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Thoughts on Disintegrating Artwork – Artistic Research, Museum Work, and the Categories of Art

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> *The main class describes the artwork with its common noun, for instance painting, photography, object art. The artwork can only have one main class, which is chosen primarily from the word list in the guidelines.*[1]

I am writing this article from (at least) two viewpoints. On the one hand, I am drawing from my experiences as an examiner of artistic research: I was part of the external examination

Jani Ruscica, *Flatlands*, 2018. Installation view from the exhibition 'A Dream in Four Colours', at the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, 27 February 2026 to 10 January 2027
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Virtanen

1 Helka Ketonen, *Taideteosten luettelointiohje* [Guidelines for cataloguing artworks]. Helsinki: Finnish National Gallery, 2010, 72.

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board of the Academy of Fine Arts, Uniarts Helsinki, from 2016 until 2024, and in addition I have examined artistic doctoral research projects at other institutions. For several years I have also been a full-time curator of contemporary art and in particular working with the collections of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma at the Finnish National Gallery.

My understanding of what it means to work at the museum of contemporary art is a paradox: Kiasma's mission is to collect contemporary art that reflects our time as diversely as possible. Even though it is of utmost importance to aspire to create a collection that is diverse, this is clearly an impossible task – one is bound to fail. That impossibility is similar to the issue of artistic research being by nature contradictory.

Artworks that are acquired for the collection undergo certain procedures. Due to the multiplicity and border-crossing nature of contemporary art, the relation between art and museum practices can at times create friction. Sometimes, a seemingly easy task turns out to be challenging. For instance, the collection database cataloguing system requires choosing a 'main class' for each artwork. In addition, one can choose subclasses, called 'special classes'. Even though categorising artworks into main and subclasses sounds very basic, there are increasing numbers of artworks that challenge the system so that an easy, unambiguous answer to such questions about categories is not possible. Often, special classes seem more enticing, as one can choose several of them to describe an artwork: the piece can be many things at the same time (eg. media art and installation, or painting and sound art). These experiences of the multiplicity of contemporary art and how it challenges museum practices can be paralleled with some of my experiences of pre-examining artistic research: more and more often, the artwork under examination challenges the thinking on what artistic research is and what artworks can be.

As a curator and researcher working with contemporary art, I acknowledge art's particular quality of renewing itself and bringing surprise. A museum, an institution dedicated to collecting and preserving art for future generations, will always be one step behind its task. Yet it does not mean that museums should stop re-evaluating and improving their practices. Looking at the multiplicity of contemporary art, the question concerning the classification of artworks can at times feel completely useless. Yet it has its purpose: classification enables future researchers and curators to search the collection and find the art. But because art changes constantly and art research is lagging behind, the classification system and keywords will not be up to date. One illustrative example concerns a form of

Tellervo Kalleinen & Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, *The Complaints Choir*, performed at Kiasma for the 'ARS 06' exhibition in 2006
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Petri Summanen

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art that during recent decades has established its position as contemporary art, namely participatory art. The contemporary art researcher Kaija Katavuori has explored the Finnish National Gallery Collection from the perspective of participatory art and one of the challenges she encountered was how to identify artworks that require participation from the audience. Kaitavuori writes: 'The terminology describing participatory art is not well established and there is no consensus on the concepts that should be used to describe it.'[2]

It may be that the participatory element of the work has been acknowledged at the time of the acquisition of the work, but there has not been a pre-determined concept for it, or, the vocabulary at the time has been different. For instance, *The Complaints Choir*, by Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen, which is part of the museum collection, is classified as a video work, even though the original nature of the work is participatory. The participatory aspect of the work was very well known at the time of its acquisition since *The Complaints Choir* – the choir's performance, as well as the video made of it – was presented at Kiasma's 'ARS 06' exhibition and was consequently acquired for the collection.

At the crossroads

> *Taking artistic research seriously means accepting disorganisation in the relations between the disciplines that deal with contemporary art.*[3]

Museum and artistic research both share the challenge of accepting the impossible. And following on from the above quote from curator Chus Martinez: because artistic research crosses disciplines, it is clear that the outcome is neither precisely defined nor clear. Often art moves between spheres that might not otherwise meet:

> *The new importance of philosophy and the social sciences in the sphere of contemporary art is related to an essential discovery: art today is located in a space uniquely productive for the interrelation of knowledges that would otherwise never intersect.*[4]

As a member of the Academy of Fine Arts pre-examination board, I first thought of my role as examining an exhibition that would be part of the doctoral candidates' artistic doctoral studies. That it would require me to show up at the right time, make observations of the exhibition, and to understand it in relation to the original research plan of the artist and the 'linking text' they had written for the pre-examination board, which would define the relation between the research plan and the exhibition. The 'linking text' was especially useful, especially if time had passed between the original research plan and the exhibition, and the research project itself had begun to branch off in new directions.

However, relatively soon I noticed that the examination work was not always that simple. The exhibition to be examined might take place in a challenging location and time, and one could not make it to the site. Or there was no exhibition, and instead the artist had wanted to create something different as a part of their artistic doctorate – a radio programme or a writing workshop. A radio show is easy to access, but a writing workshop requires a decision as to whether to attend the workshop or carry out the examination based on documentation.

2 Kaija Kaitavuori, 'Dialogues, complaints, coffee, and dough. When the viewer participates', *The Many Forms of Contemporary Art. The Collection Book*. Saara Hacklin, Kati Kivinen & Satu Oksanen (eds.). A Museum of Contemporary Art Publication. Helsinki, 2022, 184.

3 Chus Martinez in his essay 'Clandestine Happiness: What Do We Mean by Artistic Research'. In Chus Martinez, *The Complex Answer. On Art as a Nonbinary Intelligence.* London: Sternberg Press, 2023, 19.

4 Ibid., 19–20.

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After the oeuvre

Both through examining artistic research and in my work at Kiasma I am faced with the changing forms of contemporary art. The history of contemporary art shows how the idea of the artwork as a unique material-based object has inspired artists to re-think it in multiple ways. In an article on Jacques Derrida and the concept of an artwork, the aesthetics researcher Martta Heikkilä writes about the border-crossing nature of art. Heikkilä stresses how, instead of objects, artworks have become multi-part, multimedia installations, words and happenings, as well as something made by non-human actors, as in the case of bio art.[5] In the midst of all these self-questioning processes, museums are still collecting objects for their collections. However, alongside unique art objects, there is also an understanding of art that is not object-related. To collect an artwork for part of the collection should not be in relation to its materiality. Museums have to be able to acquire artworks that challenge them to understand what it is.

Osmo Valtonen, *Circulograph*, 1983, recorder, sand, wood, 200cm x 43cm. Detail of the artwork, installed at the exhibition 'A Dream in Four Colours', Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in 2026 Finnish National Gallery Collection / Ateneum Art Museum
Photo: Finnish National Gallery / Pirje Mykkänen © Kuvasto

In similar ways, artistic research should be examined even though we might not know what it is that we are examining. According to the rules of the Academy of Fine Arts, the exhibition or other examined part of the doctoral studies must be examined based on documentation, if needed. This is a practical demand – the exhibition will naturally be documented – and the practice of not always sending examiners to the exhibition site is supported by ecological viewpoints concerning travelling. Yet I don't see that opting out of travelling is necessarily a good thing. Encountering artworks in a space, sensing the context and the situation, can be very significant. One might ask, have I experienced the exhibition? There is also the question, what if I have not interpreted the documentation correctly? The physical experience of the artwork, sensing the different materialities, the space, and one's body are important. It could also work vice versa: what if everything looks better 'on paper'? Documenting an exhibition or an artwork may sound easy, but it requires many choices. And no documentation can fully replace experiencing an artwork.

However, what happens when there is no original artwork? Observing artistic research, one is often confronted with the question of whether the work can be experienced – or can it be in the form of a written statement – if observing it from afar? The relationship to the spectator is intrinsic to contemporary art: sometimes activating the spectator is a vital part of the work. In those cases experiencing the work includes active participation. The examiners can remain in their role as examiners from a distance and sometimes there are very practical reasons for this, but there are moments when stepping into the circle created by the artwork is essential. It can be a vital condition for recognising the happening of the art.

5 Martta Heikkilä, 'Taideteokseton teos: Jacques Derrida ja taideteoksen käsite' [Objectless oeuvre: Jacques Derrida and the concept of artwork], *Tiede & edistys*, 4/2023, 12.