



Issue No. 2/2015

## Physical Phenomena and Natural Materials – The Challenges in Collection Management

Eija Aarnio // Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Finnish National Gallery

First published in *Kiasma Hits. Kiasma Collections*. A Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma Publication 139/2013. Edited by Arja Miller & Joni Kling. Helsinki 2013: Finnish National Gallery / Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, 60–71. Translated by: Tomi Snellman.

Art research has not always placed a particularly high value on materiality. Matter was seen primarily as a substratum through which meanings were read. However, the separation of matter and idea is no longer considered a realistic approach in the understanding of the processes of art. Art historian Katve-Kaisa Kontturi even claims that no image or representation can be interpreted or would even exist without the material-bodily processes of art making and reception.<sup>1</sup>

Anni Rapinoja's *Wardrobe of Nature* (2005–11) consists of hats and handbags made of cotton grass and common reed, complete with sumptuous fur coats and matching shoes made of willow or northern bilberry leaves. Peering into the handbag, you find it is filled with elk droppings. Rapinoja lives on the island of Hailuoto in Oulu, where she collects these sensitive materials for her work. The inhabitants of the island know her and her working methods. Hunters are in the habit of bringing her the ears and tails of rabbits they have caught, which the artist keeps in cake boxes while she waits for inspiration.

Timo Heino's *Dialogue* (2005) is made of synthetic and organic elements – car tyres, metal chains and human hair. With hair cascading towards the floor from their centres, the rubber tyres are like a row of chandeliers hanging at different heights. Processing has transformed real hair into an almost unnatural substance. The threadbare tyres are recycled material. The artist wants to blur the aesthetic of materials and the narrow categorisations and rigid oppositions typical of Western culture.

Whenever a new work is added to the collection in the Kiasma, the artist is interviewed so that we can record the core idea and intention with respect to the artwork's display, as well as the materials used, their durability and replaceability<sup>2</sup>. In the case of Heino's work, replaceability is an issue mainly with regard to the brake wires which were acquired from a bicycle shop, or the rubber tyres that oxidise over time and become brittle. Human hair can be ordered from London, ready dyed and bleached.

<sup>1</sup> In her study, Katve-Kaisa Kontturi emphasises a neo-materialist approach in which a bodily experience of art can also be part of critical research. Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, *Following the flows of process: a new materialist account of contemporary art*, University of Turku, Turku, 2012, 22–24.

<sup>2</sup> Siukku Nurminen, *Taideteosten elinkaari nykytaiteessa* (Lifespan of works in contemporary art), Metropolia, Vantaa, 2009, 60–61.



---

Anna Rapinoja, *Autumn Party Shoes*, 2010, made from northern bilberry leaves, from the series 'Wardrobe of Nature', 2005–11, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen.



---  
Anna Rapinoja, *Autumn Trip Bag*, 2010, made from northern bilberry leaves and elk droppings, from the series 'Wardrobe of Nature', 2005–11, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen.

Organic materials do not last forever, and all natural materials have their lifespan. In the case of Rapinoja, her working method and choice of materials are based on the deliberate idea of adhering to the cycles of nature. After a piece is finished, the artist has completed her work, and the organic material continues its life, which consists of changes that are observable in the colour or structure of the materials. The traditional concept of restoration is complemented with the new concepts of replaceability and lifespan<sup>3</sup>.

A comprehensive approach to the lifespan of an artwork should be considered in relation to their acquisition, display and storage. Materials used in contemporary art are often much more fragile and vulnerable than those used in traditional art. The observation and documentation of technical and material experiments provide important data for conservators and researchers. It is also important to bear in mind that materials can embody meanings that are relevant to the content and interpretation of the work itself. Conservation methods used in contemporary art are in fact being developed through a multidisciplinary approach. The analysis of materials needs to be supplemented by art-historical and theoretical research to support conservation decisions.<sup>4</sup>

### The importance of documentation

Since a work of art can be a prototype, there is a need to ensure its durability and functionality after its acquisition. Works that contain mechanical parts also require maintenance and replacement of parts. In extreme cases, the museum has been forced to replace a functional element of a work with documentation of the interaction between the viewer and the work.

One of the works in the Kiasma collections is Tiina Ketara's *You and Me* (1996). A life-size doll that looks like the artist, and is made of many different materials, lies on the floor and cries out to the viewer to help her stand up and sing. Originally the audience was allowed to touch the work and lift it up. This resulted in serious damage to the doll, however. Parts, such as the hair and the eyes, came loose, and the 'skin' became brittle and torn. Because of the stress on the materials, it was necessary to prevent the audience from touching the doll. In order to convey the original idea of the piece, a video record of its functional aspect was produced and will be shown in future exhibitions, together with the doll, as a replacement for its earlier mode of presentation.<sup>5</sup>

What might be the fate of Ken Feingold's work *The Head* (1999–2000)? This wacky talking head that challenges viewers to interact with it was a favourite with the audience – its highly realistic head and voice are disconcerting. While on display, the mechanism inside the work is subjected to constant physical stress. *The Head* has even been vandalised. We are currently in a situation where the museum has to consider different options for replacement. How will the changes affect the functionality or appearance of the work?

### Replaceability and physics

Spatial art is by its very nature bodily and material. The material, tensions and size of sculptures and installations are experienced and understood in relation to the viewer and the space we share with them. Giovanni Anselmo's *Senza Titolo* (1989) consists of seven slabs of granite hung at eye level. The stones are mounted on canvases with a loop of steel wire wrapped around the upper part of each piece. The weight of these massive stones is pulling down on the taut wire, yet the impression made by the work is quite the opposite: the stones seem to defy the laws of physics, becoming quite ethereal and airy. The steel wires are under heavy stress, however, and have to be replaced each time the work is displayed.

Tommi Grönlund and Petteri Nisunen have worked together for a long time exploring spatiality and physics. Their installations are extremely polished stylistically as they exploit the laws of physics using ordinary, everyday technology in innovative ways. The materials of the works are often replaceable and off the shelf. In *Levitation* (2012), a magnetic field is created in space among wires and magnets suspended between the floor and the ceiling.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Modern art: who cares?: an interdisciplinary research project and an international symposium on the conservation of modern and contemporary art* (eds. Ijsbrand Hummelen & Dionne Sillé), 1999, The Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, Amsterdam, 1999, 14–19.

<sup>5</sup> Siukku Nurminen, *Taideteosten elinkaari nykytaiteessa*, Metropolia, Vantaa, 2009, 16–17.



---

Timo Heino, *Dialogue*, 2005, Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma. Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen.

The non-material field created by 20 vertical steel cables is baffling. As its name suggests, *Levitation* literally floats in the air.

The works of Esa Laurema are based on a combination of motion and light. *While Sleeping* (2012) is constantly changing its form. This work consists of two sources of LED light and 37 turning reflectors. The impression of motion is created by coloured lights that gradually change colour, and reflectors that limit the light while moving in a rhythm of their own. Moving towards the centre, the colours come together to form condensed areas, only to scatter when they move towards the edges. The mood has a cosmic and spatial depth to it that makes you feel you could merge into it. *While Sleeping* was purchased just before the artist's death and hence technical changes made to the work can no longer be approved by the artist.

### Issues in the acquisition of digital material

Works that employ digital technology pose new challenges to museums. Media art calls for new ways to store, maintain, conserve and present the works, and contractual practices also need continually to be developed. The terms of agreements on the acquisition of media art include an option for transporting the work from one format to another. This is why the work by Ange Leccia, which was purchased from the 1995 *ARS* exhibition, can be exhibited using new technology.<sup>6</sup>

Leccia's *Sea* (1993) is like a 'living' painting. The softly billowing waves of the Mediterranean look like blue and white brush strokes. Materiality is replaced by a more ethereal form of expression. The inherent limitations of painting are left behind in a move towards the possibilities offered by light and the moving image: time control, superimposition and pure light. The coastline was first shot from above, and then the picture was rotated 90 degrees so that it rests on its side, making the waves appear to move vertically. The spatial installation of the work creates a calming and meditative experience.

Videos are usually presented either as a projection or on a monitor, depending on the situation, the exhibition and the artist's instructions. The videos by Hannu Karjalainen, *Man in a Blue Shirt* (2006) and *Woman with Dark Hair* (2007), contain layers associated with the working process. The painterly and sculptural aspects are emphasised by the dripping paint and the moving hair. The artist is making an allusion to the tradition of portraiture, but the sitter's personal features are rendered unrecognisable. The sensation of materiality is difficult to put into words, and our gaze easily lingers instead between the figurative layers of the videos. Art usually depicts something that exists in the world, but Karjalainen's works focus instead on how art produces something new.

Works in digital media are basically very easy to transport and loan. Today works of art can even be transported electronically over the web. This highlights the importance of judicial issues in their presentation. Jacob Dahlgren's *Neoconcrete Space* (2012) creates an immersive experience based on an endless stream of coloured stripes striking the viewer's eyes in the space where the video is presented. Dahlgren has videoed striped paintings made by himself and has then joined the shot sequences into a temporal continuum. The artist has a knack for finding new ideas from the legacy of modernism and abstract art. The basic criteria for concretism are also satisfied by this work: the form is limited to colours and stripes, and compositional rhythm comes from the temporality of the video. The work is on loan from the artist.

Another piece by Dahlgren, *The Wonderful World of Abstraction* (2009), is one of the most popular works in the Kiasma collections; it had already won its place in the hearts of the audience in the 'It's a Set-up' collection exhibition in 2010-11. The work is spellbinding through its inviting, haptic form. It consists of dozens of polyester ribbons of different colours that are hung so as to create a sea of ribbons you can dive into. The ribbons are tied to steel frames that can be hung in different configurations. In this exhibition, they are hung in a cube. The ribbons can be replaced when necessary.

<sup>6</sup> Finnish National Gallery collection strategy and collection policy (ed. Teijamari Jyrkkiö), Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, 2011, 25–26.

## Untouchability and durability

The definitions and boundaries of conceptuality have become very heterogeneous and fluid in contemporary art, allowing conceptual art to encompass many of the things it sought to set itself apart from in previous decades. Conceptual art today can be visual, material and aesthetic, emphasising experientiality instead of its earlier linguistic, scientific, intellectual and non-subjective qualities<sup>7</sup>.

Works may also be acquired for the Kiasma collections that can be stored as conceptual designs, ideas or plans to complement material works<sup>8</sup>. Mirosław Bałka and Hilda Kozári have both created works that involve a multi-sensory event. Both works underline active reception, action and interpretation. They challenge our accustomed ways of thinking and observing, and also our notions of knowledge and reality.

Bałka's *Touch me / Find me* (2013) is located in a seemingly empty gallery. The title of the piece invites the viewer to embark on a search. Heat cables embedded in the walls and in the wall of the balcony convey a surprising sensation of heat when you touch the wall. The work only comes alive through human touch and interaction. What thoughts does it provoke in the viewer? Is the heat a reference to the presence of another person? *Touch me / Find me* is produced by Kiasma, and remains in the collection only in the form of documentation and instructions. The physical lifespan of the piece is restricted to its actual presentation.

Hilda Kozári has worked with visually challenged young people, and her works feature texts in Braille in different materials and scales. Her piece *Terve* (2012) greets the viewer from the gallery wall – *terve* is a common greeting in Finnish, a word that means 'healthy'. The reference to health is also embodied in the work through its material: copper inhibits the growth of bacteria. This property of copper was utilised long ago in the door handles of Alvar Aalto's Paimio Sanatorium. You can – and indeed must – touch the work. However, the viewers' hands leave grease and dirt on the copper plates, which will in time alter their surface. How should we view such changes in the work? Should the plates be cleaned after each exhibition, or should the traces of their viewing be retained as part of the work? Because of its interactive nature, the work is a potential hit, another phenomenon the exhibition 'Kiasma Hits' is dedicated to exploring.

<sup>7</sup> See Sakari, Marja, *Käsitetaiteen etiikkaa: suomalaisen käsitetaiteen postmodernia ja fenomenologista tulkintaa* [Ethics of conceptual art: postmodern and phenomenological interpretations of Finnish conceptual art], Helsinki, Dimensio: scientific publication series of the Finnish National Gallery 4, Helsinki, 2000, 253–257.

<sup>8</sup> *Finnish National Gallery collection strategy and collection policy* (ed. Teijamari Jyrkkiö), Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki, 2011, 26.