

ANTI Contemporary Art Festival

Kuopio, Finland: September 27-October 2, 2011

JENNIE KLEIN



Tryst, *Assisted street crossing in Kuopio.*, 2011
Image Credit: Pekka Mäkinen

In Fall of 2012, the annual ANTI Contemporary Art Festival in Kuopio, Finland, celebrated its 10th anniversary. From September 27 to October 2, the festival took place at various sites in the city, and with the help of the performance collective Mammalian Diving Reflex (Canada) culminated with an awards ceremony organized and presented by a local 4th grade class. Since the first festival in 2002, ANTI has been characterized by experimental and unusual art that challenges the expectations of the general public and art tourists alike. The 2011 festival was no exception. Artists from Finland, the United Kingdom, Canada, Belgium, Norway, Italy, and the U.S. converged on Kuopio to participate; some for the first time, while others had been asked to return in honor of the festival's 10th anniversary. As always, there was much to see and think about at the ANTI Festival. This year there was a great deal to celebrate: 10 years of festivals as well as the publication of a beautiful catalogue, *A Decade of ANTI Contemporary Art Festival*, written in Finnish and English.

The ANTI festival is unique among international art festivals in that it focuses on site-specific performance art. Every year the co-artistic directors of the festival, the Finnish dancer Johanna Tuukanen and Greg Whelan of the performance group Lone Twin, negotiate with the city of Kuopio for performance spaces. Most of these spaces are situated in downtown Kuopio, a city built in the 19th century on a grid plan with every other street reserved for pedestrians and surrounded by lakes. The symbolic and literal center of the city is the majestic town hall (a frequent site for ANTI performances), which opens onto a massive paved square surrounded by shops and restaurants. In many small to mid-sized European cities, the sacred exists alongside the secular. Kuopio is no exception. Just off of the city center the Kuopio Cathedral, a 19th century stone, neoclassical church sits atop a natural rise that permits a viewer standing at the entrance to see all

the way to Lake Kallavesi and the island of Vasikkasaari, a frequent site for ANTI events. The Kuopio Cathedral itself, while not generally part of the ANTI Festival, overlooks Minna Cantha Park, a cultivated neoclassical garden where many performances have taken place. These sites and several more (including the train station, a barber shop, several street corners, and a parking garage) were used by the artists in 2011.

In addition to its focus on site, each festival is devoted to a specific theme: gender and site (2007), domestic spaces (2008), walking (2009), site and narrative (2010). For the 10th anniversary, the theme of ANTI was: remake, rebuild, renew. The 10th ANTIversary coincided with an extensive renovation of the Kuopio City Center, which included torn up pavements and streets, construction barricades, and an excavation that extended several stories below street level. The cover of the program for this year's festival (which was designed to look like a newspaper) featured a photograph of the torn up city center, a site that many of the artists chose to use. Many of the pieces were performed on or near the torn up city centre, forcing the audience to navigate pedestrian paths made of plastic sheeting, plywood, and concrete barriers. The theme *remake, rebuild, and renew* also made reference to the work of the many artists who had come back to Kuopio to perform at the festival. Many artists returned to their original sites, some of which had been rather drastically transformed in the intervening years, and some of which remained more or less unchanged. Other artists came to ANTI for the first time, performing works that honored both the anniversary of the festival and the renovation and renewal of Kuopio on both a literal and metaphorical level. All of this excitement was beautifully documented by Pekka Mäkinen, who has been photographing the work in the ANTI Festival since 2002. Posters of Mäkinen's ANTI pho-

tographs could be seen all over Kuopio during the festival, and a selection of photographs from this festival can be seen on the web site: <http://www.antifestival.com/2011/eng/gallery/>.

This year's ANTI Festival was about looking back and celebrating the success of a remarkable festival where performance art is made public and placed before an audience that has not bargained on encountering art. For the most part, the artwork in ANTI is subtle and sensitive, with the artists integrating their performances with the public space in which they find themselves. It seems fitting that the artist-in-residence this year was Heidi Fast (Finland) a voice and performance artist. The artist in residence program at ANTI was inaugurated in 2009. Essi Kauselainen spent two months in Kuopio in the spring and summer prior to the ANTI Festival. Fast also spent approximately 2 months in Kuopio. Fast first came to ANTI in 2006 to perform *Amorous Dialogues—practising acoustic ranges*, a vocal concert performed in an empty apartment that was for lease and thus available for Fast and her audience. For *Amorous Dialogues*, Fast gave an anonymous apartment a musical voice. As the 2011 artist-in-residence, Fast gave the city of Kuopio a musical voice with the *(Re)Attuning Choir*. Beginning in May 2011, Fast worked with a cross section of Kuopio residents who formed a choir. The *(Re)Attuning Choir*, whose music was based on the characteristics of each singer's voice, performed three times: the first on September 10 in honor of World Suicide Prevention Day, the second on September 28 in the Kuopio University Hospital Corridors, and the third time on September 30 in the market square. The third performance lasted just over an hour. The *(Re)Attuning Choir* played instruments crafted of pipes, cardboard cones, and straws while leading the audience through the maze of paths surrounding the market square excavations. The performance took place at 7 p.m., just as the sun was setting and Kuopio was slowly shutting down for the night. The delicate, somewhat mournful sounds of

the choir along with the slow, deliberate pace of the procession lent the whole performance a meditative, other-worldly feeling, which was extraordinarily moving and quite lovely to observe as a participant.

Like Fast, most of the artists who returned to ANTI engaged with site through the agency of memory and nostalgia, re-performing site through various memories whether their own or those of others. Elaine Kordys' *Analogies Can Make One Feel At Home: Three stories from Kuopio: change, life and time* was based on interviews with three residents of Kuopio, who spoke about the changes in their lives and the changes in the city. Kordys' video/sound piece, which juxtaposed the oral accounts with bucolic videos of the Kuopio landscape, was presented in the Aapeli Shopping Center Car Park, the same location where she had performed *How Excellent Your Name is in the World* nine years prior, when the car park was under construction. Kordys' piece was a meditation on change and flux, as well as the decay and eventual death of all bodies.

Throughout the years, the train station has been the site of many performances, including the Baroque extravaganza of costume and identity that was executed by La Pocha Nostra-- Guillermo Gomez Peña and Roberto Sifuentes (2009), the urban corporeal dancing of BodyCartography (2009), the meditational walking piece by Jon Fawcett (2003), and the assisted street crossings of Tryst (2011). At the first ANTI Festival Christopher Hewitt made lifesize drawings of the performances on the train station walls as they were being performed. These drawings, which serve as an indexical trace to the original performances of 2001, were joined by images of the 10th anniversary performances, thus linking the festival through time and affinities—several of the performers initially depicted on the wall were back for this ANTI. At

the 10th anniversary festival, Hewitt's black and white line drawings/paintings, which he made by projecting Mäkinen's photographs onto the white walls of the passage between the two tracks, suggested the impossibility of fixing a performance in time. Copies of copies, Hewitt's drawings, executed literally as the performances were happening, will never be more than the indexical trace of something that will no longer happen anymore.

While Kordys and Hewitt both changed their pieces to reflect the passage of time, other artists chose to reprise their original piece at the original site. Kirsi Pitkänen reprised her "proclaimer" persona from 2006. For that performance, Pitkänen, dressed in a wind suit (a very popular casual outfit worn by working class Finns) appeared on the balcony of the city hall, where she recited a long list of complaints taken from the local newspaper's (*Savon Sanomat*) hotline. Many of these complaints were petty and xenophobic, appropriate fare for a proclaimer character who spies on the neighbors and minds everyone's business. For ANTI 2011, Pitkänen included political propaganda and phrases designed to have mass appeal and interpellate the viewers. Performed entirely in Finnish, for an English speaking viewer the performance seemed to be a cross between period films of Hitler's speeches and the ranting of itinerate street preachers.



Juha Valkeapää, *Vocal Portraits*, 2011
Image Credit: Pekka Mäkinen

Juha Valkeapää, a sound artist, re-performed an intimate concert for the local barbershop located around the corner from the Town Hall and the ANTI headquarters. One by one, participants were seated in the barber's chair, which Valkeapää carefully adjusted based on height and size, then blindfolded and treated to a gentle vocal performance of clicks and notes, made all the more resonant with the absence of sight.

Aaron Williamson, whose work engages with the estrangement of disability, returned to Vasikkasari Island to perform *The Marooned Wildman*. In 2007, the year Williamson first performed the piece, he remained isolated on the island for the day, desperately shouting "I am a Man" into a megaphone. Profoundly deaf, Williamson's actions, visible from the shore, suggested the inability of the disabled to connect with the abled. In 2011, Williamson permitted festival attendees to come to the island, where he awaited, garbed in a furry suit. Shy at first, the reclusive Wildman finally emerged, ate some cookies that were offered to him, and then quickly disappeared. The

final image seen by the participants as they rowed away from the island was that of the Wildman, begging them to come back.

ANTI would not be ANTI without several new performance interventions that had not previously been done in Kuopio or Finland. As in the past, ANTI included interventions that took place in both real and virtual space. Brian Lobel's *Purge* used Facebook as an agency for questioning friendships and connections in real time. For several hours a day, Lobel, who has hundreds of Facebook friends (including, for now, this author), spent 1 minute considering each of his friends in front of an audience who had been given the power to decide whether Lobel should keep or delete the friend. When Lobel's minute was up, three people from the audience would vote on the fate of his FB friend. *Purge* was a brave performance, both in terms of Lobel's willingness to put friendships on the line one last time (Lobel had done this performance before, and had lost friends because of it), as well as Lobel's willingness to perform a feat of endurance—literally talking a mile a minute over several days for hours on end, until he had moved through his entire collection of friends. In the end, Lobel was able to keep most of his friends, although a particularly bad hour occurred during which a ruthless group of teenagers came to view the performance, thus putting Lobel's trust in the power of the public to make sound decisions to the test.

In spite of Lobel's congenial personality, there was something slightly invasive about his performance, which probably contributed to his decision at the time not to reprise the piece (although he recently performed PURGE again).

While some performances were site-specific and stationary, others moved throughout the city from one location to another. The architectural group svop/T from Norway and Italy, designed

Viewpoints, a stair platform covered with plastic turf that was moved around the city and situated in places that afforded a good view. Participants were encouraged to climb up the stairs and experience the city from a different perspective. Working in conjunction with Finnish dancers, the group Tryst performed *Assisted Street Crossings in Kuopio* at various locations (all with traffic lights that had pedestrian symbols). Interested participants could choose from a menu of traditional dance lifts (my favorite was the donut) and be carried across the street with the lift of choice. *Assisted Street Crossings* was quite safe—with the lifters garbed in workers jumpsuits and orange vests to signify their role as service workers—and also quite fun. Like *Viewpoints*, the participant was able to experience the city differently. The group Blast Theory's also offered audiences a new way to experience the city, but on a bicycle. For *Rider Spoke*, viewers were given a helmet and a bicycle with a game console supported by GPS technology mounted on the handlebars. Cyclists were encouraged to ride around the city, finding hidden secrets recorded by previous riders and leaving some secrets of their own. A sort of SI *detournement* with bicycles instead of feet, *Rider Spoke* allowed the participant to navigate a city of ghosts.



Gaëtan Rusquet, *Back and forth*, 2011
Image Credit: Pekka Mäkinen

Of course, you can't have a 10th anniversary without a party. ANTIversary had plenty of party-type performances and two ceremonies: one for adults on Saturday night and the other for children on Sunday afternoon. Belgian artist Gaëtan Rusquet kicked off the festivities on Friday afternoon with his performance *Back and Forth*, which took place at the College of Social and Health Care. The performance began with a pile of colorful balloons—the long, thin type used to make hats and animals at children's birthday parties—and Rusquet, who calmly stepped out of his clothing and folded it carefully at the side of the room. He then proceeded to weave the balloons together and suspend the structure from tethers that were already attached to the walls and ceiling of the lobby area where he was performing. The completed structure proved to be an elaborate and fantastic exoskeleton, into which Rusquet placed himself, after which the structure was detached from the architecture. Trapped inside his own creation, Rusquet freed himself by aggressively breaking all of the balloons, which he did by pressing his body and the balloons against various surfaces. The performance ended when he put his clothing back on.

The following night Bryony Kimmings performed *7-Day Drunk*, a performance/cabaret act that she allegedly developed from a 7-day experiment in collaboration with a pharmacologist, neuroscientist, and psychologist. For one week, Kimmings, inspired by the mythos of artists and mind-altering substances, remained drunk while documenting her experiences and attempting to answer the question, “Is alcohol really linked to creativity?” Part cabaret act and part spoken word performance, *7-Day Drunk* included dancing, a clown suit missing two pom pom buttons, kitten heels and bare feet in cold weather, bottle smashing, and surprisingly very little blood. It also included a rather astonishing poem of every word and phrase that Kimmings could find that had been used to characterize a woman’s genitalia. *7-Day Drunk* was followed by *A Date With the Night*, a one-on-one piece in which a tequila swilling Kimmings enacted a series of blind dates with various audience members. For the length of a song, Kimmings, and her sometimes reticent partner, made small talk, danced, took dirty photos, and snorted fake cocaine. *A Date with the Night* recalled Andrea Fraser’s 2003 performance *Untitled*, a videotaped piece that records Fraser’s encounter with a collector “to make art.” Unlike Fraser, whose work is self-consciously situated into the institutional critique fad of the early 90s artworld, Kimmings’ work is much darker and more dangerous, with the very real possibility that something bad could happen. Indisputably real was Kimmings’ splitting headache the following morning, the result of a very bad hangover.

ANTI concluded on a positive and extremely colorful note with *The Children’s Choice Awards*, organized by Mammalian Diving Reflex, a Toronto-based group of artists. For the duration of the festival, Mammalian Diving Reflex worked with a fourth grade class comprised of immigrant children of various ages and ability to speak in Finnish. The children were taken to every event.

On the Sunday following the festival, the children hosted an awards ceremony in the city hall, complete with a talent show and awards made with feathers, glitter, and hardened chocolate. All performers received a children's award (some received more than one) and the finale involved silly string, cartwheels and refreshments. The presence of the children at ANTI, as well as the 10 year celebration, bodes well for its continuation, ANTI remains one of the most experimental and interesting international festivals around.

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<http://www.finearts.ohio.edu/art/faculty-staff/klein.htm>