

“People are careful not to interfere and just do their own work. It makes any change difficult.”

RAAKEL KUUKKA is a visual artist and photographer, whose work has been shown in big exhibitions all over the world. In Finland she has experience for 30 years of mainly exhibiting in galleries where she has had to pay rent, and also the invitation cards and fund-raise for the exhibition. In 2013, together with nine other artists, she organised an exhibition in the Kunsthalle Helsinki, which also charges rent from artists. But in the recent years she has been fortunate to get invited to exhibit increasingly also in museums, where such exhibition-related expenses do not apply.

How have you collected money for the exhibitions?

By applying for grants. Often there is a certain risk involved as the exhibition has been agreed and then you need to apply for grants. You cannot know whether you get funding or not. Sometimes I have had to take a small bank loan. But I have always been very careful with that, not taking out big loans for exhibition.

So can you tell how you have usually managed to cover the exhibition expenses and to get by?

I have had to spend my personal money on the exhibitions as well. But I have become more aware of that within the last ten years. I think that earlier I spent

a lot more on my work production, and it was not economically profitable. Well, it is not profitable now either, I am still in the same situation. It is good if in the end it is a plus-minus-zero-situation. If you think that you should earn a living from the work, it doesn't happen. You might get the expenses paid and reach a zero-situation. But there is no artist salary. The Kuvasto fees are so small that I don't consider them as salary and they come so much later as well.

However, I have had artist grants for living costs. But they are not meant for work production and gallery rent. Also I have earned money with jobs, for example teaching. Or I have tried to be active and get an artwork sold, and perhaps I have managed. But I really do not know, indeed I wonder how I have managed

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economically. Somehow I always have. Maybe I have been careful. It has also affected the artworks as I have not been able to realise them with the best possible technique, because the economic situation has influenced the choice of materials and their realisation. I have not wanted to take a 10000 euros bank loan for the production costs.

Is the zero-situation such that you get the work production expenses covered but not a salary?

Yes. Now currently I have an exhibition in Kouvola art museum. It is great that the museum pays for the invites, the rent and insurance, my travel expenses and other costs like this. However, we had agreed that my fee corresponds to the Kuvasto fee. It is a big exhibition and it is installed for four months. I have been preparing it for at least half a year. The exhibition fee is 1500 euros, which went towards the framing of artworks, and there was nothing left for me. When the exhibition was installed I was in a zero-situation. I think there should be a salary for the exhibition period also. I had received a short term grant of four months, but it was not even enough for the time I was working towards the exhibition. Further, you cannot rely on the income from sales. Photography is within a risk zone, as in Finland there are very few instances where someone would buy photographic art. Usually it is museums and foundations who purchase, and they have their limits. One cannot count on them at all. The museums do not function as art dealers either, so you have to be active yourself, if you want an income. From the exhibition in Kouvola nothing has come yet. [A few days after the interview Raakel received information that the Kouvola art museum will buy three pieces

from the exhibition for their collections!]

It is mentally very heavy and depressive when you do a big work which receives good feedback, but economically you are ending up in a zero-situation. It doesn't lift your self-esteem. Also, here in Finland, it doesn't work so well that you try to sell your own artwork. It is difficult and humiliating. When I was working at Hippolyte, I had to sell the works of other artists. It was meaningful, as I knew the works, I could speak about them, and I knew how important it is for the artist and the gallery to sell them. But when it comes to my own works, it is really difficult and it would be better if there was someone else in between as a mediator. That someone could be a representative of the Artists' Association. But preferably not myself, as it is not nice.

The thirty years that you have held exhibitions in galleries that cost, can you say something about how the situation has changed?

It is difficult to say. I think it is harder these days to get a grant for the gallery rent, because there are more artists around. It feels as if in the 1980s it was easier to get a grant. Maybe it was because I was young and an interesting visual artist, also in the 1990s. Lately I have tried to avoid galleries where I need to pay. But the *Karjala!* exhibition in the Kunsthalle Helsinki was completely up to us artists to find funding. The exhibition was first in the Joensuu Art Museum, where the funding structure was different. In the Kunsthalle Helsinki the budget was huge because the rent of the space is so big. Luckily, as we knew about the exhibition early on, we could apply for every possible grant. As we were so many, we could divide up the tasks which made it easier, and the applications were good and well-reasoned. We took a very big risk, but we were also many.

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The rent of the Kunsthalle Helsinki of the exhibition period was 15000 euros, and with everything else added it was something between 30000 and 40000 euros. We were ten artists and we thought that we can take that risk. Thankfully it was a success, as we did receive funding, almost everything we applied for. We were even left with money for work productions, which is surprising in an exhibition of this scale. But it was not enough to cover all the work expenses.

What kind of expenses were there with the Kunsthalle Helsinki?

Daily rent, fees of personnel for the time exceeding what we had agreed on, design and printing of invitation cards, the transport of works, possible insurance, equipment rent... They had some kind of agreement with a company that is renting out display equipment. The Kunsthalle Helsinki recommended this company to us, and while we got a discount, we still had to pay.

Did you have any curatorial dialogue with them?

Yes in principle. We had several preparatory meetings with them. But it was a bit difficult, as we didn't have an appointed curator from their side, and so we didn't know with whom to speak to. It was difficult for them as well, that they were charging rent from us. They said that to us at some point – that it is difficult to interfere with all kind of issues, when we are buying the space from them and paying for everything. But they did write the press release and it seemed it was important for them to do it according to their protocol. The additional programme we planned together. In other words, we had some ideas and they had some ideas, and we

combined these in agreement. That was good, but it was also what we got the funding for, and paid for. They offered their workers, within the limits of their working hours.

Would you organise an exhibition in the Kunsthalle Helsinki again?

Now when I know the risks and the expenses, I would really have to think carefully what kind of a project would be possible to receive funding. I am not sure if I would have the energy to apply for all the funding again. But I think that it is a really good exhibition space. It is central and important. So in that sense, I would. I am aware of the financing structure of the Kunsthalle and it is very problematic. They do not have any bad intentions, but they have to charge rent from artists. It is really strange, how it can be that way. It limits their exhibition policy, when they are dependent on applications and are not able to produce many exhibitions themselves.

What should change so that money would circulate differently in the art scene?

I think that it should be the task of the exhibition venue to produce the exhibition. In my opinion, they should have that kind of production model. I don't know why it is so passive. Is it because the exhibitions at the Kunsthalle change so fast? Often museums have only two exhibitions in a year, or in any case a lot less than what is in the Kunsthalle. They are lacking the basic funding. It is not the task of the artists to get the funding for the most basic things; for rent, invitations, insurance, transportation, etc. These aspects should be the responsibility of the exhibition organisation, and the funding

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should be structured accordingly. And the same goes for the galleries of the artists' associations: there might be a lot of good-will toward the artist's work, but the associations didn't manage to arrange the funding in the way that this issue of individual artist responsibility for funding would disappear from exhibiting.

Why do you think that is?

I believe it has a lot to do with attitude, a strong will is missing. We artists have been too humble and nice also historically, at least since I have been around. We have agreed to anything in order to be able to realise our work. I think that is part of the problem. One's own attitude toward work is too humble.

Where does the gallery rent come from?

I cannot say. I have been following the art scene since the 1970s, especially in the photography field, and I have been involved in the Gallery Hippolyte. I have also seen the other artists' association galleries and they each have a rent to pay. The same applies for Forum Box, which is run by a co-operative of artists, and there is also the principle that the artist pays rent. There has been some discussion about the issue every now and then, but it has been quite mild. And the people who raise such issues – for example when in the *Taide* magazine (*Taide* 2/2010) there was an article by Jussi Kivi about artistic work and its expenses – they easily get the label of being difficult. People are careful not to interfere, and just do their own work. It makes any change difficult. I haven't been following the discussion much, but the idea of artist fees sound really good, if they were to be

budgeted in exhibitions from the start.

But I am wondering whether we can just glue on the fees into this existing system. We have to pay rent in the galleries, but in museums artists would instead get a fee. The gap between the galleries and the museums would just grow even more.

Tell me, why to have exhibitions at all?

For me the experience of being in a space is important. It is a physical experience, it means a lot to me, and I visit exhibitions a lot.

What influence does the gallery rent policy have on the art scene?

It is a strange money transfer through the artist to the organisations. It comes from the same source as the artist grants. The rent enables that one can run a gallery without needing to sell works, not needing to be commercially-orientated. The money has to come from somewhere.

Who should run the case to change the gallery rent policy?

This should happen in a united front, where everyone would join in demanding for the issue to be taken into budgets. It asks for prudence and a shared will. There is always some discussion going on about abolishing the gallery rent policy, so that it would not be responsibility of artists any more, but in 30 years I have not seen a serious attempt, nothing has happened.

Of course it should be the artists' associations. Their galleries, via the Finnish Artists' Association. It should start from there. There should be some discussion event about the issue. But is there any real will to change it?