

Art Fair Suomi '17

...to engage with local communities... picture making on a daily basis... idealistic and artist-run... a gallery with no legal address... art, science and emerging technologies... a gallery in the oldest mental hospital in Finland... These are some of the phrases describing the galleries, collectives and project groups participating in Finland's largest contemporary art: Art Fair Suomi (AFS).

Established in 2005 through the amalgamation of the Photographic Artists' Association and Artists' Association Muu's annual members' exhibitions, AFS now promotes artistic activity through a vibrant program of exhibitions, talks, performances and workshops, screenings, professional development sessions and invited guests. The prodigious event takes place in Helsinki's massive Cable Factory cultural center. The presentation, which now occupies more than 40,000 square feet of space, is 6 to 7 times bigger than its initial offering. It also features the work of 300 artists and 20 international galleries.

Sitting with Timo Soppela, Muu's Director, in the Cable Factory's airy Hima & Sali café and restaurant, we talked about the fair's origins, its current program and the directions in which the fair is headed. Soppela began by noting the complementary nature of the two national artist organizations – one supports lens based artistic practices; the other promotes experimental forms of art – and the inherent challenges associated with promoting and distributing this kind of work.



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MARI HOKKANEN: MANMADE, PHOTOGRAPH, 100 x 78 CM, 2016



The whole thing has been and continues to be a learning process that involves figuring out how to create a market for this kind of art and improve its operation. This has, for example, led to the crafting of better contracts that serve all the players – the artist, the buyer and the art organization – and spawned other projects. The creation of Muu's Performance Art Bank (2011) and Sound Art Bank (2016) are two examples.

Petronella Grönroos, Exhibition Coordinator at the Photographic Artists' Association's gallery, emphasizes the importance of the whole AFS program. Since visiting AFS can be an intimidating experience for some members of the general audience, the program must offer something for almost everybody. Thus, one



HARRI PIISPANEN: HATWALK, HD VIDEO, 2016

of the fair's priorities is to pull in first time visitors. We want them to see that they can also enjoy the art viewing experience. Then we also have to cater to the more seasoned AFS visitors.

This is a view Soppela also broaches. The fair doesn't just exist to show art; its overarching purpose also involves developing an audience, maintaining visibility and establishing networks. These are things that apply to everybody: the general art viewing audience, the artists and the art organizations.

It is, for example, very important to experiment with the program and expand it. It now includes events designed for

different age groups. This time round we have incorporated rap music and dance events into the schedule. A diverse array of round table discussions created strictly for art professionals has also been added. The topics range from international issues (Crossing borders – chasing dreams), to the role of artist-run organizations (Institutions and initiatives – the alternative to what?) and the probing of seemingly atypical partnerships (Art and Science).

Artistic counterparts to the round table discussions can be surveyed in the fair's exhibition spaces. Take, for instance, the fascinating projects executed by the Brains on Art collective that, according to artist member Kasper Mäki-Reinikka, consists

of 45 people with backgrounds in the fields of art, science and engineering. In works such as *Brain Poetry* (2014), the group devised a system that utilizes brain waves to create poetry. In AFS, they are showing *Culture I Viljelmä* (2016), a work that measures an individual's biosignals, then creates a virtual microorganism based on that data. The measurements determine the color, shape, lifespan and behavior of the creature, which can be observed interacting with other similarly created organisms in a large and shallow pool. Mäki-Reinikka notes that the work promotes conversation between viewers who don't know each other and questions whether virtual organisms create emotional attachments. As such, the work forms one avenue through which the gap between virtual and physical realms can be investigated.

Identifying gaps and bridging them, in fact, forms an important aspect of AFS, for with it comes the opportunity of establishing contacts from which future domestic and international collaborations may develop. This is the prime logic that underlies and





OSKAR LINDSTRÖM: GRATIS, 2016



SIRPA PÄIVINEN: HOTELLI ONNENTAHTI
#1, FOTOSEC, 115 x 140 CM, 2015

influences its program and characterizes the gallery participants. It is also why the gallery, significantly dynamic in and of itself, also accommodates a double focus.

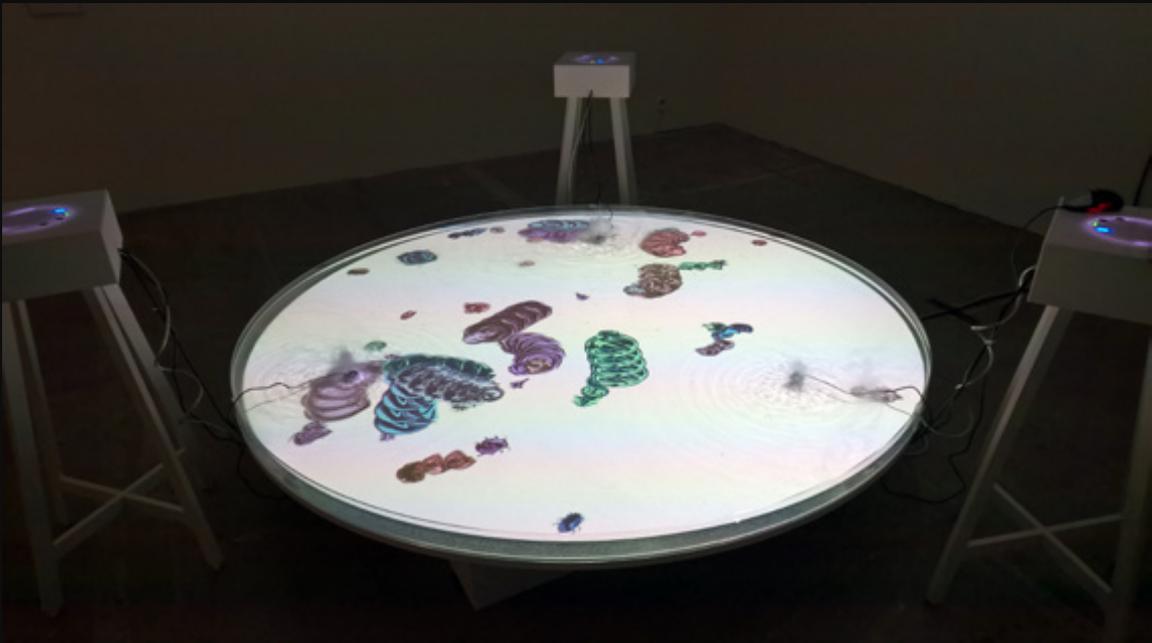
Here we have one path that leads to Russia and another path that leads home. These paths function as distant parallels. Close together, neighbors in fact, but also far apart, the participants are not well known to each other. The Russian participants include Parazit and FotoDepartment out of St. Petersburg, and Too Much from Moscow. Twice the number of art organizations makes up the Finnish component. Gallery Sculptor,



BRAIN POETRY: CULTURE | VILJELMA, INTERACTIVE VIDEO INSTALLATION, 2016

Gallery Huuto, Gallery Lapinlahti..., All, but one, are based in Helsinki. They are aware of each other's presence, but not necessarily very familiar with what each one does. Soppela explains that more than half the galleries in Helsinki are artist-run ventures and that local artists are keeping art alive in other parts of the country too. AFS offers the artists, curators and galleries of both groups to meet each other and also connect with the participants hailing from other parts of Europe, as well as North America and Japan.

A great amount of thought and planning goes into each edition of the fair. Liisa Kanerva, who designs the spaces' layout, speaks about how she enjoys the planning and problem solving inherent to the task. To do this she prefers to adopt a filmic approach wherein she imagines viewers moving through a movie; the exhibition carries them from scene to scene. She



BRAIN POETRY: CULTURE | VILJELMA, INTERACTIVE VIDEO INSTALLATION, 2016

wants viewers to encounter surprises as they round a corner, to expose them to unexpected viewpoints.

The movie, though, then aspires to be rated. Questions surface. What worked, what didn't work? Did the current version of the event, with its art fair beer, Moroccan brunchies and Sound Art Sauna located on the Cable Factory's roof, convey the intended festival feeling? AFS can be compared to Stockholm's Supermarket Independent Art Fair, which also focuses on artist-run organizations, but the scope of the two events, indeed also the two capital cities' art scenes, are remarkably different. AFS' development has been organic. It is the sum of many experiments and follows no carefully orchestrated plan. Multiple artists are themselves active in its realization.

And where is AFS headed? Will

the next edition bring in even more galleries or branch out in some other direction? Soppela contemplates the planned construction of the new Dance Center next to the Cable Factory and whether it might be used for performance art and film screenings. There are likely other considerations that Muu and the Photographic Artists' Associations have already pinpointed, which are not mentioned. As yet unrealized artist projects will also determine the fair's character. The only thing we can do is wait, to see exactly what transpires.

John Gayer

John Gayer is an artist who also writes about art. His texts have appeared in Sculpture Magazine, Paper Visual Art Journal, thisistomorrow.info and elsewhere. He is currently based in Helsinki.

More info:
Art Fair Suomi '17, http://artfairsuomi.fi/afs_2017/en/info-4/

Organizers:
MUU Artists' Association / Muu Gallery, <http://www.muu.fi/>

Photographic Artists' Association / Hippolyte Photographic Gallery
<http://www.hippolyte.fi>