhibition?

There was an exhibition of the Romantic Geographic Society, group which I am member of together with Tero Kontinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, at the Huuto! gallery. It was a group exhibition of some 15 artists with the theme of Nature Romanticism. Of that we probably did need to pay. If I remember right Oliver paid it. And once I had an exhibition at the Studio of the Kunsthalle Helsinki. There I needed to pay for the invitation cards.

They were around 500 Finnish markka. But I didn't need to pay rent.

A couple of years ago I was talking with a gallery owner in Germany, who could not understand that in Finland artists have to pay. What happens is that when artists pay for the gallery rent with their grants, it is a great example of outsourcing process. It is as if running a gallery would be some kind of state supported cultural work outsourced to galleries. Galleries finally get the money but it comes from the state and foundations. Why galleries cannot be supported directly but instead artists need to get it for the gallery? It is true that the galleries do not manage only with the rent money, but it does decrease the risk, which is taken by the artist. It is obscene, because the artists are among the poorest and they need to pay the rent. In classical music, at least in orchestras, there is the chair where they are playing the violin and they get paid for it. I don't know the theatre field nor its funding. In cinema there is the director, and I've understood that they also need to sacrifice, whereas the light engineer, the sound engineer and the stage designer do get paid, because they are working there. There is some kind of idea that the artist after all is not working.

Why did you write the text that was published in *Taide* 2/2010?

With the exhibition in Kiasma, which I wrote to the *Taide* magazine about¹, my starting point had been that I should be getting the same salary as the museum technician. I was not even asking for any special copyright fee. My aim was that as I would be working there for two weeks, I would not end up being the only one in the team who was not paid. In Venice I got 3000 euros in total, and I was working approximately five months full time. I did

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have a living grant at the time though, but this had nothing to do with the Venice project, it was given before that, but without that it would have been impossible to do such a laborious work for the biennial. My assistant Filippo Zambon got half of that for one month's job. I am not the least bit bitter to Filippo about that, he did a great job and deserved his salary. And we had fun too. But it was really the treatment I got in Kiasma at the time which made me write the text to *Taide*. I asked for 2 500 euros from them, I was paid 2 000. But that followed by all kind of weird treatment by the chief curator Arja Miller, which the new museum director Pirkko Siitari did apologise for afterwards, when I sent her the text to inform what I was about to publish. Siitari told Miller to call me and to apologise for her mistakes, but I would not forgive her. There were too many well-considered mistakes one after another, I had also heard through the grapevine what she had discussed, and I had no reason to forgive her.

How were the reactions to that text?

There was a lot of positive feedback from the scene, artists were thanking me for bringing up the issue. The only critical comment that I should consider was from the lawyer of the State Art Museum, about me not knowing how much the Venice project cost in the end. But my complaint was mainly about Kiasma not wanting to pay a fee to me and Miller revenging to me that they were forced to.

We agreed about exhibiting the work in Kiasma already before it was shown in Venice, and this was the initiation of Berndt Arell at Kiasma. When I first heard of the Venice-thing I thought that is a good thing and I went for it out of interest. But when it turned to be that kind of exploitation of the

artist I thought, oh shit, not this again! I had stepped on the other side of the river and I didn't manage with dry feet, something got me pissed off again. Never before has an exhibition organising ended up in an argument except here. I have also not earlier experienced of being particularly bullied before.

My relation with money is that unless I have an acute lack of it, I cannot be too much interested in it, and in how to get it. I have always preferred to think that I have other values than money. And this is probably how many other artists think. And that is what the whole cheating of artists is based on.

A while ago I was talking with artist-colleague Lauri Astala, we are of the same generation. We have learned not to market ourselves very much. And if each artist generation has their own myths, for us it is the van Gogh or Cézanne or Duchamp type of artist who is harvesting apples and settles for little as long as they can do their art. Today already at school you learn to market yourself and to strive for success.

Do you have a reputation of being a difficult case because you speak out?

When I was awarded with the Ars Fennica prize, I thought that now a lot of invitations will follow. What has followed have been a couple of invitations to summer exhibitions in the provinces. I was invited into an exhibition in the Lappeenranta Art Museum, which was to travel to Mikkeli afterwards. They wanted a specific work from me for that exhibition. I said to them that I am not a member in Kuvasto – The Finnish Visual Artists' Copyright Association – but I would still like to get an equivalent payment of the Kuvasto fee. The person

on the other end of the telephone line got a bit confused and told me they would call me back after they found out about the possibilities. Then they called back and said that the museum cannot pay, as they have not budgeted such an expense, and also explained that it would be unjust toward the other artists, if I was paid. It was a minor sum all and all, just a few framed drawings. They asked me once again whether I still want to consider my participation, where I replied “no.” It was in the very end of the negotiations, they were already about to come and fetch the work from my studio when this came up. I should have asked the person, who I think was a curator, whether they are working there for free.

Why are you not a member in Kuvasto?

Because I think it is quite complicated. My pictures are not circulating in media so I don't need it for that, no-one has asked my pictures for postcards for example. And my impression is that the Kuvasto fees are quite small, and part of it goes to running of the Kuvasto office. Also I don't exhibit that much, and often there is some kind of deal of our own, and anyway the fees do not apply to exhibitions abroad. At some point I was considering joining Kuvasto, but I concluded that it adds up to plus-minus-zero, or even a bit minus. In principle I have nothing against it.

Other experiences?

The following year in Tuusula Art Museum they did pay me for participating in their summer exhibition. And there was no hesitation at all. Then at the Helsinki Photography Biennial the Mustarinda collective, who organised the part where my work was included, had small fees for

artists. But that exhibition I would have joined in any case, as I am a member of Mustarinda collective and I thought it was interesting what they were doing there. When the organisers are clearly non-profit, it is a different case, but if it is so that they are partly non-profit, partly on salaries, then it is not ok.

But I have not been invited in any more prestigious exhibitions since then, except for a couple of summer shows in regional museums. I have not been part of any higher ranking Finnish project after that. Reasons could be anything, it is difficult to speculate. I got a lot of positive feedback for my text in the *Taide* magazine. But those whose toes I stepped on, probably do still remember it, and also remind others like-minded, that he is a difficult case. When I have written such an article, it is easy to think that he must be really difficult. But I am not a difficult person, that was the only time. I don't seek for trouble and I don't have some complex that needs to come out every time after the opening. But I can imagine that in the institutions, to some extent, not to generalise, there can be people who want to play safe. And an artist who writes a story like that is clearly not completely reliable and it is safer to work with someone else.

These career developments in the art world are interesting. I have had a rocket-like rise and a similar fall. After Venice there was one show in Linz, but I could not participate in it as I was at the same time in Kiasma.² Nothing has followed since then. And Ars Fennica is not particularly known outside the Finnish or Nordic borders.

When the Cheap Thrills ended, there was nothing for a long time, until Huuto! and other artist run spaces started to emerge. Forum Box was founded already in the end of 90s or early 2000s, and that was a big bang at first, as there was

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some sponsor and front line artist names founding it. But the rent was high. It functioned with the same logic as the artists' association galleries.

Now in Helsinki there are a few commercial galleries which do not charge rent, but they take provision of sales, of course. But selling art in Finland is not a very easy business. The scene is small and there are no markets, like in bigger metropolises. But it is good that there are those few galleries, which do not charge rent. It would be nice to have a gallerist to sell my works, and some years ago I tried to approach a few galleries, but they were not interested enough. Now after Venice and Ars Fennica my situation has changed, but in the art world they don't go and ring doorbells. And I am a bit shy and very bad in marketing my own works to gallerists.

What is wrong with the gallery rent system?

I am against it because as an artist it doesn't make any sense as a source of living or as business. You are funding your own work, you have to have a basic income to get by, you rent a studio space, you buy all the materials and you use your creative energy and time for some artwork, and then in the end you pay a lot in order to get it shown. And even if you did sell, the money would not probably be much after all the studio expenses and others. Someone can sell well from an exhibition, but after the provision that the gallery takes anyway, and if you even have to pay rent, and all the other expenses, you are left with not much profit. It is a senseless equation. Normally people do not pay so that they can do their work, that they get their living with. What if you went to the construction site to work and you'd pay for it yourself? Compared with other creative jobs, for example

in the advertising business they make a lot of money. There probably are a lot of precarious workers in other fields too. But if you have something to say, why don't you look for other channel to say it, so that you don't need to pay huge amounts just to be able to say it. And if you don't have something to say, then you might just as well do without. Then there is no necessity to say anything.

The gallerist has probably rented some expensive office shop front, and has to get paid somehow. And I believe that it is not easy to make money with art, but artist pays the rent. Also the gallerist is taking a risk, but the risk that the artist has to take is bigger. And usually the gallerists live in a completely other social class and rate of income than the artist, for some reason.

A few years ago I participated in exhibition at Oksasenkatu 11. It was the best work I have done in a while. The gallery is a bit off-centre. In the opening there were a lot of people, but after that there were 5 people a day. It was fun to do it, but I don't know if I have the energy to continue exhibiting only to friends, or for the sake of being able to realise an installation. One can do in a smaller scale just for oneself. The alternative gallery scene is a thing for the art scene and I am not very interested in it, showing just for each other. It was nice in Kiasma, because there a lot of people saw the work. At the Ars Fennica award ceremony I gave a small speech where I said that it was quite an unusual gig, when there were five guys working but only one got paid. Not that I would have split my prize money with the others. But it was quite absurd to know that someone had even taken a bank loan for their installation, as investment for their career. He must have been pissed off not winning it. I calculated that with the photo prints and frames, I spent 2000

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euros for the work in the exhibition. Not a penny I got for materials. The prize could be a bit less and everyone could get some production money.

But the fact is that when you are working in a non-commercial gallery, where you don't need to pay rent, you are more free to do whatever you want. It's best if you don't have even a subconscious pressure of selling or any of those kinds of ideas. It helps you keep your focus on the content and on the questions that you think are interesting. In a way, also, by avoiding the commercial side and the big financial investments on the artworks I have guarded my own freedom – partly subconsciously – but also fully aware. Somehow quite gullibly, I have begun to grow to the myth that the most important thing for an artist is guarding one's freedom, although in reality no-one is free and independent of the relation with the surrounding world, culture, nature, etc. It's good to remember that even big names could make uninteresting and unimportant works when they fall too deep into the business and don't have any more free time to concentrate on their artistic work.

1. My intention is not to criticise Kiasma in itself, or the fact that the State Art Museum exists. My critique was directed toward the certain ways in which Berndt Arell and his close employee Arja Miller, treated me as artist when I was working with them in Kiasma. The State Art Museum is an important institution, similar to the library institution, cornerstones of civilised nation. I don't want to join the choir of people who want to dismantle the public institutions. [Jussi Kivi]
2. In *Taide 2* / 2010 Jussi Kivi writes: “My work was invited from Venice to Linz in *Biennale Cuvee* exhibition, which is a compilation of the most interesting works from the different biennials held in 2009. Because the exhibition overlapped with the exhibition in Kiasma, I had to reject the invitation. But this proves that the selectors of the *Biennale Cuvee* thought I was among the best of the Venice Biennial. But now it has become apparent that by choosing Berndt Arell's Kiasma instead of Linz, I am only among the stupids.”