

# Taking Place – The Use of Urban Space in Otto Karvonen's Art

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- 1 Jaukkuri, Maaretta. "Fluid Street." *Fluid Street. Alone. Together*. Ed. Jaukkuri Maaretta, Vanhala, Jari-Pekka. Helsinki: Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008. 9-13. p. 13.
- 2 Villanen Sampo. "Street Diversity and its Control in Helsinki." Trans. Snellman, Tomi. *Fluid Street. Alone. Together*. Eds. Jaukkuri Maaretta, Vanhala, Jari-Pekka. Helsinki: Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, 2008. 59-71. p. 59, 61.

**Altered street signs, tools for occupying urban space and propositions for alternative uses of space: Otto Karvonen keeps tapping into political debate and controversial topics in society with his artworks, which challenge existing conventions and norms in a subtle yet effective way. By adding a twist to the known and recognizable, he seizes upon and exposes a variety of social, political and economic issues.**

For others to be able to understand and recognize these individual acts and manifestations, they need to be part of a conventional context. And it is precisely this dependency on conventions that makes it possible to subvert them. Karvonen seems to have a preference for an outspokenly urban language, taking up and commenting on urban issues and conventions as well as artistic ones. The language he uses is therefore both particular and universal.

Street signs are recognizable as a tool for communication for most passersby, yet in the work *Signs for Wobbly Prospects* displayed around Liverpool in 2008, the message they propagate is an unusual one. Some of the signs easily bring a smile to your face, while others draw attention to acute and alarming topics such as deprivation of human rights and equality issues. The aesthetics of the urban landscape has been a common theme in Karvonen's artistic work since the beginning of his career. The street sign was already present in *Please Act like Nothing Happened* from 2002.

The cityscape and the tools used to communicate within it are fairly standardized all over the world and apply a common logic, thus offering strong tools to work with. Art that takes place in a public space is as such always part of a bigger context, namely the social, economic and spatial organization forming a city and the communities within it. It is never an autonomous event. What make streets an attractive site for contemporary art is the unpredictability, continual flux and level of horizontal communication they offer. In the street, normative behavior is required and the same rules apply to all. Anomalies are therefore easily spotted.<sup>1</sup>

Karvonen's art is not art for public space per se, but art tackling public issues, many times serving as a wake-up call addressing questions about who has access to public space, who is allowed to use it and for what purpose. *Urban Space Occupation Kit*, (ongoing in various locations since 2006) as the name so tellingly suggests, is based upon the idea that urban space can be occupied and used for your own purposes. It consists simply of four traffic cones, some barrier tape and a foldable camping chair accompanied by a canvas bag to transport the material wherever desired. Again, Karvonen plays on material already found in the street and therefore recognizable to us all. But where barrier tape and traffic cones usually restrict access to designated areas, Karvonen has created a tool for anyone to take possession of their own piece of public space.

Controlling urban space is a way to exercise power. Citizens "live through the streets," the place where a city's different functions come together. The controlled use of streets through the regulation of everyday life and thereby our terms of action is of utmost relevance to our present-day capitalistic society in terms of preserving the functional order of things.<sup>2</sup> One way of doing this is to

place guards in streets, shopping malls, subway stations and other public areas. In *Security Flip Shifty* (2005) and *Radio* (2008) Karvonen makes use of this ever-present urban security force. Skating youngsters and other underground subcultures are in many cases unwanted in the urban public space since they are seen as disturbing or at least potentially disrupting the order and rationale of the capitalist city. The video *Security Flip Shifty* features a group of skateboarders dressed in security guard uniforms going about their business as usual around Helsinki's city center. At first glance everything seems to be in order: the young males look like any other security guards, but they stand out immediately when they take out their skateboards, thus questioning the authority and mandate of security guards, who many times seem to concentrate on matters of a petty and trivial nature in the public space. This is underlined in another way in *Radio*, where a female guard stands in a public area and reports what she observes into her radio. The radio answers with different sit-com types of laughter each time she reports. Seemingly untouched by this strange response, she goes on without reacting, leaving passersby confused by the awkward situation.

Situation-specific is a term Karvonen himself uses to describe his work. Most of his art does not address or require a specific location but uses urban settings in general as a site in order to create a specific situation. Site-specific and public art was originally launched to bring art out its institutions and back to the streets and the public. The biggest change during the last forty years of site-specific art has been the shift away from an actual and fixed location or site as a basis to making the discursive domain its "locational" foundation. This shift has virtualized the site itself and made the primary site of site-specific art separate from its physical placement.<sup>3</sup>

Still, Karvonen's main stage is the street and public space of the city. The street has been seen as the ideal setting for art by many art movements during the last decades. Among the best known and most influential has been the Situationists International (1957–1972), an art movement based on the notion that the outcome of altering and appropriating the surrounding material and space would be general revolution.<sup>4</sup> The radical idea suggested by the Situationists was that "being in physical space is a political act," especially in the city.<sup>5</sup> Situationist tactics were attempts to territorialize the visual spectacle of the city, and trespassing on the territory of others was part of their basic repertoire. This is done to produce new meaning, be it through altering advertisement (*détournement*) or trespassing physical ground or using public space through alternative and experimental ways (*dérive*). Many of Karvonen's works play on the *dérive* and *détournement* tactics created by the Situationists, an important reference ground for interventionist art, a tradition to which Karvonen can also be seen as belonging.

*Urban Space Occupation Kit*, *Security Flip Shifty* and *Radio* all trespass urban public space and experiment with its occupation in the spirit of the *dérive*. Karvonen's traffic signs make use of the *détournement* technique by mimicking the appearance of ordinary traffic signs but altering their message. Another example of the Situationist and interventionist influence is Karvonen's *Here Will Open* series, which has so far been realized in Helsinki (2005 and 2013), Christchurch (2006) and Turku (2007). These works take societal issues as their cue, such as discrimination against immigrants and sexual minorities and the prejudices held

- 3 Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another. Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. p. 28-29, 112.
- 4 Sadler, Simon. *The Situationist City*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001. p. 13, 54.
- 5 Thompson, Nato. "Trespassing relevance." *The Interventionists. User's Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*. Eds. Nato Thompson and Gregory Sholette. Hong Kong: MIT Press, 2004. 13-22. p. 15.



**Radio**  
Performance, Gävle city centre  
Döm inte hund efter håren  
Gävle Konstcentrum, Sweden  
2008

**Signs for Wobbly Prospects**  
Liverpool Biennial, UK  
2008







against them. The *Here Will Open* installations have all followed the same basic logic: taking over a shop in the city and masking it to look as if it were under renovation, soon to reopen with a new “repurposed” function. *Here Will Open*’s Helsinki version proclaimed to be opening a Christian-Hindu day-care center, which was Karvonen’s contribution to public debate on religious values, child-rearing and alien influences. In Christchurch the artist reacted to the apparent homophobic atmosphere of the city by placing a sign in the shop window announcing the opening of a Christian Gay and Lesbian Cultural Centre. All of the actions trespassed upon the space of the other, i.e. the shop, while using the familiar commercial language of marketing new shops and services. *Here Will Open* can be seen as a comment on the demographics and gentrification of urban neighborhoods, where certain residents are deemed more desirable than others.

Like most practitioners of artistic interventions, Karvonen refrains from mere representation. He realizes that simply adding more information to the already massive glut of images confronting people today will not yield any more insight. Instead he chooses to play with, alter, reinterpret and intervene in the stream of information and images to help people gain insight by themselves.

How we relate to space and site, be it a street, parking lot or something else is dependent on cultural, political and social issues and our background as well as the time we live in. Interventions such as those practiced by Karvonen can be seen as opening many opportunities for the public to participate in open debate but also to gain new awareness of it. Novel ways to take part in public discourse are usually a welcome inroad. Hopefully the message gets through. Keep crossing fingers.

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