

This essay was first published in the Kiasma Exhibition Catalogue “**Landscape in Kiasma’s Collections**”, 2006. Pp. 114-131. ISBN 951-53-2884-5

Eija Aarnio

THE DISINTEGRATING LANDSCAPE

Richard Long's “White Light Walk” (1987) from an English moor, **Lauri Anttila's** “Lottery January 15, 1983” (1983) from Helsinki, **Tuula Närhinen's** “Windtracers” (2000) from the island of Harakka outside Helsinki and **Jussi Kivi's** “Documents from the Archives of the Expedition” (1995-1996) from the Ural wilderness – these are all pictures of landscapes, but they are also pictures that show us how the artist sees the world. They consist of personal experiences gathered in the memory when moving in or looking at a landscape. The works also show the artist's way of valourising their own environment. Every landscape picture is also a representation and a story of a landscape experience, about what it means to be a human, part of a landscape and its scenic space.¹

According to the French philosopher **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**, our notion of humanity is based on the human body, which uses senses to structure perceptions and create a relationship with the world. Merleau-Ponty emphasises the primacy of our body. We carry within us a capacity for bodily knowledge and skills, a capacity that starts developing from our very first perceptions in early infancy. Different sense perceptions teach us to understand differences between things. Bodily sense perceptions are the foundation for the later development of concepts.²

The elements making up our experience of nature, different spatial experiences and sensations, such as heat, cold, humidity, colours, changes in the light, all these create an ever-changing field of opportunity for the making of art. A work of art is the meeting place for the site and time specific experiences of the artist and the viewer's own experiential sphere. In the act of viewing, the landscape fragments in the work are metamorphosed into a "whole landscape" when the work has been received and shared. This is a complex, fluid process.

Works representing landscapes and the processes associated with them give rise to questions of a more general character involving our notions of nature and of art. How is our idea of nature built upon multisensory perception? What is the function of cognitive factors in the apperception of nature? How does the process of art break the landscape into parts and fragments, and how is the landscape reintegrated in the viewer's mind?³

Texts and photographs as part of early earth art

The process of making the work was an essential component of early works of earth art and transitory art. The pioneer of earth art, Richard Long, made his first walking work in a field, “A Line Made by Walking”, in 1967. Each walk was a unique experience in time, a dialogue between the artist and the site. It emphasised the pleasure of being, of breathing and seeing, of the experience of being a whole, living human. The walks, photos, words, lines on a map, stone circles and mud paintings were Long's way of representing the subtle changes in the landscape he had experienced. “White Light Walk” is a text work made in 1987, where the artist recorded experiences of colour that he had had during his walk, such as "orange sun at 4 miles", "yellow parsnips at 23 miles" and "blue eyes of a child at 56 miles". Conceptual text works document the miles walked by the artist, the landscapes or changes in weather he has experienced.

Modes of representation and reception adopted from conceptual art have also had an effect on earth art, such as the disruption of the object character of art in the practices of presentation, or multi-layered structure of meanings. Also Richard Long uses documentary photography and verbal language in his earthworks to convey temporally and spatially absent events or experiences to the viewer. His text works document actions, places or list perceptions. They are minimalist documentaries of the artist's physical presence, his manner of moving and observing things. The event inscribes itself on the viewer's understanding on a conceptual level.

Fragments or slices of landscape

A few artists at the turn of the 1960s and 70s in Finland tried to cross the boundaries of genres by juxtaposing different modes and methods of presentation. These typically involved the recording of multisensory bodily experiences. Lauri Anttila's process of art making began in 1967 when he began taking a photo of the house across from his flat every day at noon. The serial method produced information that surprised even the artist himself, revealing changes in the subject of the photos we would not otherwise be able to perceive. It was the serial presentation of the photos that ultimately revealed an unknown reality behind the images. The method raised the work to a level where meanings had not yet been fixed. The serial mode could be used to illustrate concepts like growth, the passage of time, gravity, heat, movements of the sun, phenomena that frozen, momentary visual perception was unable to capture.⁴

Lauri Anttila has discussed his method in his book *Ajatus ja havainto: kirjoituksia vuosilta 1976–1987*: "Although writings have changed my art and vice versa, writing or making art as such is not the main thing for me. What is essential is the cognitive process they involve, one that is then spelled out in writing or art. When I was younger I used to avoid this, I thought that only that which can be seen or felt is real. Since then I have learned to understand the totality of cultural factors that govern our perception and thinking, and to see how real they in fact are." Anttila summarises his method in one word: "Why?" He says he wants to make things visible and to put people in a situation where the question arises. "I want simultaneously to both pose the question and to try to find an answer to it."⁵

Anttila is also interested in letting external or random factors direct his work, relegating the artist's role to the background, into someone who merely carries out a predetermined set of instructions. Anttila has told us how his work "Lottery January 15, 1983" was inspired by the performance of **Marcel Duchamp's** only musical composition by **Mats Persson** and **Kristine Scholz** in Finlandia Hall on 15 February 1981. The score was constructed by dropping at random balls carrying the notes into the cars of a toy train. In the performance of the work, which Anttila heard, the piece was played by grazing small rotary discs against the strings of a grand piano. The sacral mood of the composition inspired Anttila to choose the Helsinki Cathedral as the centrepiece of his own piece. The random numbers suggested a natural Finnish correspondence to the notes, and the lottery coupon for the score. Anttila placed the grid of the coupon on a map of the centre of Helsinki and shot the church from points indicated by the numbers on the coupon. Anttila was unable to anticipate what the pictures would look like. The views recorded by his camera happened to reflect quiet and empty views in the streets of Helsinki, without seeking to evaluate or aestheticise the object in any way. With prints made at home in a primitive darkroom, the lottery coupon, the map of Helsinki and an explanatory note in a grey cardboard frame, the homespun appearance of the work communicated the artist's idea that "what's important is not the glamour of the prints, but the content."⁶

Anttila seeks to combine scientific and artistic methods in his work. He dissects and breaks the experience of landscape into measurable elements in a way that reflects the scientific way of conceptualising the landscape. The experience of the landscape or environment is broken up into discrete sense perceptions, with vision is not necessarily the primary experience. Next to the pictures he makes Anttila also presents maps, statistics, measurements, taped sounds from nature or maybe dried plants. Anttila has tried to make visible the layered aspects and causal relationships in landscapes. Multisensory and cognitive fragments build up into a meaningful whole that reflects the present.

The process of recording multisensory experiences

How can one describe the multiplicity of simultaneous bodily sensations or visualise something immaterial that only becomes material through another element, such as the motion of the wind in the trees or the waves on the sea?

Artists have searched for personal ways to approach the landscape as a subject, such as **Jukka Mäkelä** who has painted the lines of wind, or Lauri Anttila when he tried to photograph the air in Helsinki. **A. K. Dolven's** "Saturday Night" (1996) or **Bill Viola's** "Hatsu Yume (First Dream)" (1981) are both video works that succeed in depicting the subtle visual changes, the immateriality of the landscape as a story taking place in real time. The tonality of the narrative comes from the gradual changes in the weather. The time perspective of the video is determined by the artist, the use of repetition, slow motion or other effects to disrupt the real time flow. In a photograph or a painting, the time aspect of reception cannot be determined with the same accuracy, where the viewer starts to view the work and how much time they are allowed for it.

In his photographic works, Lauri Anttila seeks an objective form of representation that would reflect the scientific method of investigation. The measures he has used include the human body and scientific instruments, the camera in particular. The works use the instantaneous witnessing power of photography. Tuula Närhinen uses extended exposure to compile long events into a kind of image with temporal layers. The final photo is a combined result of constant variations in the light and the speed of the film.

Närhinen writes about her work "Windtracers": "They say that it is impossible to take a photo of the wind. You can feel it on your skin or perceive it as movement, but in the still image it disappears. In my wind experiments I try to register the motion of the wind by using long exposure times to photograph tiny lamps fixed in a tree. When the lamps move in the wind, they draw thin lines in the photo. I have also let trees and grasses function as anemometers themselves by fixing a felt pen in them and giving them white paper to draw on." Närhinen got the idea for her movement-recording photos from the experiments conducted in the late 19th century by the French physiologist **Étienne-Jules Marey** who used photography and plotters to analyse movements that could not be perceived by the naked eye alone.⁷

Närhinen's works often stem from powerful impressions of landscape and nature, experiences she has either had herself or found in literature. At the same time, she uses her works to investigate issues about her own identity and worldview. Using certain random and even absurd methods and language games, she produces new parts, pictures, texts or found objects for her installations. Multisensory perception emerges in fragments. The many metropolitan smells are refined into perfumes in "Three Stories of Girls: Heidi, Alice, Zazie" (1992-1995), such as "parfyme sauvage pour homme" or "air du métro." Alternatively, the disagreeable taste of contaminated water in "Senne"

lead to the development of grotesque brands for beer mats, such as "Mort Raide", "Styx" or "Bacille".

Närhinen has said about the making of "Senne" (2001-2003): "In my work I have studied the waters of the Senne from the source all the way to the mouth of the river by taking samples of its water. I took a kitchen sieve and some pantyhose to make a net for capturing plankton and other fine materials, from which I took samples with a pipette and placed them on slides. I selected one detail from each slide, which I then painted in watercolour. The microscopic world contains beautiful colours and exciting creatures in the dirt, which can nevertheless be seen to originate from waste oil, plastic, the fibres of toilet paper or some other undefined biological waste." ⁸

Concerned about the contaminated samples of water she took near Brussels, Närhinen decided to make a sequel to "Senne", which she named "Les meilleures bières belges – The Worst Beers in Belgium". The ecologically-oriented artist developed a series of fictitious beers, made of beer bottles she collected in Belgium and for which she designed new labels and beer mats. The products include a note to the effect that they are made by breweries using water from the Senne and local microbes to achieve a "natural" fermentation of the beer. The linking of beer brands and spoiled biological products also hints at the possibility that the drinker might be looking at an express trip to the river Styx after drinking his favourite brew.

The culturally constructed landscape

Jussi Kivi's installation "Documents from the Archives of an Expedition. A Little Night-River, Pripoljarnyi, the Ural mountains, Komi, Russia, August." was part of the international exhibition *Strangers in the Arctic*. The research and exhibition project was an adventure shared by artists and scientists to the Arctic regions.⁹ The valley of the Voj-Vozh river, where Kivi made his work, is in the Komi Republic in the northwestern Urals, where Asia and Europe meet. Regarding the Finnish title of the work, Jussi Kivi has pointed out that in the Komi language the points of the compass are expressed with words that refer to the time of day: the southern tributary is Day-River, the northern one Night-River. The artistic goal of the expedition Kivi travelled with was to study pristine nature as a mythic concept. To see and ascribe meaning to what one sees. The purpose was also to observe the expedition itself and its activities as performers of a mythic rite.¹⁰

The installation "Documents from the Archives of an Expedition" consists of a video projection, watercolours and drawings in sepia and pencil. The sketch-like small drawings depict the melancholy mood of early dusk on the tundra along the fast waters of the river Voj-Vozh, the impenetrable undergrowth of the primeval forest, or an old fire site on a lush meadow along the river. The artist's perspective moves from panoramas on the river to bird's eye views of bogs. Kivi is also interested in anthropomorphic formations. The 'sculptures' are remnants of a geological formation of tougher rock which the Ice Age and erosion have given recognisable features. According to Kivi, from far off the formations can bear an uncanny resemblance to the ruins of an ancient, mythic castle or "the nose of a petrified Nenets soldier." Kivi has appended some botanical samples to the work. On the video he has recorded the "mythic rites" of the expedition, scientific observation of flora and fauna and the acts of walking in the untouched wilderness and relaxing by the campfire. Also included is an action-packed sequence of the expedition's embarkation in an old Aeroflot helicopter, from the windows of which the Arctic reality is revealed in all its immensity. The stylistic aspect of 'avant-garde in the periphery' is emphasised by the mechanical whirr of a film camera on the soundtrack and the use of intertitles reminiscent of silent films.¹¹

Allusions to landscape art in the pictorial conventions selected for his work by Jussi Kivi range from paintings made in the romantic idiom to historical and anthropological accounts of expeditions aspiring to a realistic manner of description. Romantic landscape paintings in the 19th century typically depicted panoramas, broad vistas over expanses of lake or forest. The romantic horizon of hopes and dreams in the blue distance alluded to a pristine origin. But the landscape also developed into an arena for nationalism. Artists took the liberty to combine dramatic details, moonlight, broken trees or cloud formations in their pictures. The painting was not merely a reproduction of the perceived landscape, but a construct utilising elements not found in the real landscape. The choice of perspective, an aerial view, implied control over the depicted view. In his installation, Kivi uses his typical techniques to try to analyse and convey the confusing experience of suddenly finding yourself in the middle of a wilderness stretching hundreds of kilometres in every direction, in a nature reserve where no one has ever lived before you.¹²

In his *Kaunotaiteellinen eräretkeilyopas (Artistic Guide to the Wilderness)*, Kivi describes moments in traditional 'wildly romantic' sites such as forests or the wilderness: "But if on a dark night you sit by the campfire deep in the forest, spend a night or a few days there, you may find that the mystery of the forest is no longer such a distant thing. There are things it is difficult to put in words. What is the smell of a forest under snow, why is some small pond in the woods so special compared to another pond? What does it feel like to recognise the gentle scent of the scented shelf bracket and what does it tell about the forest? How does a moose smell just after it has got up? The dark night, the glittering morning, the frosty snow and the spring on the wind, the sun occasionally smiling from behind the clouds, all these are real, tangible and existing things."¹³

The relationship between the landscape and the viewer abounds with rules, customs and acquired knowledge. We all carry within ourselves expectations created by things we have seen and experienced before. They say that an ability to observe the environment is culturally constructed and leaves no room for an objective view. An artist can never forget his cultural bonds, not even when confronted by an untouched, wide open wilderness. In his installation, Jussi Kivi tries to give a sense of the historical burden of contemporary humanity, the weight of the seen and the experienced.

The emergence of post-modern art in the 1980s changed many of the then current ideas about representation. Artists may be moving in the same landscapes and depicting the same sites as many others before them. The landscape has remained nearly 'untouched,' but the artist has not. The artist has become primarily an observer. The landscape is processed by many senses, it is deconstructed, layered and meanings are created in new ways. The ideal, aesthetic landscape picture has become part of a scientific, ecological and cultural context. Things are seen to be complex, the chains of cause and effect are broken. Meanings accumulated in the process of a work's making are presented to the viewer at once. A work that remains open and multisensory will always leave more room for interpretation. The multisensory fragments or references in a landscape work do not resolve themselves into a 'whole' landscape until in the viewer's mind.¹⁴

¹ In her essay *Contemporary Landscape*, Hanna Johansson examines the new emergence of the landscape genre in the practices and content of contemporary art. She also discusses what landscape means in a contemporary context. Johansson, Hanna, "Nykytaiteen maisema", *Pinx. Maalaustaide Suomessa. Maalta kaupunkiin*, 2002. Ed. Helena Sederholm (vastaava / responsible). Weilin + Göös Oy, WS Bookwell Oy, Porvoo.

² Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 1993. *Silmä ja mieli*. (L'Œil et l'Esprit, 1964). Suom. / Trans. Kimmo Pasanen. Kustannusosakeyhtiö Taide, Helsinki, Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy, Jyväskylä. See also: Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 1997. *The Visible and the Invisible*. (Erfahrung und Urteil: Untersuchungen zur Genalogie der Logik, 1948) Ed. Claude Lefort, Northwestern University, Studies in Phenomenology & Existential Philosophy, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, The United States of America.

³ Hanna Johansson poses similar questions in her doctoral dissertation *Maataidetta jäljittämässä*. See also: Johansson, Hanna, "Metsän ja kielen välissä, Fragmentteja suomalaisesta ympäristötaiteesta ja metsän merkityksistä.", *Katoava taide / Förgänglig konst / Ephemeral Art*. Ed. Leevi Haapala, 1999. Valtion taidemuseo, Helsinki, Salpausselän Kirjapaino Oy, Hollola.

⁴ See Johansson, Hanna, 2004. *Maataidetta jäljittämässä*. Like Kustannus Oy, Otavan Kirjapaino Oy, Keuruu, 184-217.

⁵ Anttila, Lauri, 1989. *Ajatus ja havainto: kirjoituksia vuosilta 1976-1987*. Kuvataideakatemia, Helsinki, 10-11.

⁶ A text by Lauri Anttila included in the work "Lottery January 15, 1983".

⁷ A text by Tuula Närhinen included in the work "Windtracers".

⁸ A text by Tuula Närhinen included in the work "Senne".

⁹ The biological-artistic Finnish-Russian-Komi expedition that travelled to the valley of the Voj-Vozh river in the Komi Republic in the north-western Urals in August 1995 comprised the following: Aleksei A. Estafyev, German A. Estafyev, Teemu Haila, Yrjö Haila, Jussi Kivi, Alexander N. & Tanja Pystin, Anatoli Nikolaevitch Petrov and Marketta Seppälä.

¹⁰ Kivi, Jussi, 1996. "An Expedition to the Little Night-River", *Strangers in the Arctic*. Ed. Marketta Seppälä, 1996. FRAME – The Finnish Fund for Art Exchange and Pori Art Museum, Painohäme Oy, Ylöjärvi, 180.

¹¹ In the text I refer to the drawings and texts related to the video in Jussi Kivi's installation "Documents from the Archives of an Expedition".

¹² *Pinx. Maalaustaide Suomessa* has several essays relating to the national landscape by writers including Ville Lukkarinen, Annika Waenerberg and Jukka Ervamaa. *Pinx. Maalaustaide Suomessa. Maalta kaupunkiin*, 2002. Ed. Helena Sederholm (vastaava / responsible). Weilin + Göös Oy, WS Bookwell Oy, Porvoo.

¹³ Kivi, Jussi, 2004, *Kaunotaiteellinen eräretkeilyopas*. Kustannus Oy Taide / Kuvataideakatemia, Helsinki, Art-Print, Helsinki, 27.

¹⁴ Foster, Hal, 1999 (1985. Bay Press). *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. The New Press, New York, 13.