

Photographicality

Jan Kaila



[Fig. 1]

wanderer, a *flâneur* who seems to discover the world he encounters partly by accident, partly according to a plan. The photographer “collects” that world by taking images of it, processing it further by aesthetic means, while simultaneously trying to maintain the authentic information contained in his findings.

My doctoral thesis, *Demonstration of Knowledge and Skill* for the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts is made up of two components: *Mystery of the Object*, an exhibition composed of nine large artworks shown in the Amos Anderson Art Museum, Helsinki in 2000; and a book published in 2002. The photographs in the book document the development of my works and also present art created by other artists which has influenced my practice and research. The textual part of the book consists of four conversations I had with my supervisor Carolus Enckell, accompanied by lengthy appendices which embellish upon questions that emerged in the discussions and in my practice, and which, I hope, are also relevant to the entire field of contemporary art and photography. What is photographic presentation? How is *photographicality* presented in contemporary art?

The piece you see now displayed on three monitors is an attempt to visualize essential parts of my research [Fig. 1. Installation shot. *Nameless Science*, Apexart]. On display are conversations, appendices, and images that deal with three artworks. The conversations are not presented entirely and in a linear order as was the case in my book. I have instead placed all materials that dealt with each work sequentially.

In the first research plan for my doctoral studies, which I wrote in 1998, I stated that the works to be incorporated in the research would consist of photographs on urban themes realized with the logic of a street photographer. I thus committed myself to the well-known tradition where the photographer is a

I therefore initially limited myself to using photography as my sole medium. This might be seen as a gesture of insecurity, since I had adopted other media for my art years before embarking on my course of study. Yet in early 1999, I found myself making art not only by photographing, but also by making videos and using objects (clothes, books), as well as texts [Fig. 2. *What-Where-When*, 1999-2008]. Around that time, my work reached a turning point in that I abandoned the traditional narrative mode that had occupied a central place in my earlier production. Since then, many of my works, and even more so the exhibitions they eventually grew into, would no longer necessarily have a verbally definable topic sited in a specific time and/or place.

The new situation awakened a host of questions, not necessarily always pleasant, about whether my research might be too thematically incoherent. I gradually realized, however, that my works were not as heterogeneous as I had thought. In spite of using different media and addressing mutually very different themes, difficult to express in words, as an author I was still a wanderer and a collector interested in discovering things and organizing them into informational images and works that allude to their origin. This attitude towards the practice of art, stemming from my background in photography, appeared in my new works as a factor that lent unity to my production, a feature I began referring to by the term *photographicality*.

Photographicality is not a quality limited only to photography, however. Rather, it is an artistic tenet and attitude, a way of using different media with the aim of creating pictures that would awaken the same kind of perceptions, associations or other meanings as photographic images. In my own work, this strategy appears in the ways outlined below.

My videos do not draw upon the core tradition of moving images, where changing camera angles, dollies and editing are used to create a linear story. In my works, the camera is stationary, just like in a photograph, and all movement derives from the motions of the subject of the shot. My editing is mainly directed toward creating a sense of simultaneity, not linearity.

My use of objects also aims at *photographicality*. My hope was that it would recall the traditional conflict within photography, the fact that photographs allude representatively to something in the past, while at the same time they are present in the here and now as physical artifacts. It is thus essential that I have chosen to use secondhand clothes and books; in other words, objects where the past becomes visible.

I have been fascinated for years by a comment made by Walter Benjamin, in his essay on the history and meaning of photography, 'A Small History of Photography'. Benjamin writes: "Thus in fact it is to *build something up*, something artistic, created."

Building developed into an important artistic method for me, but perhaps in a slightly different way than Benjamin was thinking. For Benjamin, building was a force contrary to photography, which relied upon a creative, traditional aesthetic; the kind of (photographic) constructivism developed by the Surrealists or Russian avant-garde filmmakers through the use of collage and montage. For me, building meant the construction, processing and combination of my photographic discoveries into a kind of *presentation*, where information would be paralleled, and also opposed, by aesthetic dimensions contained, not in language, but in a more immediate sensory perception, and which were based on repetition, color and space.

Thus my production gradually developed into an investigation, not only of the found, but also of the *presentation* I had made using found objects. At the same time, my research began revolving around what was to become the main theme of my work, the polar intertwining of the presentational, aesthetic dimension, the “here and now”; and the photographic, representative and informational dimension, the “there and then.”

As a painter whose work rests upon non-figurative and colorist reduction, Carolus Enckell represents a mode of artistic thinking which contradicts the informational tradition of documentary photography which served as the starting point in my artistic work in the early 1980s. My decision to invite Enckell to be my thesis supervisor and interlocutor was based on the fact that my art had changed gradually in the 1990s - issues dealing with repetition, color and space had become central to the way I thought about photography and making art.

In early 1999, I suggested to Enckell that we start meeting once every six months or so to discuss my ongoing works that would be included in my doctoral thesis project. This resulted in four conversations, each lasting 4–5 hours unedited. Neither of us planned our talks very much; the idea was instead to comment freely on everything that the works and changes in them would bring to mind. This must not be taken to imply that our meetings were accidental in terms of their content. The preceding conversation always affected the course of the subsequent one – in other words, we established a discursive contact and culture.



[Fig. 2]

For some time, discussion has been a natural way for me to approach art, and I have used it when I have produced material for publication about other artists. I think that a dialogue, which a conversation always essentially is, creates at best the kind of unforeseeable knowledge and sense of presence not always achieved in writing, which tends to be more theoretical. Discussion also seemed suitable to my artistic research, because it would permit me to document, in a more or less chronological and authentic manner, those reactions and moods which the current phase of the works elicited over the course of the two years it took to make them.

At a later stage, I wrote appendices to the conversations. I wanted to include in my research also these elements that had affected my work, which for practical reasons were impossible to explore systematically in the meetings between Enckell and myself. These elements included theory, phenomena and works in the sphere of the history and present status of photography and art.

My original idea was not to evaluate the interrelationship of the appendices well in advance, but to link the appendices to every relevant point in the conversations so that the end result would resemble a collage with multiple perspectives. I did follow this idea for quite a while, but the scope of my material just kept expanding. At one stage, I was working on 150 extensive appendices, whose subject matter differed so wildly that I was completely unable to control the situation. I therefore continued by cutting and combining, finally ending up with 32 appendices which had a concrete link to my practice, and also shed light on its background within the complex framework of *photographicality*, presentation and contemporary art.

Response

George Smith

I love the term *photographicality*. It is so pertinent to the problems we are dealing with when it comes to the question of a PhD project in visual art and the notion of research as a studio practice. *Photographicality* situates your project within an in-betweenness, which seems the key to it, since in-betweenness undermines the hierarchy of knowledge and frames the debate around the question of classical, traditional and conventional philosophy on the one side, and research and knowledge on the other. It allows us to see relationship as one of becoming, as opposed to one fixed in a dialectical tension. What we get then is a much more dialogical relationship, moving away from a hierarchical, dialectical relationship.

In the context of your work specifically, I love how the grid interacts with the notion of the everyday. The everyday is of course something that comes in through a romantic channel. Posited against the neoclassical representational aesthetic discourses, it allows us to think about the commonplace level within an aesthetic appreciation, and it moves towards reminding us of the hierarchical structure of knowledge in the relationship of aesthetics and philosophy.

Jan Kaila's project shown in the *Nameless Science* exhibition is a wonderful project. The language used to represent the process itself becomes embedded in the artistic experience, turning the art inside out. Precisely through representing the language as part of the work, the philosophical principles do not clothe the work, but evolve from within. Again, that is a wonderful way of getting toward the dialogical relationship between philosophy and art, between knowledge and artistic representation.