

Lectio Precursoria

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Honorable Custos, honorable Opponent, ladies and gentlemen,

‘*Aber etwas fehlt* (But something is missing)’, insists Paul Ackermann in **Bertolt Brecht**’s satirical opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* (1930). Ackermann is an Alaskan lumberjack, who has arrived with his friends to Mahagonny, to the glorious, extraordinary city in the middle of the desert. The city promises everything that money can buy for everybody. There are no prohibitions. Still, *something is missing*. The monetary pleasures of Mahagonny leave Ackermann to long for something else.

My doctoral dissertation ‘*Everyday life of utopias. Places of participation and change in contemporary art 1980-2011*’ defines the notion of utopia in the spirit of lumberjack Ackermann as something that is missing. I ask in the research, how to understand and conceptualize the transformative and relational quality of the participatory art that also can be understood as utopian.

I discuss this question with six contemporary artworks, that each has very different relation to participation: French **Sophie Calle**’s *Suite vénitienne* (Venetian Suite, 1980), American **John Baldessari**’s *Your Name in Lights* (2011), Finnish **Minna Heikinaho**’s *Ilmainen aamiainen* (the Free Breakfast, 1994), *the Free Shop* (2003 ->) of the Danish Superflex artist group, *Copenhagen Free University* (CFU, 2001–2007) and born Belgian **Francis Alÿs**’s *Quando fe mueve montañas* (When Faith Moves Mountains, 2002). In the research, I also return regularly to the artistic strategies of the early 20th century European avant-garde and the experimental atmosphere of the 1960’s art.

The processes of participatory art are dependent on their site-specific contexts. Therefore, I have situated my research in the everyday urban scenes of the artworks: in the street, café, shop, school, and cathedral. Everyday life takes its form in these urban settings, based on their strong and often foreseeable social and functional routines and rituals. However, *something* breaks the self-affirmative flow of the everyday life. When people get involved – either by accident or on purpose – in the participatory art processes, they are temporarily disengaged from their predetermined routines and performative roles

of the everyday life. Participatory art acts as an unfocused and undetermined send-off, which enables the critique of the present. It can bring forth dissident imagination and dissident ways of being – porous utopias.

‘*Something*’, my child in her Kindergarten age used to say when we asked what she had been doing during the day. This frustratingly evasive and blurred ‘something’ describes in its obscurity the multiplicity of the everyday: *something* is plenty and many without any specific highlights or culminations. There is just “something”, and this something stays beyond verbalization.

The processes of participatory art in my research could also be described as ‘*something*’. The experiences and interpretations of the artworks remain scattered and impossible to reach as clear and concise. Indeed, participatory artworks often lack clear form and character, which is why it has been considered challenging to the critique and conceptualizing. In my research, I have characterized the scattered and fragmented quality of the participatory art as trans-situational.

The reading of the trans-situational artworks can never be exhaustive nor final. They lack a center. *Something* in the artwork stays always out of focus. Therefore, art can only be grasped in its temporary processes: in its fleeting relations and connections with something or someone. In practice, this means that I have not ‘interpreted’ or ‘analyzed’ the artworks, but *rewritten them* into this specific research context. My aim was to practice readings of the artworks that would not tame, adjust nor hegemonize them. What has emerged as diverse and indefinable, has partly let to stay as uncomfortably indefinable, as something.

My doctoral dissertation begins from the city streets – in the footsteps of the *flâneur*, the hero of the Modern life of the 19th century. I examine the ‘street’ as a public realization of the everyday life with two very different artworks and urban structures: the labyrinth-like streets of the medieval Venice in the *Suite vénitienne* make contrast to the modern and commercial streets of Sydney, Amsterdam, and Paris, the scenes of the *Your Name in Lights*.

The first artwork, the *Suite vénitienne* takes us to Venice in 1980. Back then, Artist Sophie Calle had a habit to randomly pick someone from the crowds of

her hometown Paris, and begin to follow him or her. Calle also secretly took photographs and wrote down some notes to document her routes—until she lost the sight of the person she was following.

Then unexpectedly at a party, Calle ends up face to face with a man she has just been shadowing. The man, Henri B, tells Calle that he is soon going to travel to Venice. Calle decides to follow him there, too. She packs—among others—a blond wig, some make-ups, sunglasses and a camera in her suitcase. The *Suite vénitienne*, Venetian Series, begins.

The Suite vénitienne is Sophie Calle's narration of the two weeks she spent in Venice following Henri B. The artwork consists of Calle's diary entries and notes on maps as well as black and white photographs of the streets, signs, cafés she sees and people she meets while tracing Henri B. Finally, the photos of Henri B complete the series.

The art historical analysis of the *Suite vénitienne* typically concentrates on the unrelational relation between Sophie Calle and Henri B; on Calle's fear of being uncovered, and on the unavoidability of it. The artwork has not previously been seen as participatory. However, if one understands Calle's shadowing process as participatory, the unnoticeable social and material bonds that support the Venetian everyday life emerge. When looking for Henry B, the artist has to ask for help from numerous 'allies': hotel receptionists, friends of the friends, souvenir sellers, passers-by, et cetera. These 'allies' are the community of the artwork, its participants and stakeholders. This community emerges without any identifications or definitions. It just comes, in the process of Calle's problem-solving.

John sari's *Your Name in Lights* is the only artwork in my research that I, too, have taken part (Image 1). It all began when I received e-mail, which promised fame for my friends and me. It offered advertising space for my name at the brightest neon lights for fifteen seconds, and entirely free. Naturally, I accepted the offer and signed in. Later I watched a live internet stream from the other side of the world, which showed the façade of the Australian Museum, Sydney, and my name in the lights.

This shiny moment of my name lasted the promised fifteen seconds. I myself wasted these seconds trying to take as brilliant screen capture of my name



Image 1. Kaldor Public Art Project 23: John Baldessari 2011. *Your Name in Lights*, Façade of the Australian Museum, Sydney, 8.-30.1.2011. Photo: Paul Green.

as possible. Yet, today you are not going to see my name in lights. I have lost the screen capture. Instead, here is – along with the fireworks and cries of joy -- some official photos taken from the opening party of the *Your Name in Lights* in Sydney 2011 (Image 2).

John Baldessari's *Your Name in Lights* is a thirty-meter LED sign, installed in the façade of a building. Everyone is welcomed to send his or her name to shine as part of the artwork.

The lists of names changing in fifteen seconds intervals seem endless. One possible way to approach the work is to read it as a list or catalogue characteristic to conceptual art. Yet, I started to think about the sense of communality the artwork creates and the commercialization and eventization of the urban streets. In this respect, I claim that the artwork suggests only a meagre potentiality to change: it engages



Image 2. Kaldor Public Art Project 23: John Baldessari 2011. *Your Name in Lights*, Façade of the Australian Museum, Sydney, 8.-30.1.2011. Photo: Paul Green.

its participants only in the already known. And it reinforces the content and connections that already exist.

It is easy to imagine that Bertolt Brecht's city of Mahagonny was brightly lit by similar neon lights to the one in the *Your Name in Lights*; Mahagonny by default was a city where everyone and everything was competing for the attention and money. But the café in this next image is quite the contrary: it shows no interest in the attention value. The small orange paper on the window is the only evidence to tell it truly is a café. The paper says "*ilmainen aamiainen / free breakfast*" and its opening hours. The café in question is Minna Heikinaho's artwork *Free Breakfast*.

Heikinaho set up her free breakfast room in an empty commercial premise in the summer of the great economic depression in 1994. Because of its topical content, the *Free Breakfast* soon became one of the most discussed communal artworks in Finland. Together with the nearby breadlines of the Salvation Army, the everyday life in Heikinaho's breakfast room made the concrete outcomes of the economic recession visible. People were struggling to get enough money for food and living. Yet, I claim that the free breakfast room was not only a charity café, which gave free food to the hungry. It was a radially hospitable place, which brought different people with very different backgrounds around the same dining table.

The Free Breakfast made the public sociability and its reverse side, the differentiated loneliness and the inequality of the urban space visible. In my dissertation, I deliberate the public sense of togetherness amongst the strangers suggested by the artwork, and ask, what does the act of sharing a free breakfast bring forth in and through its participants.

I have typically presented the artworks of my research narratively: the narrative is functional though sometimes criticized format to analyze experiences.

The narrative of a participatory artwork could, for instance, go as follows: you are shopping in a store like so many times before. The store could be, let's say, a record shop (Image 3 and 4). You go through the record selection, browse the novelties, and think about your needs and wishes. Finally, you choose the record you want to purchase and move on to the cashier. Just as



Image 3 & 4. Superflex 2011. Free Shop (Digelius Record Store, Helsinki).
 Photo: IHME Contemporary Art Festival/Veikko Somerpuro.

always. Shopping is an everyday routine you do not especially need to think or question. Until something plays havoc with your shopping plans. In this story, this happens when you get a receipt from the cashier. The receipt says that your purchase does not cost anything. The round zero euro printed on the receipt breaks the steady flow of the everyday life. A new kind of relation and orientation has entered into the social scene of shopping.

This narrative follows the simple score of the *Free Shop* created by the Danish artist group Superflex: *'Anything the customer wants to purchase is free. Free Shop can happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone.'*

According to Superflex, the *Free Shop* is toying with the notion of counter economy; with the possibility of alternative monetary systems. This way, the *Free Shop* shop brings in focus the relational forms of humans and non-humans mediated by money. In these relational forms, the most central protagonist is the cash receipt: it reveals the artistic nature of the *Free Shop* intervention.

Participatory art has many times characterized as a paradigmatic turn from (art) objects to people. This, in turn, has led to emphasize the social relations in art at the expense of the material reality. In my reading of the *Free Shop*, I re-turn things and everyday objects to the core of the participatory art—as active mediators and agencies of inter-human relations.

Free morning coffees or free purchases interrupt the flow of the everyday, ruled and regulated by money: what used to be clear and familiar becomes obscure and strange. The same is apparent in this photo, too (Image 5). It is an entrance to **Henriette Heise's** and **Jakob Jakobsen's** home in Copenhagen, as well as to the university the artist couple founded. The university functioned



Image 5. The Copenhagen Free University's staircase 2001-2007. Photo: CFU.

at their home in 2001-2007. However, this place, a staircase of an ordinary apartment house does not even remotely fit into the traditional image of a university. *Something is missing* and the missing of something is purposeful.

Heise and Jakobsen have described, how the CFU aka *Copenhagen Free University*, took its form when 'a mattress became a residency, the bedroom the cinema, the living room a meeting space, the workroom an archive, our flat become a university.' By naming their

home as a university, they aimed to bring back the idea of the university closer to its original meaning: the university should stand as a support structure for shared teaching and discussions and free sharing of knowledges (Image 6).

The institutional critique of the *Copenhagen Free University's* do-it-yourself activism actualized the political issues of knowledge, ignorance, and representation. During its years of operation, the political atmosphere in Denmark changed drastically: xenophobia and racism were growing and the failure of the welfare society was becoming very



Image 6. Reform Event with Stefan Dillemath in the CFU 2002. Photo: CFU.

apparent. For the CFU, this signaled the urgency to create new independent institutions and alternative political languages, poetics.

CFU's activism can be understood as radically hospitable. In practice, it suggests a university that inhabits what is weird and alien; yet unknown and unnamed. The weirdness in the CFU's academic activities proved its radicalism in 2010, three years after its closing. The former university received a letter from the Danish Ministry of Education. The Ministry forbade the CFU to use the word 'university' as part of their functions -- in order to prevent the disappointments of the students.

'So, in fact, we have other projects. Things like drink the Atlantic, melt the Antarctic, paint the sky—that kind of simple stuff.' The person listing these new projects is one of these white dots at the top the sand dune. A shovel in his hand, he took part with hundreds of other volunteers in the grand earthmoving operation in the outskirts of the Lima, the capital of Peru in 2002. The operation was part of the *When Faith Moves Mountains* artwork by Belgian **Francis Alÿs**. The aim of it was to move—with the help of faith and human labor – the sand dune about ten centimeters from its original place.

These new plans like melting the Antarctic concretely manifest the force of art to create ideas you otherwise would never create; notice and recognize things and people, you would otherwise never notice. In my reading, the *When Faith Moves Mountains* becomes a utopian process, during which from the seemingly purposeless cultivation of the land emerges a temporal center, a *cathedral*. It opens space for the communality and communal imagination. And at the same time it reactivates the political negotiations of the space, ownership, and profit: shoveling the sand dune highlights the hegemonic control of the wasteland.

That certain *something* that connects the artworks of my research is the un-reciprocal act of sharing. Meals and purchases are free; a place in neon lights comes free as well as teaching and other services. When interpersonal relationships are not mediated by money or by the principles of exchange economy, the notion of free sharing i.e. radical hospitality and unfocused gift becomes crucial. This unfocusedness prompts to understand the community

as being-togetherness, not as a representation or description of a group. In such a case, the participatory art can bring forth dissident imagination and alternative ways of being—everyday utopias, where *something* is missing.

Something is missing, which my honorable Opponent will soon certainly prove with wise use of words. So be it. More than the consistency of the research, I hope that my research would still possess some porosity and openness, which would also make it possible to think everything in it differently. Only then, the real criticality will emerge. And only then, the notion of something missing will transform into the potentiality of new knowledge.

Riikka Haapalainen's doctoral dissertation in art history *Everyday life of Utopias. Places of participation and change in contemporary art 1980-2011* was publicly examined at the University of Helsinki in January 2018. The opponent was Docent (*Adjunct professor*), University lecturer Leena-Maija Rossi, University of Lapland. The thesis is available through the E-thesis service (in Finnish): <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/229855>.