

Official Otherness?

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Jari Järnström: *Pyhät miehet*

In November 2008 Finland's biggest newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* published an in-depth article on a forthcoming exhibition entitled *Toiseuden kohtaaminen* (Encountering Otherness).¹ The exhibition was commissioned by Secco, a team on visual arts of the Resources Agency (Kirkkopalvelut ry), an association that is part of the Finnish Lutheran Church. The exhibition was part of the Resources Agency's annual Common Responsibility Campaign (known in Finnish as Yhteisvastuukeräys), whose mission is to

*[R]aise awareness of social injustice and deprivation, to influence politicians and policies, and to develop innovative working methods among communities and beneficiaries.*²

This time the theme of the Common Responsibility Campaign focuses on Finnish immigrants and their difficult position (at the labour market) in the Finnish society.

One part of the Campaign consists of an art exhibition. The Resources Agency and Secco had asked two visual artists, Mika Vesalahti and Jarmo Vellonen to curate an exhibition for the Campaign. The curators had chosen several well-known Finnish artists in the exhibition, among them two

¹ Lehtinen 18.11.2008.

² <http://www.yhteisvastuu.fi/index.php?fid=84>.

painters, Viggo Wallensköld and Jari Järnström.

Now the problem was, reported by *Helsingin Sanomat*, that after having seen these two artists' works, the representatives of both Secco and Resources Agency had demanded that they be removed from the exhibition. The reason was that these artists' works referred too much to transsexuality and homosexuality and not enough to the immigrants' position in the Finnish society.

In the following days, several viewpoints were voiced on the pages of *Helsingin Sanomat*. The curators claimed that they were never asked to curate an exhibition that would focus solely on the position of immigrants. Instead, they had understood that they could curate an exhibition that focused on the wider idea of otherness also including sexual otherness. Mika Vesalahti argues:

*It is tragicomic that the commissioner wants to exclude art works that deal with experiences of inner otherness.*³

At this point the debate reached a scale of a mini-scandal in the culture section of *Helsingin Sanomat*. It was claimed that the commissioner practiced censorship as it was also claimed that Järnström's and Wallensköld's paintings were even pornographic and thus not appropriate for an exhibition that was supposed to be open also to children. "Pornographic and erotic art does not belong to the church," one curator claimed indignantly.⁴

³ Lehtinen 18.11.2008.

⁴ Aalto 20.11.2008.



Viggo Wallensköld: Aamu (III)

This curator does not specify what she means with pornographic art. Looking at the paintings, we see one painting representing a bold figure standing in front of the window, in another a young girl with braided hair, sitting naked on a chair, sporting rather small breasts but a seemingly



Viggo Wallensköld: Aamu (I)



Viggo Wallensköld: Aamu (II)



visible clitoris. The third painting is perhaps the most disturbing one: it represents a young person dressed in a baby-doll dress. Looking closer at the painting, we see that the biological sex can not be distinguished either as female or male: the figure has both breasts and a penis. The blood stains under the figure's breasts indicate that the figure is under some kind of transformation. A contemporary version of the classical figure of the Hermaphrodite? Or a contemporary portrait of a transperson? Be as it may, these anatomical details just became too big for this particular curator,⁵ and led her to interpret the portraits as "pornography".

The same goes with Järnström's paintings. In his case the censors wanted to cut off the erected penis, because it referred too openly to male homosexuality, with which the church has still not come to terms with. "What moralism, as if the church's own ideology doesn't centralise around different kinds of erected crosiers," one writer remarked in Facebook.

The censoring was also taken up by the chair and vice-chair of SKY *The Association of Finnish Curators*. They were worried about the position and the independency of the

⁵ Interestingly enough, this anatomical detail has raised heated medical and psychological debate over the centuries. For medicine the size of the clitoris has been a problem: too big a clitoris, too big a sexual desire. For Freud the clitoris was a problem in another way: if the girl didn't give up her phallic, masculine clitoral sexuality in the oedipal phase she was to become a lesbian. In contemporary debate these ideas have been largely rejected, instead, the clitoris's unnatural size is now considered to be a sign of the individual's intersexuality. All of them being issues that apparently the church and still some Finns has to settle its accounts with. On the history of clitoris, see Vänskä 2007, 152196.

curators as creators of art exhibitions more generally. We explained that curators always create exhibitions, which aim at discussing different, even touchy and taboo issues in the society.⁶

As a response to the statement of the curators' association, the director of the Resources Agency Seppo Koistinen sent a letter to the association. In the letter Koistinen explains that the Resources Agency had never hired Vesalahti and Vellonen as curators and therefore it did not censor their work.⁷ Rather, Koistinen argued that Vesalahti and Vellonen were merely asked to collect art works which they thought would suit the theme of the Campaign, and the final selection was supposed to be made by the representatives of the Resources Agency and Secco.

The issue of the fate of the paintings and the Lutheran church's relationship with sexuality was also taken up as a question of the week in *HS-raati*, a board of 100 Finnish opinion leaders discussing various issues weekly in the *Helsingin Sanomat* culture section. Not surprisingly, 62 % of the Finnish intelligentsia doomed the censoring of the paintings and was of the opinion that the church is not credible when it comes to issues concerning sexuality and sexual otherness.⁸ Reading Judith Butler's (1990/2004, 183-203) interpretations of censorship it can be argued that the

⁶ Seikkula & Vänskä 22.11.2008.

⁷ Letter from Seppo Koistinen to the president and vice-president of SKY Association of Finnish Curators. 9.12.2008.

⁸ HS 22.11.2008.

church's call for censoring effectively recirculates the very discourse it seeks to renounce. This discourse *produced* the paintings to be unsuited for the exhibition by associating them with meanings which were not essentially in them before the whole scandal.

On the 29th November 2008, this mini-scandal finally reached a compromise. *Helsingin Sanomat* informed its readers that the two painters who were first excluded from the exhibition could participate in it, but with works that do not expose male genitalia and do not represent homosexuality.⁹

SQS-Journal is proud to exhibit the trouble-making censored art works.

⁹ Lehtinen 29.11.2008.

Unpublished sources:

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