

## Reflecting Ambivalence

The late modernity is said to be imprinted by autonomic self-reflectivity, that is, the pondering and definition of our identities and ways of being<sup>1</sup>. The calling in the question of the prerequisites of this autonomy is, to my opinion, one of the themes presented by the pieces of work of Mika Vesalahti. The art of Vesalahti is not trying to create reverie outside of the observation of the late modernity, but instead it is openly with and within it. The discourses under display are creating inner reflective tensions as explicitly challenging hybrid wholes. On the other hand, the special quality of the pieces of works lures the spectator to contemplate the specific ways of looking. At the first glance the works are characterised by typical late modernity: the figures display conjunctive rows instead of the either-or dichotomies abhorred by the late modernity<sup>2</sup>. If the glance is broadened to watching or observing, there is born an impression that the artist wants to aim his critic at the fashionable and commonplace ambivalent chains of discussions.

### Art as a form of being and knowing

Objects of art are exceptional, because they can reveal the ordinary. Art as such is ordinary in that respect that, like other forms of challenging communication, it creates “reported speech”<sup>3</sup> with its quotes from art, media and ways of being, but they always contain a potentially open initiative that in the actual incident indexes the dread of choice pertaining to the late modernity.

At least from 1950 onwards, western art has created distance from the myths of immediacy as a part of the general deromantization process<sup>4</sup>, as the general mediatedness of existence has been acknowledged. Along the lines of Gadamer<sup>5</sup>, art can not be thought of as a special way of being of knowing and understanding, which is not and cannot exist only as museal or galleristic subjectivity, but instead is a part of the process of representation (*Seinvorganges der Darstellung*).<sup>6</sup> Art is

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<sup>1</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt 1991, *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge. Giddens, Anthony 1991, *Modernity and Self-Identity. Self and Society in Late Modern Age*. Cambridge.

<sup>2</sup> Beck, Ulrich 1997, *The Reinvention of Politics*. Cambridge.

<sup>3</sup> Vološinov, V.N. 1973 [1930], *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Transl. By Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Tutnik. New York.

<sup>4</sup> Vrt. Sanglid 2003, 179-181. Sanglid, Torben, Gråt utan tårar. Känslans relevans för senare avantgardekonst. Teoksessa: Johansson, Anders & Martinson, Mattias (red.), Efter Adorno

<sup>5</sup> Gadamer 1960, 93. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer 1960, 93. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*. Tübingen.

participated in. The spectator and the art exist as co-existing, not separate as the Kantian and also modern subjectivist autonomism expects them to be. The pieces of work by Vesalahti call forth explicit forms of prejudices, that is *Anspruch auf Wahrheit*. As subjects we do not so much use “readymade language”, rather it speaks through us as tradition. However, this doesn’t mean that we are at the mercy of language, but that as a horizon it opens up possibilities for us, such as expressing existence in the form of art<sup>7</sup>.

Visual art as semiosis doesn’t exist as praxis or being without speech, talking and writing: “...it is impossible to dis-integrate artistic and non-artistic communication”<sup>8</sup>. The interpretations becoming expressed are naturally open, and the indistinct features in the pictures appear to refer to the continual vacillation of the horizons of understanding. However, this vacillation does not make it impossible to pose the questions. The questions concerning the reality of Vesalahti’s art display themselves as clearly discursive reality, and they do not dream of the “unusability” or “unusefulness” of their world of images, that is truth-autonomy beyond praxis<sup>9</sup>.

### **The modalities of arting in general**

The institutional placing on display of the pieces of art produced by figurative art creates the social side of the more manifested arting. By my definition, arting is constituted of the social practises that reproduce the art world, and those social practises construct all those modes of being that by any ground can be counted as belonging to the world of art. The practises thus have both repetitive and transformative nature<sup>10</sup>. Thus the art gallery can be characterized as an institution repeating arting, whereas to the artist it can mean a rite of passage which the institution allows and makes possible.<sup>11</sup>

The objects displayed by Vesalahti in this exhibition exemplify my interpretation of arting. The pieces of art reflect the distinctive composition-like and performative character of modern society. The socio-historical frameworks of the ways of looking are also present, as well as the question of

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<sup>7</sup> Vrt. Mt. 255-269, 288, 441-449

<sup>8</sup> Harris 1996, 240. Harris, Roy, Signs, Language and Communication. Integrational and Segregational Approaches. London.

<sup>9</sup> Vrt. Derrida 1987, 7, 9. Derrida, Jaques, The Truth of Painting. Transl. by Geoffrey Bennington & Rachel Bowlby. London.

<sup>10</sup> Chouliarki, Lilie & Fairclough, Norman 1999, Discourse in Late Modernity. Rethinking Critical Discourse Analysis. Edinburgh.

<sup>11</sup> Vrt. Hermanowicz & Morgan 1999, 208-211. Hermanowicz, Joseph C. & Morgan, Harriet P., Ritualizing the Routine: Collective Identity Affirmation. Julkaisussa: Sociological Forum.

how the wider geo-semiotic<sup>12</sup> contexts define the positioning into looking and the terms of displaying of the things looked at.

### **The Mode of Being of Art in Particular**

The pieces of works by Mika Vesalahti display in their problematising of looking the impossibility of the theoretical–atheoretical -dichotomy, which corresponds to the notion of understanding of hermeneutical philosophy. Thus there arises no need to create distance from craftsmanship as many artists since the Italian renaissance have aimed to do in their effort to characterize their action as essentially intellectual, as a part of the effort to rise in the social hierarchies. At that time the need was formed to distinguish between *la practica* and *la scienza* or *la theorica*<sup>13</sup>. The “emotional poeticality” of art is often opposed to the “rationality and prosaic unequivocality” of science.

The hollowness of this dichotomy is indicated specially well by visual art: in visual art the form comments on the ways of understanding. Performance is always embedded in the content, “the style” cannot be distinguished from “the form” or “the substance”. Thus there is no need to as if separately metaphorize the art as language<sup>14</sup>, because it exists in language in any case. Vico emphasized the meaning of *sensus communis* and *eikos*, the appealing argumentation, in the production of knowledge<sup>15</sup>. The Italian philosopher characterizes the purpose of philosophical hermeneutics as just the reflecting of the historical reflection<sup>16</sup>. The exhibition of current interest by Vesalahti pertains to this mode of being. Historicity means also the communality of creativity: “Imagination... is nothing but the springing up again of reminiscences, and inquiry or invention is nothing but working over what is remembered”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Scollon, Ron & Scollon, Suzie Wong 2003, *Discourse in Place. Language in the Material World*. London.

<sup>13</sup> Cast, David 1998, *Vasari and the Practical*. Teoksessa: Jacks, Philip (ed.), *Vasari's Florence. Artists and Literati at the Medicean Court*. Cambridge.

<sup>14</sup> Gombrich, E.H. 1960, *Art and Illusion*. Oxford. Goodman, N. 1968, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis.

<sup>15</sup> Gadamer 2004 [1968], 67. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Klassinen ja filosofinen hermenutiikka*. Teoksessa: Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Hermenutiikka. Ymmärtäminen tieteissä ja filosofiassa*. Valikoitunut ja suomentanut Ismo Nikander. Tampere.

<sup>16</sup> Vico 1961 [1744], 28-29, 52-53, 62. Vico, Giambattista, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. Translated from the third edition by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. Garden City, NY.

<sup>17</sup> Mt., 215-216.

## II

### The Infernos

In Vesalahti's works is actualised the rather typical metacommenting, but in a way which overcomes the ordinary both-andness. As stated, Vesalahti doesn't really practise and-like hesitation, but instead his art is characterized by the atmosphere of *hineinstürzen*, in which the languid but pleasure-loving yawning is present only in the bad conscience of the spectator. The artist presents us with images that are successfully intricately mimetic: they show themselves as well as ways of looking. These elements index in their part different macrosociological structures, such as power and violence. The artist doesn't end up in the Adornoan abstract to enable the commentary of world dialectics, but the pieces of art live openly in our world. From Adorno we can instead snatch his concept of *mimesis*, with which he doesn't refer to imitation and mockery, but instead to an attitude of "making-like-oneself" (*Verhalten*) and mode of approach (*Verhaltenweise*)<sup>18</sup>.

The works are not characterized by joyous gaiety, even though the still-lives are not lacking in humour and self-irony. The humour is not boisterous but rather it is melancholic, and the self-ironic touch is not dominant. The means of irony and humour are themselves present as ambivalent cultural-semiotic relations. The paintings are also not marked by the habitual postmodern decorativity and interior design-likeness; these works will not function as the frameworks or furnishings of our happiness, as *parergon*<sup>19</sup>. They do not frame homeliness even though they tell us about homes. *Not anybody*<sup>20</sup> would hang these on the walls of his/her home.

The general atmosphere is quite horrible, and even the laughing figures are waiting for their hell. "Fools that will laugh on earth must weep in hell", sighs the Mephostophilis wandering in hell on earth in Marlowe's *Faustus*<sup>21</sup>, and Vesalahti conjures up just those hells on this earth that we can not avoid in present day visual world. In Vesalahti's art the constellations of media and art history are displayed in new visual contexts. Speech is speech and thus understandable and at the same time opening. The discursive hybrids thus created make us think about the ordinary ways of looking at the original constellations. The rather contrasting use of colours of the works, the fade-out of the

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<sup>18</sup> Adorno 1972, 86. Adorno, Theodor W. *Ästetische Theorie*. Bd. 7. Teosarjassa: Tiedemann, Rolf (hrsg.), Adorno, Theodor W., *Gesammelte Schriften 1970-1986*. Frankfurt am Main.

<sup>19</sup> Vrt. Derrida mt., 61.

<sup>20</sup> Reijo Kupiainen suomentaa Heideggerin *das Man*-käsitteen lausekkeella *kuka tahansa*. Heidegger, Martin 2000 [1927], *Oleminen ja aika*. Tampere.

<sup>21</sup> Marlowe, Christopher (1965) [1588-1592], *Doctor Faustus*. Ed. by John D. Jump. London.

form and the symbolics of violence really create to anybody the possibility to ponder one's relationship to the news picture voyeurism and to the visual floods in general. The repulsive liminal angel acting as a bystander underlines our flaccid helplessness but operates at the same time as a nagging prompt to repentance. The vacillation functions as the dialectical antithesis of the sharp saturation of the news world and it means the courage to speak interrogatively, not repetitively.

The imagery of the media is marked by covering up in its effort to be apparently unpoetic even if flamboyant. The practise of the media thus recreates the myth of the organised nature of reality. On the contrary, Vesalahti's art emphasizes the active potentiality of our looking in displaying views that speak to us simultaneously covered up and exposed. This way, the paintings can tell us something about the basic essence of the hermeneutical understanding of reality; Heidegger's *aletheia*. The visual expression of Vesalahti is critical towards the everyday ways of looking of *anybody*, but the critics itself is not trying to be independent of the fundamental habitual ways of looking of our culture<sup>22</sup>.

The infernos of Vesalahti can also be conceptualised as forms of apotropeia<sup>23</sup>, where the evil is shown in order to expel it. The thematics considering looking calls this constellation into question also by showing how displaying the evil doesn't expel it. In natural religions the evil was performed in rites, whereas nowadays the demons are our everyday guests. Is it really true that we need an evil society to be able to be happy "elsewhere"?<sup>24</sup> The everyday homely retreats protect from the "evil world out there", even though it nowadays is visible in the home.

Thus even the home does not offer more than illusory metaphysical comfort, and the showing of this appears to be one of the themes of the paintings. However, I do not interpret the message as a cynical yawning which would mean excludingly rational and uncomprehending presumptuousness. Gadamer<sup>25</sup> is justified in warning us from projecting Nietzsche's visions to the concrete of our time. Limpid relativism cannot be bothered to pay attention to its own conditions of living.

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<sup>22</sup> Vrt. Skirbekk 2003 [1968], 80-81 ja Brandom 2003, 43 Heideggerin *Daseinin Mitsein*-luonteesta. Brandom, Robert, *Dasein – tematisoiva oleva*. Teoksessa: Kakkori, Leena (toim.), *Katseen tarkentaminen. Kirjoituksia Martin Heideggerin Olemisesta ja ajasta*. Jyväskylä. Skirbekk, Gunnar, Ihminen eli *Dasein* transendentiaalisena immanenssina. Teoksessa, Kakkori Leena (mt.).

<sup>23</sup> Vrt. Adorno & Horkheimer 1996 [1969], 24. Adorno, Theodor W. & Horkheimer, Max, *Upplýsningens dialektik*. Göteborg. Kreikan sanasta *apotropaios* – "torjuva", "loitollapitävä". Antropologiassa ne rituaaliset muodot, joilla torjutaan uhkaavia vaaroja.

<sup>24</sup> Vrt. Luhmann 1987, 125. Luhmann, Niklas, *The Evolutionary Differentiation between Society and Interaction*. Teoksessa: Alexander, Jeffrey C. et al (eds.), *The Micro-Macro Link*. Berkeley.

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer 1983, 263-264. Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *A Letter by professor Hans-Georg Gadamer*. Teoksessa: Bernstein, Richard J., *Beyond Objectivism. Hermeneutics and Praxis*. Oxford.

From a positive viewpoint it can be thought that the mediated suffering mediated by Vesalahti's works can, accommodating to Adorno's negative dialectics<sup>26</sup>, be interpreted as a possibility to shared objectivity and dialogue. The polyphony as such is no guarantee to goodness, but the paintings also refer to the propensity of late modern heteroglossic hubbub to cover the *figures* of power<sup>27</sup>. This is what the works are aiming to talk about in an openly discursive mode.

In displaying himself and referring to art history, Vesalahti is also asking after art and other different ways of looking at holy views. This emphasizes the continuum of the terms of glancing and admiring: visual art is also a media, which is shown institutionally in a gallery or museum, though, and not pleasantly or irritatingly at home. The art that thrives at home is sometimes mentioned as art, arising from the need of distinction<sup>28</sup>, but many talk about "paintings". This enables thus an admiring or yawning partaking outdoors, which is the most common mode of being of pseudo-individuality. Thus, arting can be one of the forms of forgetting oneself along with any other *spending of time*<sup>29</sup>. The forgetting of oneself is one means of defence against the horror of nothingness and not-belonging. If one remembers oneself, one remembers also the possibility of absence and finally, death. The ways of death displayed in Vesalahti's paintings mirror those everyday habits that make us forget death itself even when looking at it observantly.

Technology has enabled an ever more actively orientated lazy and hedonistic way of looking. However, I do not regard Vesalahti's works as creating a Heideggerian critics of technology. A human being is positioned as the master of the creation, thus also as the master of his techniques<sup>30</sup>. This implies power and responsibility. When problematising the looking, Vesalahti poses us a question about what kind of master and slave each of us is. Invigorated by Mika Vesalahti's works, we can ponder about the nature and purpose of the fragmentary, multichannelled late modern *sensus communis*, about what each of us is looking and what are the terms of gaping and glancing. The ways of collectivity, shown by these works of art challenge us to observe the terms of our own, concrete collectivity.

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<sup>26</sup> Adorno, Theodor W. 1966, *Negative Dialektik*. Frankfurt am Main.

<sup>27</sup> Vrt. Crowley 1989, 83. Crowley, Tony, Bakhtin and the History of Language. Teoksessa: Hirschkop, K. & Schepard, D. (eds.), *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*. Manchester.

<sup>28</sup> Bourdieu, Pierre 1984 [1979], *The Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London.

<sup>29</sup> Levinas 1989, 142. Levinas, Emmanuel, *Reality and Its Shadow*. Teoksessa: Hand, Seán (ed.), *The Levinas Reader*. Oxford.

<sup>30</sup> Vrt. Levinas 1990, 231-233. Levinas, Emmanuel, *Heidgger, Gagarin and Us*. Teoksessa: Levinas, Emmanuel, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Transl. By Seán Hand. Baltimore.