

Leena-Maija Rossi

Abstract for the 57th AICA Congress Germany 2019

**Between benevolent naiveté and populism:
Art institutions in the age of neo-liberalism**

As we all know too well, the neo-liberal order prioritizing financial gain, competition and self-sufficiency, has infiltrated also the cultural field, art museums included. When states and cities are run more and more like companies, even publicly financed museums feel the pressure to compete "metrically," trying to reach as wide audiences as possible. This is where the imperative of entertaining the audience and providing immersive amusement park effects enter the museum scene. The arguments for providing non-critical, and at least seemingly non-political contents often repeat the rather naive idea of the "gate theory": once the "ordinary people not interested in art" find their way to the museums (allured by such sensual pleasures as magic-like tricks of perception, or just plain bright colours), they will come back to see more serious and critical shows, too. This may be presented as benevolent cultural politics, but the result of this politics may be an endless row of contemporary art turned into bouncy castles.

If populism refers to politics, which "supports the concern of ordinary people," we may very well define this politics of art institutions offering easy-to-digest exhibitions as populist. For example, the Finnish Contemporary Art Museum Kiasma advertises its current shows on its web pages as follows:

"Joy, playfulness and innocence, these are among the things Hrafnhildur Arnardóttir/Shoplifter wants to convey with her art. -- The exhibition urges the audience to participate, relax, hang out, share experiences or to just blow away the cobwebs from one's everyday routine."

Even if the art presented by the institutions would support critical readings on culture and society, it is often lubricated with simplifying pedagogical discourse, aiming to lure the audiences in. Again, Kiasma advertises:

"Finnish artist Iiu Susiraja is famous for her candid self-portraits in which she poses for the camera in everyday situations at home and in absurd situations. -- Susiraja creates candid photographs and videos with a sense of warmth and humour."

It is symptomatic that in their writing, the critics quite often continue the "playful and innocent" tone of the museum's pedagogical discourse, not taking a *critical* look at the presented art, or the way it has been re-presented. In the frame of neo-liberal meaning production adapting a critical voice means becoming a representative of an ideologically wrong, negative attitude, being a killjoy. My paper, written through the attitude of a feminist killjoy, will bring forth and analyze some cases of this phenomenon I conceptualize as cultural politics between naiveté and populism, framed by neo-liberalism. I will draw my reference material from the Finnish scene of art museum and criticism.

BIO:

Leena-Maija Rossi, Ph.D., is a feminist researcher of visual culture based in Helsinki and Rovaniemi, Finland. Currently she teaches gender studies as senior lecturer at the University of Lapland. Her research interests include politics of intersectionality, queer theory and activism, and critical studies of whiteness, as well as different forms of visual culture from advertising, film and television to contemporary art. She has published extensively, both in Finland and internationally, with her latest books being *Volatile Gender: Politics of Sexuality, Class and Color* (in Finnish, 2015) and *Gender and Violence: Ethics and Politics of Reading* (in Finnish, co-edited with Sanna Karkulehto, 2017). In the late 1980s and early 1990s she worked as a critic for *Helsingin Sanomat*. She has also served as the director of the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York (2011–16). Furthermore, she has curated numerous art exhibitions that have been presented in Europe, in the United States and in South America.

**Statement on the Congress topic
Art Criticism in Times of Populism and Nationalism:**

In current political situation even seemingly innocent and benevolent expressions of "supporting the concerns" of the ordinary people" may lead to art institutional politics simplifying the critical potential of art. It is my firm belief that we need to see more, not less critical art, and we need art institutions to present art in a critical and analytical manner. Therefore, we need art critics to act as killjoys, even at the risk of becoming unpopular.

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