

# Pondering about My/Our Serious Drinking Problem

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## Biography

Seija Ulkuniemi is Doctor of Arts (Art & Design), Master of Education, and a photographer. Since 1997 she has been working as senior lecturer in art education at primary teacher training in the University of Lapland. Ulkuniemi designs and teaches courses in the fields of art pedagogy, the means of picture making, media education, three-dimensional-design, as well as knowledge of art and visual culture. Her work also includes mentoring practice of student teachers for primary schools. Ulkuniemi has written several articles and given many lectures about art pedagogy and family photography abroad, especially in InSEA-congresses. She has been active in international university teacher exchange. These have taken place in many countries (e.g. Norway, Iceland, Spain, Germany, The Neatherlands, Great-Britain, U.S.A., South-Africa, Cuba). She has also had numerous exhibitions both in Finland and abroad.

## Abstract

**This visual essay deals with drinkable water. Clean drinking water is essential for our lives, but we often take it for granted. We tend to forget how precious it is, as we get it so easily. I introduce the idea of my artwork which intention was to stop people to ponder about the value of clean Finnish tap water. The work “Thirst extinguisher” was exhibited in InSEA congress in Helsinki in June 2018. I installed the main version of it in a toilet, and another one in an exhibition hall, the Beta-Space. I also show and reflect on some responses**

**from the participants who encountered my intervention. I write about my work in relation to some recently published newspaper articles where water theme has been in focus. I will reflect on some memories that are connected with the theme. I also include a post scriptum that indicates how personal life experiences can affect the meaning of things/artworks.**

### **Keywords**

**Intervention, tap water, drinkable, installation, participation, art education, toilet, memories.**

### **Pondering about our serious drinking problem**

I confess. I drink too much. Maybe you have the same problem. I consume too much bottled drinks. Despite the fact that Lapland where I live is an area where tap water is clean and beautifully tasteless. These qualities make it to belong to best quality waters on the Earth. So: I need to remind myself of changing my bad habits. To start drinking water from the tap to extinguish my thirst instead of using bottled products.

### **Thirst extinguisher was born gradually and has many parents**

Probably the background of my work “Thirst extinguisher” (2017-18) which this article is about is partly in this above-mentioned notion, and in my shame following it. There are also other factors that I can recall, that may have had an effect in developing the idea. Emmi Itäranta (2014) describes in the book “Memory of Water” (2014) an imaginary world where only few people know the secret places to get fresh water. Itäranta showed how water was essential, special, and in her text carefully prepared for a tea ceremony. I admired a lot Itäranta’s ability to make me ponder about this product that we often take for granted. Then – I gradually somehow

forgot.

When the Union of Finnish Art Associations announced in autumn 2016 that one could send works about the theme Happiness to a jury to choose the works to an exhibition in Lapua art museum, I started to think intensively about what makes me happy. I suddenly understood how fortunate I am being able to get clean water easily from the tap. I made the first “idea version” of Thirst extinguisher. It was not accepted to the Happiness exhibition.

In autumn term 2016 I also pushed my students studying to become primary teachers to ponder about their values. I asked them: “What do you appreciate about Finland?” They responded showing their values with photographs and briefly described their meaning. Many of them appreciated especially Finnish nature, its silence and cleanliness. Some of them also mentioned especially clean water (figures 1 & 2). The project also included pupils from the university



Figure 1: Toni Berg 2016.



Figure 2: Tiinamaiju Kauppila 2016.

practise school, and led to an exhibition that will also be shown soon in Cuba. (Ulkuniemi 2018.)

### **The realization of Thirst extinguisher as an intervention**

InSEA congress in Helsinki was announced in autumn 2017 with the title Interventions. There was also an opportunity to offer works to an exhibition. I decided to send the idea of “Thirst extinguisher”. The jury accepted my intervention which main aim was to stop the visitor to ponder about the value of water. As the context and background, I declared:

Finnish people consider pure tap water as foregone conclusion, whereas millions other people on the Earth lack it. The idea of the work/intervention is to make people to stop and realize the happiness of being privileged: having a chance to extinguish their thirst – with tap water.

To make people stop and devote some of their precious gift, time (see Santaoja 2016, 208), for their thinking process, I put a pile of papers and instructions to make an origami cup (figure 3). Participants could then use the cup to extinguish their thirst by filling it with pure cold water. They could also take the cup with them to use it during the congress in several situations. Alternatively, they could give their feedback by writing or drawing on it, and leaving the cup in the basket provided. (In fact I was a little bit surprised of the use of throw away paper mugs in the congress, hoping that people would have at least re-used their coffee cups. . . ).

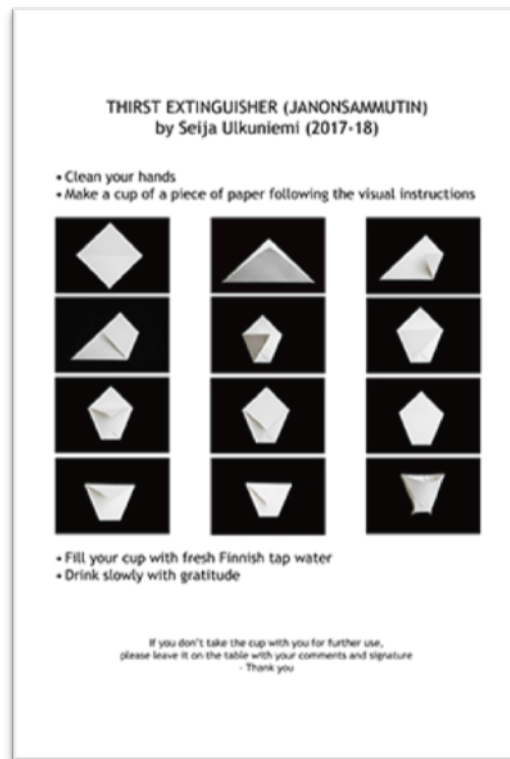


Figure 3: The poster for visual instructions to make an origami cup of paper.

As a primary “exhibition space” for the work I asked to have a joint toilet for everyone, as the main idea was that the participant could personally take water directly from the tap. I also find our toilets being a source of happiness, as they are usually so clean. But on the other hand, they also represent our bad consumerism: we flush enormously lots of clean drinkable water

just down our toilets...

The main version of “Thirst extinguisher” was placed close to Beta-Space in a toilet of Aalto university building. For my request the door was marked with a sign that indicated it was for all genders (figures 4 & 5).



Figure 4 & 5: Toilet for all.



Figure 6: Writings on men's toilet door in Aalto university campus.

Interestingly, during the congress I also found in the campus an example of a toilet door writing that dealt with the problem of gendered toilets (figure 6). In addition, it included a reference to openness of homosexuality, and possible lack of water.



Figure 7: Installation Thirst extinguisher in the first room of the joint toilet.



Figure 8: Papers for origami and a basket for used cups.

As some people are extremely afraid of viruses, I had a chance to put the installation in a kind of “entrance room” of the main space with toilet seats (figures 7 & 8). Thus, people did not need to worry about if their cups would be unhygienic. (Though I sometimes think we have become over-sensitive with this hygienic issues.)

However, I also hoped that people who might not use the toilet provided for the work would encounter the intervention. Therefore, I had another version of it in the main exhibition hall, the Beta-Space. I placed a big can of fresh water there, as no tap was available (figure 9).



Figure 9: Another version of Thirst extinguisher with a can of fresh drinkable water in the exhibition hall The Beta-Space.



## Feedback from people who participated the work in InSEA congress

In the opening of the exhibition “Dark Days, White Nights” I saw many people stopping at the work in the exhibition space. I was especially happy for some children who made the cups with the help of their parents. I could also talk with some people about the meaning of the work.

During the few days of the InSEA congress, some people had left their empty cups in the baskets of the exhibition hall and the toilet (figure 10). I don’t know how many have taken their cups with them – hopefully many! An empty cup was also a sign of stopping and participation.



Figure 10: Empty cup.

I present some feedback I got in form of used and marked cups left in the baskets. Some people had written their thanks on the cup, or “cheers” with their mother language, and/or drawn hearts (figures 11-13).



Figure 11: Cup with thanks.



Figure 12: Cup with hearts.



Figure 13: Cup with Icelandic text saying: Cheers, friend!

Some people commented on the quality of the piece. It was considered a well-designed intervention, surprising and freshening (figures 14-17). A comment stressed the fact how joint effort – that everyone has an active role of giving – makes a good congress (figure 18).

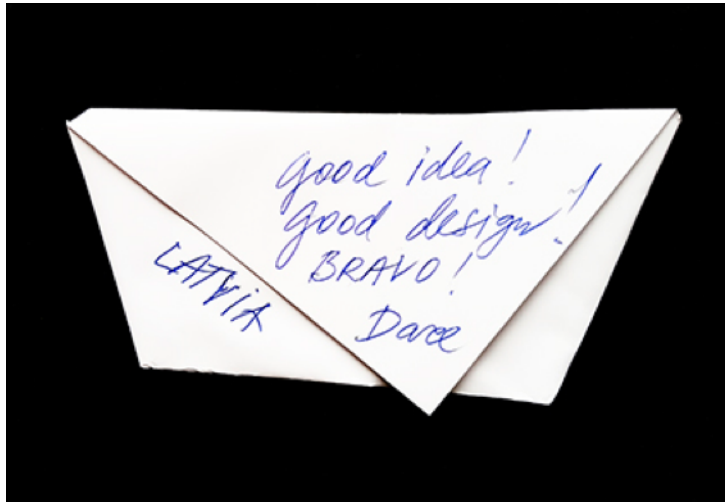


Figure 14: Response about the idea and design of the work.



Figure 15: Response about the characteristics of the intervention.



Figure 16: Response about the unexpectedness factor of the intervention.



Figure 17: Response about the effect of the intervention.

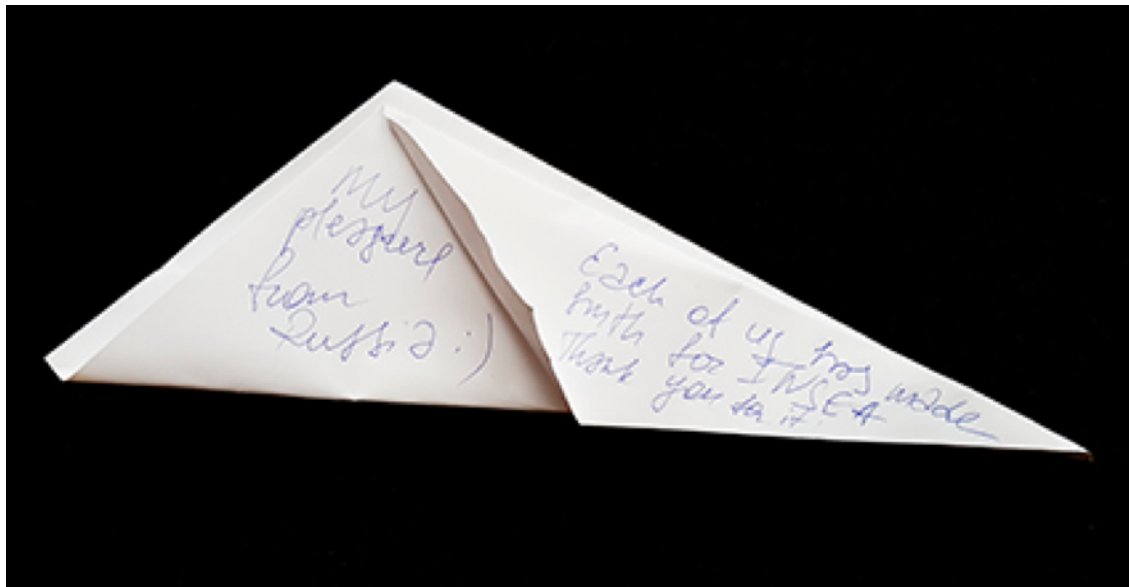


Figure 18: Response about the importance of everyone's participation in the congress.



Figure 19: ResponseParticipant request of using re-cycled materials instead of new paper to make cups.

I was very happy to receive a comment concerning the use of brand new paper for origami. One participant suggested the use of old magazines, for example, would be better to enhance the “green spirit” of the work (figure 19). I find this comment valid. In fact, when preparing the work I experimented with various kinds of paper materials. I found out that often the soft, porous papers did not keep water well. I also thought about the further use of the cups: when they were done of glossy paper, they would last longer. One more reason for why I did not choose the “greener, re-cycled paper” was that printing ink is not very healthy to drink. On the other hand, for temporary use it could be fine.

There were also some comments about the thought the experience awakened. The fact that you can get drinkable water in a toilet was given attention to (figure 20). (This makes me remember how I for some years ago sent feedback to Finnair about the lack of cold tap water in the airport toilets. The automatic taps only gave lukewarm water that was not something to fill one’s water bottle with! Lately in Helsinki-Vantaa airport they have installed cold water taps in toilets.)



Figure 20: Response about the chance to get drinkable water from a tap in a toilet.

One comment showed that the participant had started to think about the essential things in her life (figure 21). She wrote: “Thank you for reminding! Life can also be simply beautiful.”



Figure 21: Response about the importance of simple things in one's daily life.

And then there was a response in form of origami bird (figure 22). This bird made me think of my childhood when my mother taught me to make a Japanese origami bird, one that would move its wings when one pulled its tail. My mother also told me the story of called called Sadako Sasaki. I had forgotten part of the story, but found it told by Dana Hinders (2018). Sadako was a young girl who developed leukemia as a result of radiation exposure from the Hiroshima nuclear bomb. She tried to fold a group of a thousand cranes (“senbazuru”) before her death, as in Japanese tradition this would help the dream come true. Sadako was unsuccessful, she died in 1955 before completing the 1000 cranes, but her friends and family finished the project in her memory. Hinders (ibid.) shows that many campaigns use the idea of sanbazuru in awareness raising campaigns. Maybe we should make a site to raise awareness to protect clean tap water? The crane stands for Hope.

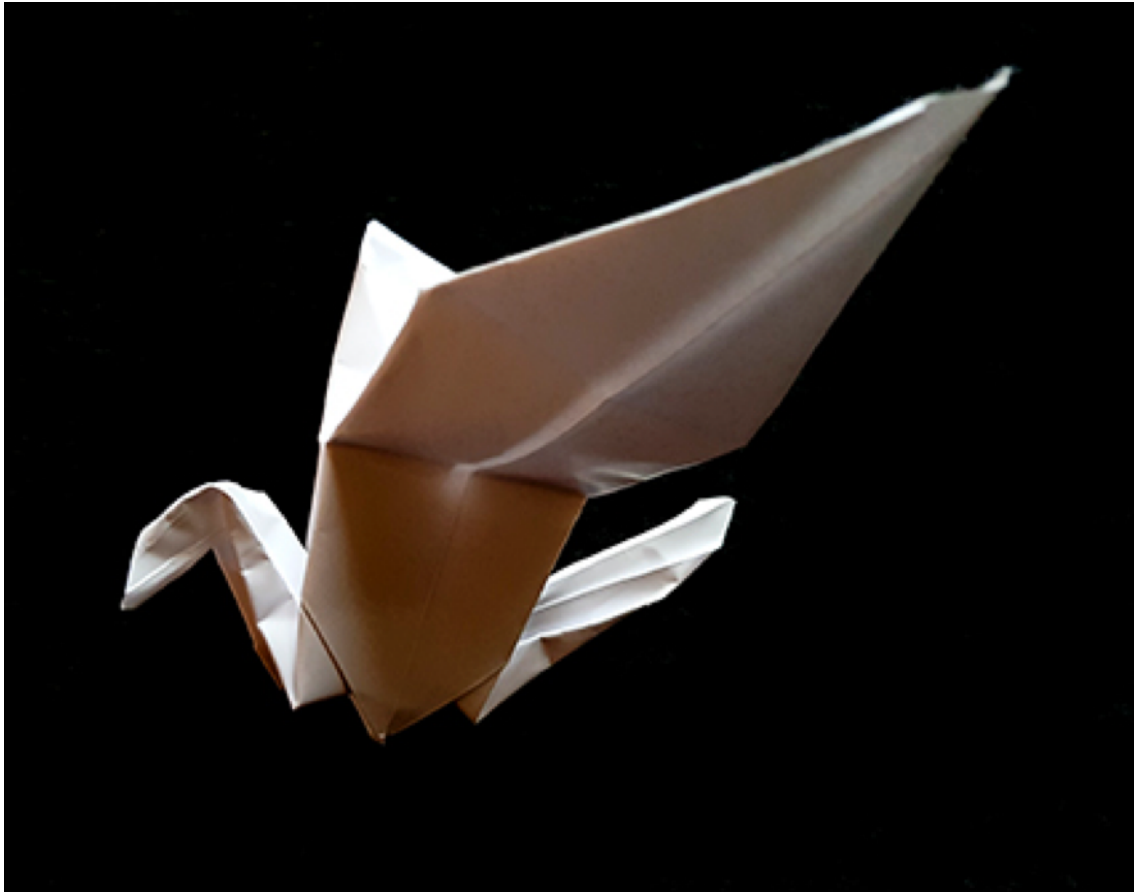


Figure 22: Response in form of origami bird/a crane.

## **Post Scriptum**

Soon after I had sent my proposal to InSEA exhibition committee, our 25-year daughter having cancer came home for her terminal care. She spent her last three months with us, in the end not being able to eat or drink. (I remembered the last days of my mother who died in cancer when I was 20. She also came home to die, and in her last days she could only get water by letting ice cubes melt in her mouth.)

But miraculously, just about a week before the death of our daughter, she decided to learn to drink again, drop by drop. Slowly. Praising the taste of tasteless water. Thus, I ended the



poem connected to a photo exhibition “By your side” (figure 23) I made for her memory with the following words:

With your last strength  
you gave honour  
to a modest bowl of water;  
you enjoyed the drops  
of the Source of Life.



Figure 23: Example of Seija Ulkuniemi’s photo exhibition (2018) “By your side” that will be first time shown in November 2018 in Casa Diego Velasquez in Santiago de Cuba.

For me, “Thirst extinguisher” got a deeper meaning through this experience. I will never forget the joy just being able to drink water can offer. I never want to forget the joy being able to drink fresh water from the tap offers us. This may be the first step for my recovery of my drinking problem.

## Post Post Scriptum

The IPCC report about the climate change was published just a few days before I was finishing this article. When thinking about the choices every individual can do for the environment, David Solomon (2018, O3) highlighted the importance of using tap water. After making it clear how crazy we are when we import yearly to Finland 38 million litres bottled water, and in addition produce 70 million litres of it in the country, Solomon reminded us of the possibility to make aerated water at home, if we are so much in the need of it. Thus there would be lot less fuel emissions of heavy trucks.

There are also opposite types of plans, too. Some experiments of importing Finnish water to countries that lack drinkable water have already taken place. Future will show if we can import know-how for effective water supply instead of selling bottled water. (Vainio 2018, A22-A23.)

Another extension closely connected with this theme is more general. Liisa Holmberg (2018, A2) reminded us about how mines cause pollution for of the water tables. She argues in the end of column what we all should do: “Defend clean water.”

**All photographs if not otherwise mentioned are taken by Seija Ulkuniemi.**

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