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Diaries as a Primary Source for Understanding Lauri Anttila's World

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> *Diary: 'A form of autobiographical writing, a regularly kept record of the diarist's activities and reflections. Written primarily for the writer's use alone, the diary has a frankness that is unlike writing done for publication* […].'[1]

Lauri Anttila (1938–2022), the Finnish pioneer of conceptual and environmental art, kept diaries throughout his professional life. The first date from the end of the 1960s and the last were written in 2022, just before he passed away. On many occasions he mentioned in his diaries that his aim was to publish part of them as an autobiography. With his wish in mind, I have used his diaries as source material for my own research to write a biography of the artist.

Lauri Anttila, *Nature of Finland*, 1971, photograph, 79.5cm x 59.8cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve © Kuvasto

Lauri Anttila, *Nature of Finland*, 1971, photograph, 79.5cm x 59.8cm
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1 Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/art/diary-literature (accessed 30 March 2026).

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Lauri Anttila, *Nature of Finland*, 1971, photograph, 79.8cm x 59.6cm
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Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve © Kuvasto

When Lauri Anttila's family donated the archives of the late artist to the Finnish National Gallery, I was working as Director of the Ateneum Art Museum. I was really happy that the Finnish National Gallery received such a rich and substantial amount of material concerning Lauri Anttila's amazingly vast career. Despite his strong impact on the field of Finnish art, there hasn't been published any biographical survey of his thinking and artistic production. In addition to being an artist, he was also teaching from the 1970s onwards, at the School of Design and at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki. He also became the rector of the latter between 1988 and 1994 and professor there from 1989 to 2001, first as professor of general studies until 1995, and then at the new department he founded. This was the Department of Time and Space, which has established its position alongside the departments of painting, drawing and sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts of Uniarts Helsinki. Anttila was a thinker and philosopher, who showed the way for generations of young artists by teaching and giving lectures, and also through his writings[2]. His numerous exhibitions – group and solo – have been influential since 1971 when his first solo exhibition 'Suomen luonto – Finlands natur' (Nature of Finland) was exhibited at Galleria Katariina, a gallery for the Helsinki Artists' Association.

After my retirement in January 2024, I had the time and opportunity to start sifting through the material to write a biography of Anttila and his career. My academic interest has been conceptual art and Lauri Anttila and his art was already familiar to me from my earlier writings. I was really inspired when I started to read the diaries, which give a more intimate and rich picture of the artist. The diaries reveal a romantic and poetic thinker whose observations deal with subjects ranging from the politics of the day to philosophical

2 Kuvataiteilijamatrikkeli, Lauri Anttila, https://kuvataiteilijamatrikkeli.fi/wp-content/uploads/artist/artist_1710/cv-lauri-anttila-2017.pdf (accessed 13 April 2026).

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comments, from happenings in the art world to teaching, from childhood experiences to the observations within his journeys. Due to these broad subject areas and their literary richness, the diaries have become my primary source for the biography. The material needs to be contextualised and thematised, but here I want to give the reader some examples of the style and richness of topics in his various diary entries.

It has been – and still is – a massive task to go through 13 folders containing approximately 10 diaries in each. Up to now I have arrived at the year 2000. The writings form a significant testament to gaining an understanding of Anttila, his philosophy and his ethos as an artist. In this essay I focus on two themes that have influenced his art, namely his childhood and his paradoxical relation to German culture. Paradoxical in the sense that Anttila admired German early romanticism, but at the same time the German Nazi ideology casts a shadow on his enthusiasm. Post-War Germany became familiar to him during his many journeys and hikes following in the footsteps of the early romantics.

Important surroundings

Generally speaking, all of the places where he stayed or that he travelled around were meaningful to Anttila. Either he travelled to different places driven by his interest in certain philosophers, artists or scientific inventions, or the places and environments where he made his home became crucial to him. Anttila's method as artist was parallel to a scientific one – he observed, took samples, questioned. For him, perception was the basic foundation for understanding the world.

The diaries are clearly intended as background material for Anttila's own memoirs. He focuses on recording his own thoughts on art, his travels, his observations, his teaching, what he has seen and experienced. He often repeats that he is a child of wartime. He was born 19 months before the Winter War in Finland (30 November 1939 – 13 March 1940) and when the Continuation War ended on 19 September 1944, he was already an eight-year-old schoolboy.

Lauri Anttila, *Ship Graveyard, Katajanokka*, 1961, ink on paper, 25.5cm x 38.7cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve © Kuvasto

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Repeatedly, Anttila comes back to his childhood experiences in the diaries. There is a often a nostalgic longing for a 'paradise lost'. This nostalgia can already be seen in some of the photos in Anttila's first solo exhibition 'Suomen luonto – Finlands natur' (Nature of Finland), opened in 1971. He spent his youth in the residences of different mental hospitals because of his father's profession as psychiatrist. That is probably why normality was something strange and indefinable to him. As a consequence of this early closeness to the mentally ill, he made a connection between artisthood, modernism and schizophrenia, as shown for example in the diary entry from 18 February 1995:

> *There's an article about schizophrenia in the monthly supplement of Hesari* [Helsingin Sanomat]*. When I read that, I thought – yeah, I'm a clear case. That's how it goes when reading a medical book. On the other hand, I've thought, I even told my father, that maybe it's not a disease. Especially if one percent of the population is susceptible to it… You can easily classify most artists as schizophrenics. So, I think that schizophrenia is a disease with a short history. It's somehow related, I don't know how, to modernism. And now that (Modernism) is dead, the disease also dies. Isn't it incredible that those who are said to be healthy believe in God, create all sorts of structures around that belief, and nothing can be proven. What kind of health is that? Couldn't we say that schizophrenia exists just as much as God does. It's a matter of faith. I spent my childhood in mental hospitals, it wasn't until Lahti that we lived 'normally' in the middle of the city. So throughout my tender childhood and into late adolescence, I only saw schizophrenics, manic-depressives, catatonics and the mentally ill – just crazy people all the time. The mentally ill and depressed were clearly abnormal, the schizos were tense and sometimes the catatonics were the most distinct, otherwise okay. It's absolutely impossible for me to understand what normal is, since the foundations of my world of perception are so different. Still, even though I saw so many schizos, I can't judge as harshly as the community and some psychiatrists. In this environment, creative people easily get caught up in that.*[3]

The functional buildings for the mentally ill in Rauha and Joutseno in eastern Finland or later in the Nikkilä hospital in Sipoo, in Uusimaa, were the everyday environment of the young Anttila. But he also spent time in beautiful countryside on the island of Kurensalo on Lake Saimaa in eastern Finland and also in Hanko, the southernmost coastal town in Finland where

Lauri Anttila, *Spring in Hanko*, 1972, ink on paper, 17cm x 26cm
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Aleks Talve © Kuvasto

3 All citations translated from Finnish by the author.

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his grandparents had their summer houses. Those summers meant freedom and adventure for the boy who was addicted to boys' adventure books like Jack London and others. Those summers were sensual and full of happiness:

> *My childhood summers on Kukkovuori (at Kurensalo) were exactly the kind of sensual landscape that Hardy* [Novelist Thomas Hardy 1840–1928] *describes. If only I could remember all that, the communal work, the cattle herding, the mornings, the smell of milk, the sounds, the swimming, the fishing, the* [milk] *separators, the bright laughter of the girls, the beautiful dialect. I really suffer when not remembering. What a storehouse of wonderful world, a truly traditional life. I am as happy as Eero Järnefelt. Or that wonderful environment of mental hospitals. All those dreams, the dreams in which I lived. How do you remember, how do you describe it? I have seen the rise of Oulu's functionalism, seen the war, been there when the Germans burned down Pori airport (in Harjavalta) or something like that, a vague memory of a huge fire, been under bombs in Hanko, walked the same roads with the Karelian evacuees, saw the burning of a forest, lived like an Indian in the forests, and at the right moment I became enthusiastic about astronomy so that I saw the Sputniks. I saw Gagarin just a few metres away among the few people in Lahti at the train station. I witnessed the emptying of Porkkala…, have travelled all over Finland as a child – Oulu, Seinäjoki, Joutseno, Mikkeli, Harjavalta, Vihti, Hanko, Puumala, Nikkilä, Helsinki, Lahti – the places where I grew up. And now I have seen more of the world than many, Siberia, Russia, Estonia, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Sicily, England, the USA have been my education. Summer in Switzerland! I have worked as an interior architect in the most important offices, as a teacher in several different schools and universities. A huge amount of experiences, memories if only I could remember! But that Hardy world is something concrete, something that I have experienced myself, how to reach it. I still remember the warmth of the stone in the yard, and the sweet smell of the separator. In my imagination, the sensual, the erotic is connected precisely with that smell of milk. To sit there on a rock and watch Sirkka Tiittanen's hustle at the window of the cottage, listening to the funny tinkling of the separator. A tinkling that promised great things in the future, I just didn't know what.*
> (15 May 1995)

The Silent Generation finding its voice

Later on, the summer house in Hanko became Anttila's second home. The war was still very much felt there because of the numerous bunkers and other remnants of war. After the Winter War of 1940–41, an area of around 150 square kilometres, containing the city of Hanko and approximately 400 islands, had to be rented to the Soviet Union as a war indemnity. The area was only definitively returned to Finland in 1947, which meant that the wartime was visible for a longer time there than elsewhere in Finland.

War and its consequences were also present on his travels to Germany. Anttila was pondering the influences that the war had on modern art and a whole generational atmosphere which he himself was part of. He reflected on his own cultural roots as an artist when he wandered the cities and countryside of East and West Germany:

Lauri Anttila, *Aika – Tiden* (Time), 2007, installation
Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakarinen © Kuvasto

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The European youth was scattered after the war. Germany, a smoking battlefield, has been deserted for almost 40 years and only recently has the new generation of young people appeared. First, the aesthetics of catastrophe in the form of informalism rose from the ruins. It was beaten by a more refined classical abstractionism (modernism). America intervened with its Pop art and realism, but in the 1960s in England there appeared a new direction in art, whose spiritual roots, believe it or not, are in German romanticism (Fuller, Long). Now Kiefer and Beuys are restoring (returning) German art to the map. And the roots are deep in the same paternalistic soil as those of the former travellers to Italy 150 years earlier. The war caused the German language to be repulsive: I never studied it, even though I had to read it at school. Everything was like an exaggeration of emergency defence. And yet everything that was old Europe was precisely in the area of Leipzig, Wittenberg, Eisleben, Nürnberg, Jena and Weimar. My grandfather's suitcase had a Berlin stamp. He, that round-faced man with the little square moustache under his nose, was a European at heart. I marvelled at the cardboard suitcase in the summer cottage on Saimaa and could turn and look through the red-clay [painted] *cattle door on the grassy yard rising beneath the stately birch tree, past the memorable yard shed, and into the rye field that leads to the fallow land. There they are, the source of the making: the stern grandfather with the Hitler moustache, the cardboard suitcase and the Topelian yard in the lap of the Finnish landscape.*
(21 Feb 1986)

Many themes and topics overlap in the diary entries. I have therefore treated the textual mass of the diaries by placing the text according to thematic chapters. In other words, it would be impossible to use the diaries as a chronologically unfolding story. In connection with the thematic chapters, I aim to combine examples of Anttila's works and exhibitions that best represent the thought and the time in the diaries. Anttila produces his ideas as artworks, images and installations. The ideas developed over time, as can be seen for example in the work *Aika – Tiden* (Time), from 2007.

'New Europe', a page from Lauri Anttila's diary, 1990 Finnish National Gallery Collection, Lauri Anttila Archive
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Ainur Nasretdin

Throughout the diaries, one can follow the artist's work plans and the trains of thought underlying them. They also contain repeated reflections on the fact that he is not understood, that he is either ahead of his time or behind it. At several points, depression also seemed to take hold. The position of rector of the Academy of Fine Arts and his professorship took their toll on the artist's work, although teaching also developed his thinking and enabled dialogue with students. He valued and encouraged his students, including Anne Koskinen, Tuula Närhinen, Anne Siirtola and Pekka Niskanen. Artists working in the same areas, such as Jussi Kivi and Jyrki Siukonen, are also mentioned in many contexts. Many exhibition and art projects originated on the initiative of artist friends.

Anttila's art had its foundation in the experiences of the artist, as well as in his scientific view of the world. He was working with scientific methods, relying on perception. Even in the smallest observation there was knowledge. As he stated: 'The relationship between scientific knowledge and the directly experienced world is one of the things that constantly motivates my work.'[4]

4 Lauri Anttila, *Ajatus ja havainto, kirjoituksia vuosilta 1976–1987*. Selected and edited by Timo Valjakka. Helsinki: Valtion Painatuskeskus / Kuvataideakatemia, 1989, 11.