

Let's Talk About Art

Kiasma has over the past five years arranged dozens of discussion events and talks in which contemporary art has been approached from a variety of angles. But who are those who talk about art and does art need to be talked about?

>> *Let's not. All these exhibitions have already been explained and discussed in books and pamphlets. Artists and critics say what they say in papers and television. I don't think our contribution is needed.*

>> I think good art should evoke thoughts in ordinary viewers. I would be interested to hear what kind of thoughts exhibitions arouse in you.

>> *But can just anyone say just anything in an exhibition? Surely there have to be some limits!*

>> Actually those very limits and authorities are precisely what should be discussed. The discussion events have intentionally made room for different speakers to have their say. It is fascinating to hear how, for example, a mathematician and an art historian see a geometric painting.

>> *But that is like having me comment on nuclear physics.*

>> Exactly! Haven't you ever felt the urge to comment on nuclear physics? In art that kind of thing is possible. Interesting things have emerged when the audience is given a free hand to create their own programmes and express their views for others to see. For the Kalervo Palsa exhibition, the Young Audiences Permitted event programme was designed by 40 young volunteers and the humour was quite rough. In the downstairs lobby, they played pip-peli [engl. 'willy'] with a noose and on the fifth floor they were sculpting a "shitman". The audience also got their voices heard in Olli Lyytikäinen's exhibition, during which children's own stories, which were born while watching the works during the creative story-telling tours. The invited speakers have also had their chance to ask anyone they liked to be their discussion opponent and plan their own series of discussions on topics related to an exhibition.

>> *Still, I find it hard to say anything about art.*

>> In fact, Kiasma's public discussion events very seldom talk about art itself. Recently the topics have been, for example, masculinity, mental health, religion and identity. The speakers have included not only artists, but also others from all walks of life. The discussions focus on themes that everyone has something to say about.

>> *Then why is it said that these talks are about art, when they are not, and why are these talks held during art exhibitions?*

>> Because artists don't create works and exhibitions to discuss art but to discuss life. That's why people come to Kiasma, to look for new experiences and food for thought, as well as to see art. The works make difficult issues tangible, fuelling long discussions.

>> *Yes, but you can never explain images exhaustively.*

>> Of course not, but it is when it evokes thoughts which then become part of people's lives and discourse that art is truly alive. For example, at Kalervo Palsa's exhibition people discussed how the autobiographical elements of Palsa's 1960s work carried on in our time. Atte Oksanen, a researcher of rock lyrics, and Vexi Salmi, a lyricist, explored the shared perceptions of masculinity

in hard rock and Palsa's work. The theologist Jaakko Heinimäki and the writer Torsti Lehtinen talked about the balance between religious and personal morality, and the audience took the theme even further to the fundamental questions of morality, which Palsa himself pondered. The evening ended with a debate on whether suicide can be justified or not. The series of discussions showed that Palsa's art still has a lot to say.

>> *And you go on and on about all sorts of things that the artist never had in mind in the first place.*

>> But maybe you shouldn't expect that we can really be that aware of what the artist had in mind. A good exhibition is an excellent starting point to bring new topics into discussion. After all, the artist has given his or her works to be put on display, open for interpretation. Besides, Kiasma has artist meetings, in which you can talk about the artist's work with the artist. In Popcorn and Politics, the artists who started in the '60s covered, through discussing their own work, quite a stretch of Finnish art history. And artists can also introduce their own exhibition and discuss it with the audience, as Tarja Pitkänen did.

>> *But isn't it all just idle talk while the art itself slips out of focus.*

>> No, on the contrary, talking about art may, in fact, help viewers "see better", as it gives knowledge about the background or new points of departure to the exhibition. The ARS 01 exhibition seminar dealt with the multidimensional concept of the third space and analysed the globalisation in art. The seminar heard the views of theoreticians as well as artists, which could be conflicting, depending on personal experiences in different political and cultural climates. Such a wealth of knowledge simply cannot be possessed by one person, but through listening to different statements, one can better understand in what realities different forms and works of art are conceived.

>> *And put the world to rights...*

>> Yes, why not. Why could a museum not be an active player in public discourse by not just putting on exhibitions but also by offering a forum for different voices to be heard?

Kaija Kaitavuori & Jyrki Simovaara
Kiasma's Educational Curators