

Interview

Paula Toppila

**“Art changes
the world,
whether we
like it or not.”**



Fish with Conviction
ANTI Contemporary Art Festival
Kuopio, Finland
2005

Paula Toppila (PT) / What is the artist's role in society today?

Otto Karvonen (OK) / We have many roles. I personally see artists as free thinkers and free speakers who inspire and challenge people to see things anew from fresh angles.

PT/ What kind of strategies do artists use these days – what are yours, for example?

OK / I infiltrate and mix things up – I'm a stirrer. I orchestrate mini-disruptions, dislocations and unexpected juxtapositions in the middle of daily routines. I strive to be as subtle as I can. It only takes a very minimal gesture to create a sense that something is out of place. I want my works to come as a total surprise to the people viewing and experiencing them. It's impossible not to react to a spontaneous encounter of this kind – it activates you and makes you think. Whether consciously or unconsciously, it forces you explain to yourself what you just experienced.

I usually start with a very mundane situation or observation. I especially enjoy destabilizing popular prejudices. I also try to periodically question my own values and beliefs. The process is uncomfortable, but liberating; how exhilarating it feels to realize that you've been totally wrong about something – to grasp that something can be seen in a totally different, diametrically opposed way! It gives you hope that you're still able to learn something new and keep growing.

PT / In his book *Trickster Makes This World* (1998), the American cultural critic Lewis Hyde compares artists to tricksters. By this he means a roguish or jester-like figure who plays tricks with reality and raises critical awareness through mischief-making.

OK / That rings true. I confess to having mercilessly tricked people on many occasions. But to pull it off, you need to preserve your credibility. I for one have no particular interest in transcending everyday reality – I prefer infiltrating and swimming in the middle of it. It's important for me that my audience is never certain of what they are seeing; I don't want my pieces to be instantly recognizable as art. Someone might stumble upon a piece and say "Aha, so the world's like this." But the work must contradict itself, allowing the viewer to experience a flash of awareness – "No, of course the world isn't really like this" – and all sorts of reactions in between.

PT / You make a point of combining existing elements of reality, such as a common domestic fish (vendace) and religion in *Fish with Conviction* (2005) or metal fences and limitation of free movement in *Border* (2012) – everyday elements that have been transplanted in unconventional contexts.

OK / Yes, it's true; I find everything I need in my everyday environment. I take fragments and reorder them, without adding too much extra. Whenever I try to create something out of nothing, as if dredging it up from my unconscious, I invariably fail miserably, so I've stopped trying.



Border
Copenhagen Art Festival
Copenhagen, Denmark
2012



First Aid

Installation in public space
60 pocket tissue packs with typed
labels, stuck on the wall for passers-by
to take with them
Cracow, Poland
1998

PT / At what stage did art begin to feel like an important calling for you? When did you first consider taking it up as a profession?

OK / I never really consciously chose this profession – I drifted into it. At some point it just began to feel like the most natural way of expressing myself. My work in the public space traces back to my year as an exchange student at the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts. The academy had no exhibition space of its own, and there were few galleries in town to offer our work. A classmate and I solved this by taking our art into the streets. It was intriguing to observe how people instantly reacted to minor deviations in their daily environment. We immediately found an audience, and feedback came instantly – all it took was a bit of spying to gauge people's reactions. It was inspiring to discover this free way of working, without a middle man: you come up with an idea, and you make it happen right away in the streets, in the public space.

PT / When I visited your homepage I was delighted to note that 'action' came first on the list of genres you work in. Others might categorize your pieces as public art, performance or participatory art. I find your choice interesting, because 'action' is not a conventional art-making category. What prompted this particular choice?

OK / 'Performance' and 'intervention' didn't feel quite right; I wanted a broader umbrella term. I'm literally talking about taking action. Sometimes I plan and occasionally even practice beforehand, but it ultimately boils down to what takes place as the action unfolds. When you're working in the public space, the work encompasses everything else that is going on around it. It's like trying the shoot a movie sequence in the middle of a crowd in a city street without warning anyone beforehand. It would be unrealistic to expect total control, so it's impossible to predict the final result.

PT / An artwork in the public space is like a third element that recalibrates the whole dynamic between the viewer and the situational context. It triggers a dialogue and encounter that would otherwise never happen. But returning to your choice of wording: 'action' has a more socially engaged tone than certain other acts or genres of art-making. To what extent do you see your work as being socially engaged?

OK / Art is a way of taking part in society and social debate. I have always been interested in issues related to social justice and equality. It's incredibly challenging to create a world that is equal and just for all, but is there anything wiser worth aspiring to? It would be hard for me to exclude myself from that whole discourse. Our daily opinions and our seemingly insignificant everyday choices are always connected to bigger issues. With my work, I strive to produce an 'aha!' moment and rouse people to the realization that things aren't quite as straightforward as they might seem.

PT / What is your view of grass-roots activism, whether pro or con – direct political action, in other words?

OK/ The direct action taken by activists and NGOs is absolutely vital. Of course there are many kinds of activism, some more questionable than others. Some might see my art as a form of activism, but I don't see it that way. I see my role as an artist differently. An activist disseminates information in a clear, persuasive package, whereas I prefer to put across my message in a more perplexing or even self-contradictory form. But of course art and activism often diverge and complete each other, and this yields all sorts of interesting insights.

When you look at the news headlines, it's easy to espouse the pessimistic view that "everything is wrong and it's only getting worse – everything must change". We are constantly being invective pointing up how everything is going wrong, who's good and who's bad, and how we should all live our lives. No one can endlessly sustain their enthusiasm for this kind of negative rant. But as long as there is breath left in us, a grain of humour and hope lies hidden amidst all this angst-breeding Weltschmerz. This is something we must cherish and foster.

PT / And the info-glut we all face today poses its own challenges.

OK/ There is a mind-boggling amount of information out there, and we must accept that there's no way we can absorb it all. Every day we miss out on a whole host of shocking truths and ground-breaking discoveries with an irreversible impact on the reality around us. The reality that is filtered to us by the commercial media is radically simplified and embroidered with bling. It's easy to digest, so it sells, and through this stream we invariably adopt a particular version of the truth. But there's not just one truth – there are overlapping, parallel truths, and truths within truths. Every so often we should all question and revise our views and attitudes. Are my values and version of the truth truly so superior and beyond reproach?

PT / What thinkers have influenced your personal philosophy? Do you have any artistic, political or theoretical role models?

OK/ I don't know about role models, but there are plenty of people who have inspired me. Jens Haaning (b.1965, Copenhagen) is a Danish artist who had a great influence on me when I was younger. He skirts a grey zone, producing politically incorrect works that constantly mix and interrogate the boundaries between 'ours' and 'theirs'. 'Incorrect' types like him have always fascinated me. Spain's Santiago Sierra (b.1966, Madrid) is another good example of a truly confrontational and therefore important artist. He's not my personal favourite, but his controversial methods raise a number of thorny issues. This kind of provocation is a welcome thing, but the ends don't always justify the means, not even in his case.

When I began working on my *Finnish Traditional Islamic Bread* (2014) project, I spoke with a Finnish Muslim feminist of Somalian descent. I had heard her speak before and thought to myself "Now there's a wise person". Another interesting thing was that she didn't seem to fit into any pre-existing category – 'Muslim' and 'feminist' are not words you often hear together in the same sentence in everyday speech. Everyone seems to have a very clear preconception



Finnish Traditional Islamic Bread
Mänttä Art Festival
Mänttä / Tampere / Vantaa
Finland
2014

of what Islam is all about, often based on who-knows-what sources. The same also seems to apply to feminism. Western feminists sometimes seem to have difficulty coming to terms with Muslim feminists.

PT / The feminist you mentioned is an interesting example. In a way, her identity exemplifies an operation integral to your art: a contradiction or question that arises when you bring together familiar elements from your everyday environment in unexpected ways, such as skateboarders dressed as security guards in *Security Flip Shifty* (2005) or hazard warning cones and barrier tapes put up by individuals who occupy a small patch of turf in *Urban Space Occupation Kit* (2006). It reminds me of a news headline that elicited a similar Eureka moment for me. Do you remember this?: “Finland is among the countries that best embodies Islamic values in terms of how the Quran’s teachings and values are represented economically, socially and politically. Islamic countries lag behind, reports Britain’s BBC.” (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 12.6.2014.)

OK / Yes, it made me think, too. The Iranian-born professor Hossein Askari conducted a survey looking at how well the world’s nations embody the teachings of the Quran, such as the Islamic values of equal opportunities and justice. I think New Zealand took the top ranking, with Finland placing nicely in fifth position. Many religions are based on very similar ideals. The polarity between them is artificially constructed, always to serve some ulterior motive related to secular power play. The constant ‘which is better’ bickering is a dead-end. Wherever you find social justice, there you will find a community that fulfils religious teachings and values. The gods surely appreciate fair play.

PT / The Situationist International movement (1957–1972) led by Guy Debord critiqued our media-saturated world and its influence on our worldview. Eventually they abandoned art-making altogether in order to focus on ‘the art of living’. They coined a number of interesting terms that seem pertinent in relation to your work. For instance *detournement*, or ‘rerouting’, refers to a political form of plagiarism or collage. Your art could be described along the same lines: you plagiarize reality, you take elements of reality and combine them in a new collage, you hijack reality and reroute it against the norm. For the Situationists, *detournement* had revolutionary motives, not artistic ones. How do you feel about this?

OK / Artistic motives – what are they? I don’t make art for art’s sake, and I don’t believe you even can. Many of my artistic actions don’t even fulfil the outward criteria of art-making. I patch together fragments of reality to create collages and combinations, yes, very much in the spirit of *detournement*. Art for me is primarily a way of engaging in the world, not just observing and commenting from the sidelines. ‘The art of living’ practiced by the Situationists has today become an established art form. These days no one raises an eyebrow if an artwork leaves no tangible trace of itself. The revolutionary legacy of the Situationists lives on in my work, without a doubt.

PT / When I think of action, I think of the French philosopher Georges Bataille and his interesting notion of ‘the formless’ (*informe*). He defines it as a task or mission – an act, operation or event that renders *déclassé* the requirement that each thing have its own form, serving “to bring things down in the world”. ‘The formless’ consists purely of performative presence. I see a similar vein in some of your work: a skateboarder is dressed in the uniform of a security guard (an authority figure), yet still acts like a skateboarder – he commandeers the urban space without permission, yet in the guise of an authority. How consciously do you interrogate the status and power of authorities in your work?

OK /Perhaps I suffer from some degree of authority phobia, seeing as I’m constantly compelled to question authority. But you can also accept their power and status and still pose the same critical questions. Power and authority rest upon tacit contracts and compromises which are needed to keep the peace in society. To feel safe, we have to accept certain limitations upon our freedom – yet there’s something very complicated and human behind this cold logic. All things are more accessible when you strip away the pomp and ‘holy’ façade.

PT / How do you feel about politically engaged art? In a way, you can’t escape the political; it’s everywhere, also in art, if you choose to bring it to the fore. Every artist is free to define for themselves what their art is about and what they wish to emphasize.

OK /When I think of politically engaged art, I think of art that advances some specific political agenda. I don’t see myself as a politically engaged artist – the term seems too constrictive. Of course my works engage in political discourse. An artwork is always an act, an activity, and all forms of activity are political on some level. Some artists avoid social engagement because they “don’t want to get on a soapbox”. But nothing exists in a vacuum, so it would seem strange for anyone to explicitly deny the political dimensions of art.

An artist can go ahead and try to define what their art is about, but as soon as the piece goes public, that task is up to the viewing public. You can call attention to whatever you want, but someone will always interpret the work in a totally opposite way than you intended. And if an artist deliberately and systematically tries to eliminate the prospect of this ever happening, then the work loses much of its interest. That’s not to say there’s no point in trying to embed a message in your work. All art says something. You simply have to accept that there will be more than one interpretation. Once in Berlin, for instance, a neo-Nazi proclaimed to be an admirer of my work, which shocked me at first. I got it over, however, and after that I didn’t try to tweak my art in a more anti-Nazi direction.

PT / I would be keen to hear which work the neo-Nazi admired and what his interpretation was. It’s hard to otherwise imagine the situation and how the same work could be interpreted in such totally different ways. Then again, as they say: nothing exists without its opposite.



Ausländer
Pilotprojekt Gropiusstadt
Berlin, Germany
2002

OK / The work was *Ausländer*, a piece I did near the Lipschitzallee metro station in 2002. I painted a collection of incendiary words on the pavement with an arrow pointing away from each word. As people gathered to wait for the bus or for the lights to change, one of the words pointed at each of the people standing there. The words were all taken from dialogues and newspaper articles related to the prejudices that Berliners have against each other. After watching me for a moment, a man came over to chat about the piece. At first he seemed like an art enthusiast, and we spent a pleasant moment chatting together. As he left he raised his hand casually in a Nazi salute, and only then did I realize who I was dealing with. I saw my piece as a commentary on the arbitrary nature of prejudice and the random way certain ethnic minorities are labelled, but he read it differently – in quite the opposite way. He focused on certain words and was blind to the rest. It's frightening how often we only see what we want to see.

PT / What is art's power of influence in your opinion – both regarding the individual and the community at large?

OK / Art can influence our everyday reality, just like any other form of human activity. Sceptics might expect it to work like a miracle drug: "Show me how this really changes the world – then I'll believe it." But art can work its influence in mysterious ways. It can start with an individual, a one-on-one encounter. Images, reports and rumours about such encounters then spread and take on a life of their own in people's imaginations. Art can invoke states of mind that drive change. Art can tell stories that inspire people to act. It's erroneous to assert that art cannot change the world, or that art should be inherently function-less. It changes the world whether we like it or not.

Paula Toppila is a freelance curator, writer and Executive Director of the IHME Contemporary Art Festival. The above interview took place in Helsinki in November-December 2014.