

Creating Solidarity Through Art to Resist Radicalization

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Biography

Tiina Pusa is Head of Art Education in the Department of Art at the Aalto University School of Arts, Design and Architecture, Helsinki. Her tasks include teaching, developing the curriculum, and conducting research. Pusa's doctoral thesis (2012) was situated within the discourse of phenomenological-based research in art education. Her present research interests consider queer issues in the context of art education and the societal and political role of a teacher.

Abstract

***The Radical Teacher* research project is about politically radical positions of teachers in history and connected to nowadays. The political role of the teacher is approached through arts-based research with a phenomenological case setting. The question is: how and why did a teacher take a radical position in the historical frame? The mission of the research project is to look at the role of teacher with a critical lens. Crucial concepts in my research are radicalization and solidarity. The Finnish Civil War in 1918 included all levels of radicalization. Finding solidarity with historical victims on both sides of the Civil War became an important issue in the arts-based project. The experience created**

the hope of finding possibilities to make communication connections between politically opposing parties in current society and through that to avoid radicalization. Art and art education may offer an option for encountering beyond words. Through the art process, it is possible to build common experiences that are the basis for solidarity. Applications for the research could be found in teacher education and especially art education.

Keywords

Solidarity, radicalization, Civil War, Finland, history, teacher, arts-based research

Introduction

In my *Radical Teacher* research project, the political role of the teacher (Ahonen, 2002; Atjonen, 2005; Tirri, 2002) is approached through arts-based research with a phenomenological case setting. The issue for the whole research project is the politically radical positions of teachers in history and nowadays. I chose one historical case for the closer discovery of the radicalization of a teacher: Martti Pihkala (1882–1966). Pihkala was a special teacher in a school for people with a hearing impairment. For Pihkala, the period before the Civil War was a time to be released from just the teacher's position, and he took on more and more a political role of an agitator and some kind of demagogue.

A disturbing aspect in my research is that the politically radicalized teacher who I chose for the case is my grandfather, who was politically active and radical from 1910 until 1944. I never met him in person, because he passed away six years before my birth. It does not make it easier that Finnish fascist movements are being both studied and re-established intensively nowadays. The context of my grandfather's activity has been revealed not by relatives but by researchers

and journalists (for example, Jokisipilä, 2017; Silvennoinen, Tikka, & Roselius, 2016; Uola, 1982, 1998, 2001).



Figure 1. Photograph of Martti Pihkala (approx. 1918) from a family album.

The role and position of the school institution in each historical and political era is a complex issue to review. According to Rantala (2010), a didactic/psychological paradigm is dominant in Finnish research on education. The historical and societal aspect is minor. Because of this,

the political role of the teacher is rarely studied in the field of education. The Civil War is the issue at hand in some films and novels, but only a few visual artists have paid attention to this national trauma. The artist Heikki Marila had an exhibition on the issue in Helsinki in 2016, at the Forsblom Gallery (Marila, 2018). When it comes to the Civil War, Finnish art education research has a blank area. This essay is an overview of my research project. First, I will give the temporal frames and descriptions of the main concepts. Then I will clarify the method and materials. At the end of the text I will introduce some outcomes and ideas of where to apply those. Pictures have an important role within the text. The reason why I have included screen shots from Instagram in this essay, is that they represent the social aspect more authentically than would independent pictures without a hint of the context.

Teachers in Two Different Eras

The mission of the research project is to look at the role of the teacher with a critical lens. I initially approached the archive material with the question: how and why did a teacher take a radical position in the historical frame? I did not find a clear answer, but more questions and some kind of ethical paradox. I found a pattern in my own thinking: I assume that all teachers are ethical and trying to create social justice. I am a product of my own era, the era after the Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, n.d.). It is a totally different to be a teacher in a new-born country in 1918 and to be a teacher and teacher educator 100 years later in a country which has a good international reputation due its education. I understand that my grandfather's world and my world are different. The role of the school in shaping the people's ethos has been clear before and after World War II (Rautajoki, 2017; Rantala, 2002). But what makes a difference is that the school institution was seen as an important role when the Declaration of Human Rights was disseminated.

Finland gained its independence 1917 and the young state was in an unstable condition.

The Finnish Civil War (27 January–15 May 1918) was fought between the Reds reinforced by Soviet Russia and the Whites supported by the German Empire's military. Behind the Reds was the ideology of the labor movement, while the Whites were conservatives and based on national-cultural visions. Society divided into two opposite parts. The division followed social classes and professions, and the teachers were almost wholly on the White side. This can be explained by the fact that the posts of teachers were dependent on the decisions of the local school boards. The school boards were mainly formed by the Whites (Rantala, 2010). There is no doubt that Martti Pihkala was pure White, as the Suomen Kuvalehti magazine named him "The whitest man in Finland" (Jokisipilä, 2017).

Radicalization and Solidarity

A crucial concept in my research is radicalization. Radicalization means that violence is used, someone threatens with violence or encourages others to commit violence or violence is authorized by ideology. It could mean that a person joins violent groups or organizations. Extreme radicalization may lead to terrorism (Sterkenburg, 2019). Quite often contemporary discussion on radicalization is based on a vision that the roots of contemporary radicalization concern young men on the edge of marginalization. Low self-esteem is offered as some kind of overall explanation for radicalization and violent ideologies (e.g. Suojala, 2017). I suppose in some cases this could be misleading. The influencers and backing could be somewhere else.

The Finnish Civil War included all levels of radicalization. When I claim Martti Pihkala was a radical, I am referring to his archives. In the manuscript of his memoirs, he points out that he used violence only once, when he hit a man with baton. But his role in agitation was huge; he encouraged people to join and be active in the Whites. In the manuscript he describes his reaction when the moderate wing of the Whites doubted the use of weapons. "Is this some kind of operetta-revolution?" he asked when others proposed following a non-violent approach

to solve political conflict. His opinion was that the situation in Finland in 1918 needed radical action, and he knew that victims would appear on both sides. He gained his authorization for action from both nationalism and religion. He strongly believed that God had given him his role, and all his choices were for the nation (Pihkala, NAF).

Hannah Arendt (2002) clarifies how responsibility is avoided, when thinkers and agitators are separated by action. Both release themselves from guilt through explaining how they did not actually have responsibility. Actors say: we followed the instructions and we did not make decisions. Agitators say: we did not use violence. This is exactly how Martti Pihkala saved himself in his own manuscript; how he proved the case for his conscience. He also gave responsibility to God, who he considered to have authorized his role.

Another important term in my research project is solidarity, which is often associated with both feelings and attitudes and action. The simplest definition of solidarity is according to Laitinen and Pessi (2011) connection to other people, to the members of a smaller or larger group. Expressions of solidarity often take the form of time, money or a gift. It differs from both altruism and sympathy, which is in some definitions connected to solidarity (see. Sen, 1982). Commitment, empathy and compassion are often mentioned as close concepts. Embodied compassion (Pessi, Horwitz, & Worline, 2017) may offer a bridge to the arts. Salmela (2011) states that group emotions are an important component of solidarity. I assume that the arts have special possibilities for reaching connection and group emotions. Strikes and demonstrations evoke group emotions and are visible expressions of solidarity. They are clearly political acts. Media and arts offer a platform for solidarity and critical discussion through sensory and embodied knowledge. We are able to meet individual and unique lives through art (Dittrich, 2015; Zegarlinska, 2015).

Method and Way of Knowing

Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (2012) define arts based ¹ research in the field of social science. One of their fundamental features of arts based research is: “The purpose of arts based research is to raise significant questions and engender conversations rather than to proffer final meanings” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 166). When I failed to find answers to my questions from the archive material, I redesigned my research project. In this project, I have combined performative art and fiction-writing with a historical frame. The combination of arts-based and narrative material is not totally new. In the field of education and art education, these methods are believed to open the door to experiences and unique meanings. For example, Kivioja and Puroila (2017) have applied arts-based and narrative methods in the field of childhood research. Through a table theater project they reached children’s everyday experiences in school using a performative approach. They connect their research to the arts-based inquiry defined by Leavy (2015). Kivioja and Puroila state that narrative and arts-based methods allow the researcher to understand the experiences of the people involved in the research project. These methods reach beyond spoken and written words.

The narrative turn happened as long as 30 years ago in the field of research. Autoethnographical and narrative approaches became more important as data when objectivation was deconstructed. So-called real life and fiction have a complex relationship. In the field of sociology, as well as in education research, attempts to reach subjectivity and unique experiences have made room for fictional writing. Leavy (2015) describes three genres of fiction-based research (FBR): 1) the rise in autobiographical and narrative data, 2) creative nonfiction and 3) an emphasis on public scholarship. She also leans toward “literary neuroscience” when proving the power of reading and writing. Readers are physically placing themselves in fictional places as fiction is an immersive experience, which also activates the movement and touch areas in

the brain. Emphatic engagement is an aspect which makes fiction ethically interesting for me (Leavy, 2015).

Writing fiction is a process which allows movement toward ignorance. Here we face knowledge which may be understood through the concept of epistemic pluralism (Coliva, 2017; Nado, 2017) or social epistemology and feminist epistemology (Townley, 2011, p.xxi). Townley ties up epistemology and ethics in her approach to ignorance, writing in her book's introduction, "Just as it is a mistake to take knowledge to be always good, rejecting ignorance as always negative is too hasty". Knowledge and knowing sometimes have evil roots, while ignorance may offer an exit from that. In a way I go toward ignorance through my performative and fictional methods to be able to discuss evil.

I see the Crocheting Alma project as a feministic action (Townley, 2011) which is connected to performativity (Eckersall, Grehan, & Scheer, 2017). A feministic approach is somewhat of a base for my practice in research and pedagogy. But I have a rather complicated relationship with "feminine" practices. My gender identity is blurred or fluid in such a way that I am not able to identify myself as a woman in normative way. For example, crocheting is a kind of double provocation for me. When I was in comprehensive school, I took only one compulsory course in textile crafts. There is nothing wrong with textile crafts, but I just was more technically oriented like the majority of the boys. When I made my Crocheting Alma project, it was not typical for me. The assumed gender I am usefully connected to is the stereotypically crocheting gender. But while I was crocheting in public locations I felt I was doing something really radical, and that was not visible; it was only my emotion. Textile crafts have an important role among contemporary art practices (Haveri, 2016). It has been a movement against masculine-dominated art practices.

The Material

The narrative materials that are relevant for my research are 1) the manuscript by Martti Pihkala, archived in the National Archives, which contains about 600 pages of experienced history, 2) the book *Minkäläinen Suomi meidän on luotava?* (What Kind of Finland do we Need to Create?) by Martti Pihkala, published in 1918, as well as 3) in 1944 together with Finland's President P.E. Svinhufvud Pihkala designed and implemented a book entitled *Testamentti kansalleni* (The Testament to my Nation) (Svinhufvud, 1944), published in the name of the president. I regard this material as an experience report more than an event report (Gready, 2008; Squire, 2008). In the material, the subject's voice varies between the first person and the first personality of the plural. The material is historical, it is an experience documentary and a narrative from the first half of the 20th century. Pihkala's book in 1918 made clear his political agenda. The 36-year-old father of five children, the special teacher, showed that he was politically outspoken and ready for radical practices so that the future of the Finnish people was aligned with the vision of the movement he represented. He wrote:

Toinen edellytys – josta edellä on ollut puhetta – on puhdistustyön kunnollinen suorittaminen. Meillä suomalaisilla on erityisiä edellytyksiä suorittaa menestyksellä rotumme jalostustyö (Pihkala 1918, 134). (–) Onko tämä, tässä maailmansodassa omalaatuinen ja ainokainen taistelumme valkoisen, puhtaan Suomen luomiseksi enteenä siihen, että myöskin kansamme saamme taistellen valkoiseksi ja puhtaaksi kansaksi, joka kerran vielä puhdistuneena, jalona ja väkevänä saa nähdä Jumalan? (ibid., 142)

Another condition – which has been discussed above – is the proper performance of the purge. We Finns have special premises for successful completion of our eugenic task (Pihkala 1918, 134). (–) Is this lone and unique in this world war struggle of

ours to create a white, pure Finland a herald that we will also be successful in our fight to make our people white and pure, a purified, noble and powerful people who will once again see God? (ibid., 142)

The historical archive material by Pihkala and his book from 1918 made me very confused and emotionally overloaded. To understand this confusion and overload, I took a step aside. His mother, wives and daughters gave me keys to new perspectives. All have passed away, and actually my focus is not historical facts but *possible experiences* and emotions connected to them. Historical facts are starting point for fictional and arts-based knowledge (O’Sullivan, 2017; Suominen, Kallio-Tavin, & Hernández-Hernández, 2017). The first project was the performative Crocheting Alma project in spring 2018 and the second fiction-writing project Kuunottajat (Moonbathers) is still in progress.

During the arts-based part of my research I trace the polyphony of happenings in 1918. The first starting point for the Crocheting Alma project and part of my material was a portrait of my grandfather’s mother Alma Gummerus painted by artist Kaarlo Atra (1879–1961) in 1929. Crocheting Alma (Virikkaaja Alma) was my performative project, which lasted for the same period of time as the Finnish Civil War lasted a century ago. On each day, for a total of 109 days, I crocheted in public or semi-public site 50 white and 250 red stitches to represent the number of victims in both sides of the Civil War. I asked someone to take a photo of each crocheting session with my mobile phone for to publish it on the social media application, Instagram. “What are you doing?” was the question I waited for. When this was addressed to me, I said, “This is a project on the Finnish Civil War which took place 100 years ago.” Sometimes this answer made people react. Sometimes I was the one who asked the second question. I addressed it to my photographers: “Do you know which side your family or relatives were on?”

What did Alma think about her son who was a special teacher and took a politically radical position during the Civil War process? Was she proud of her son who collected White Army



Figure 2. Alma Gummerus painted by the artist Kaarlo Atra (1879–1961) in 1929.

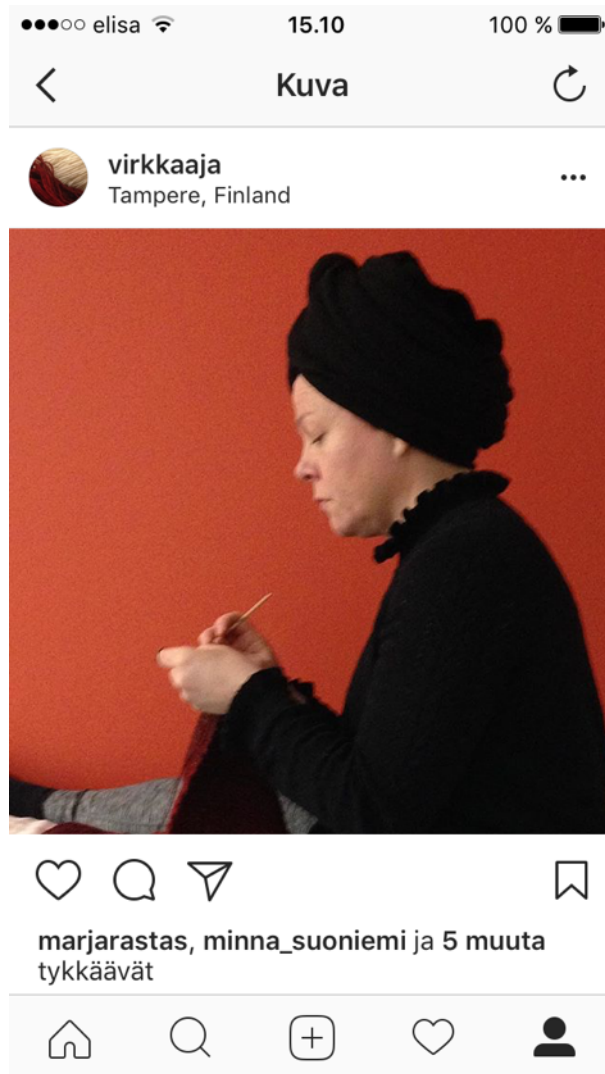


Figure 3. Screenshot from the Virkkaaja Alma Instagram account.

members and gave propaganda speeches? Was she sorry for all those victims of the Civil War? Was it a fulfillment for a mother as an educator to see her son as a political active and radical? These were not probably the questions which Alma spun in her head while crocheting ten years after the Civil War. I just borrowed this feministic performative act from her and deployed it to combine the personal and societal through an embodied project.

I am not sure if my performative Crocheting Alma project was a pastiche of the portrait by Kaarlo Atra or rather a paraphrase. Nyqvist (2010) defines pastiche in the context of literature. She summarizes pastiche as a concept of the postmodern: “Thus pastiche would not be, after all, reduced to empty imitation, but could have other uses and meanings depending on its context in contemporary culture” (Nyqvist, 2010, p. 112).

The Crocheting Alma project was action in a time mode. It may be seen as one-sided solidarity, which means assisting someone else without expecting anything in return, whereas there is such expectation in the case of two-sided solidarity (de Beer & Koster, 2009). Or was it? If I express solidarity with victims in history, I cannot expect anything in return. But if my expression of solidarity is understood in the frame of the current situation, it could mean all victims in all civil wars and all those who suffer guilt or the role of a victim.

Outcomes

The results of my arts-based research are partly in visual form and partly in verbalized experience. That is the base for the next turn and stage of my research. Through the art process, it is possible to build common experiences that are the basis for solidarity. This opens up the role of art and art education in creating solidarity. The Crocheting Alma project made room for encounters and political discussions in everyday life.

The suggestion based on the research process so far is that maybe radicalization should be studied in the context of the everyday and ordinary. Framing the issue too early with heroism or



Figure 4. Screenshot from the Virikkaaja Alma Instagram account.

guilt creates narratives which may not give an understanding of how individuals and small communities, with so-called good reputations and behavior, could ever become radical. Radicals are not necessarily from the margins of society, or the margins should be re-defined.

So far, one outcome is an understanding of how a feeling of superiority as a starting point for a teacher's work is difficult, even dangerous. Until the Second World War, a teacher could, until radicalization, work for one nation and one religion. Since the 1950s it has been possible for a teacher to be released from the role of model citizen (Rantala, 2002, 2005). The current emphasis on global social responsibility and justice in teachers' work has begun to form since the 1970s. The ethical focus has continued to grow at the turn of the millennium (Ahonen, 2002; Atjonen 2004; Tirri, 2002). This could also be seen as a deconstruction of superiority. When a teacher does not see themselves as better knowing and a better citizen, it is equally possible to build a human dialogical setting and even strongly different political and religious views may be encountered. Preventive work against confrontation and radicalization has become part of teaching.

The Crocheting Alma project made room for encounters and political discussions. According to my arts-based project, the material and performative nature of crocheting made room for the basis for compassion: compassion toward both Whites and Reds, compassion for a divided Finnish nation 100 years ago. The reasons for the Civil War were multi-layered. One answer is that the young society was politically deeply divided. When the distance between parties grows too wide, the threat of radicalization becomes real. Radicalization may be seen as a serious lack of solidarity (Saari, 2011). Is solidarity something we can promote, and if so, how shall we do this? Is it possible to express solidarity for people in history? And what does it matter?

Emil Durkheim (see Theron, 2015) was writing already more than hundred years ago about organic solidarity, which is based on interdependence in heterogeneous societies. That was at the beginning of industrialism. In an era of globalization and post-nationalism, it needs even

more, maybe some kind of *ultra-organic solidarity*. What could we do through art to make room for ultra-organic solidarity and create a wide understanding of “we”?

I see the applications for my research as being in teacher education and especially art education. I claim that to do that, we need a deconstruction of the teacher’s role in higher education, and teacher training is crucial. I hope that graduating art teachers have a high capacity for critical reflection, good professional esteem but still a very clear understanding that they are not any kind of *better citizen*. I hope they make room for encounters and solidarity within art, as they have a special potential for that.

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Notes

¹Barone and Eisner use the format arts based while I use arts-based, by Suominen, Kallio-Tavin, and Hernández-Hernández (2017)