



# Where Fragmentation and Integration Meet: Pedagogical Challenges and Opportunities for Museums of Contemporary Art

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### Abstract

Museums of contemporary art find themselves faced with a broad range of pedagogical challenges and opportunities. The art museum has to find its place in this new ubiquitous network society and, despite the trends to the contrary, ensure people space, as well as a time and place, to be present where art is. Where this succeeds, one finds fertile ground enabling rich multisensory learning experiences. The degree program in art education at the University of Lapland has an intense cooperation with Rovaniemi Art Museum. Students complete some of their studies in the art museum, working as exhibition guides or running workshops for school and day care groups. The workshops seek to lower the threshold for engaging with art by encouraging observations, discussion and hands-on activities. At their best, exhibitions and workshops help participants to build a bridge connecting everyday life and art, enabling them to understand some phenomenon from a novel perspective. In 2016, workshops titled “Eyes in your Fingers” were held in connection with an exhibition of Tapio Wirkkala’s work. The experimental design activities drove home the importance of design in our everyday lives and encouraged the participants to try out creative processes. Personal engagement with the design process gave the museum-goers an opportunity to discover new sides of themselves, as well as new aspects of the surrounding

culture and of their place in the world. The article is based on the museum pedagogy course essay by Karoliina Salo.

**Keywords:** art museum, art museum pedagogy, museum teaching, workshop, experientiality, interaction, conception of learning

## Pedagogical Challenges and Opportunities for Museums of Contemporary Art

A museum is a place where people come to remember and learn about the past and the continuum of time. In a museum of contemporary art, the visitor’s gaze is focused more on the present moment and the future. The salience of works of art lies in how they are interpreted at the moment of viewing. The main reason why people come to an art museum is to experience art and through that experience learn about themselves, the world and culture. An art museum is not an end in itself; it is primarily for its visitors, and tailoring the museum experience for different visitors is the hot topic in art museum discourse today. Visitors are regarded as active agents who construct their own understanding of what they see, with the museum there to offer them additional food for thought (Levanto & Petterson, 2004).

Karoliina recalls her days in school back in the early 2000s, when the structure of a museum visit was very straight-forward: pupils wandered around on their own and afterwards the teacher asked them what their favourite work was.

Skill from Art. Promoting Art Museum Pedagogy: collaboration between the University of Lapland and Rovaniemi Art Museum.

Art education students are a familiar sight at the Rovaniemi Art Museum. From autumn to spring, one will find groups of two or three students acting as exhibitions guides and running workshops for groups from schools or day care centres. The students' presence there is the outcome of a long process of planning in which they familiarize themselves with the exhibition, prepare appropriate learning materials and plan workshops for participants of different ages.

The master's programme in art education at the University includes a course titled Art Museum and Exhibition Pedagogy. The special feature of the course is that the students work intensively with Rovaniemi Art Museum, a tradition of collaboration going back to 1993. The course spans the entire academic year in a process that gives the students a chance to become familiar with how the museum operates, to plan and carry out the pedagogical dimension of exhibitions and to run workshops related to them. All of this is done in collaboration with museum staff. The aim of the collaborative approach is to use the art museum and contemporary art as part of, and as the basis for, art education. The museum's curators and lecturer talk to the students about the museum's activities and their work. One resource students have at their disposal through the museum, exceptional in scope in Finland, is the database of the digital images in the collection belonging to the Jenny and Antti Wihuri Foundation. Yet another benefit is that students occasionally have opportunities to plan and put together exhibitions using works from the Wihuri collection. They cooperate closely with museum staff and help the exhibiting artists display their works.

Responsibility for learning was placed squarely on the learner, as was the motivation. This approach reflected the museum-centred mentality of the past, when museums sought to enlighten the public. They put together exhibitions as they saw fit and the public's task was to drink in the wisdom the intelligentsia put before them, engaging in silent reflection as they viewed the works (Pettersson, 2004, 10-19). With culture becoming fragmented, museums no longer plan their activities for a single public but cater to various smaller publics and their needs (Levanto & Pettersson, 2004, 52).

Historically, art museums have accommodated different publics largely based on social class, with less well-off visitors offered discounts or free admission at particular times. Today, publics are differentiated mostly by the way they process information, and their habits in doing so. Museums plan their work with an awareness that people have different ways of perceiving reality depending on the things they encounter in their daily lives; for example, members of different professions will see things differently. This fresh perspective is

welcome indeed if we think of the future of the art museum, as it offers a range of practical means for planning and renewing the museum experience.

Current thinking holds that developments in technology will largely dictate what our future looks like. Futurologists say that we are headed for a ubiquitous network society. Ubiquitous technology – intelligence that is present everywhere – will change humankind; the notions of past, present and future will become meaningless because we can (re)visit any of them. Place will have a more social and fluid meaning than it does today. Physical location will no longer have the same significance it once had; the importance of a place will be primarily social, defined through encounters (Rönkkö, 2004, 122-124). The role of art museums will change accordingly: they will go from being places where art is stored to being places where people and art meet.

The idea of art museums focusing on interaction and visitor experiences raises concerns that they may become carnevalized.



The cooperation between the University and the Art Museum has intensified and the museum pedagogy course has firmly established itself in the curriculum. Students bring a breath of fresh air and new ideas to the museum. In return they get exposure to working life, as well as experience with contemporary art and how education works in museums in practice. The children, young people and adults who take part in the exhibitions and workshops provide the students with insights into how people engage with art. These are crucial lessons given that there is almost no telling what today's staggering technological development will lead to when combined with contemporary art.

The scope and intensity of the cooperation between the University and the Art Museum is second to none in Finland, and museum pedagogy features prominently in this achievement. Over the years we have seen master's theses on the topic and many graduates have gone on to pursue careers in art museums. The students' experiences and expertise follow them into the professions they take up, where they develop and help to shape the museum pedagogy of the future. They are well equipped to answer key questions such as: Where do we engage with art? And, how can perspectives on art be translated into action, bring art to life and help museum-goers feel that the art they see becomes part of them?

#### Literature:

Happonen, E. & Kähkönen, K. (Eds.) (2006): *Miksi aurinko on vihreä? Lapset ja nykytaide*. Rovaniemi: Rovaniemen taidemuseo.

Immonen, H. (2006). *Sininen torni*. Rovaniemi: Rovaniemen taidemuseo.

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Suikkanen, S. & Kuusikko, R. (Eds.) (2001). *Meidän taide. Lapset ja nuoret nykytaidetta kohtaamassa*. Rovaniemi: Rovaniemen taidemuseo, Lapin yliopisto.

Will the world of art and the value we place on it vanish altogether if everything is geared to visitors and enriching their lives? A good example is the case where a ball pit set up in a church was frowned upon. Art, like churches, has a certain sanctity about it; the enjoyment of art should not be too hedonistic (Levanto & Petterson, 2004). The variety of light-hearted activities that accompany encounters with art temper its elitist nature as an institution,

but a café-cum-gift shop circus may overwhelm the works we came to see. A place designed to provide the profound intellectual experiences that the Enlightenment valued is now full of easy-to-learn playgrounds and high-tech amusement parks (Levanto, 2004, 61-62).





Art museums have no inherent link to what its cafés and gift shops do: these are unconnected to the art collections.

An inspirational example of this is a work by Marina Abramovic, a pioneer in the field of performance art. The work, still in the planning stages, involves people coming to the Institute of Immaterial Performing Arts to engage in performance exercises, the idea being that they leave their other lives behind, outside the museum, and focus on the moment. They dress up in lab coats, making them researchers rather than spectators. All mobile phones and other electronic devices are left at the door and the participants commit themselves to being at the museum for six hours. Under Marina's direction they focus on the present moment and reclaim all the personal time that constant use of electronic gadgets has taken from them. Once in the museum they walk around, have a drink of water, stand around, sit down and lie down, all the while focused on the moment. They are then ready to look at something more sustained, such as immaterial art (Abramovic, 2015).



Marina Abramovic at a TED talk telling people in the audience to look into the eyes of the person sitting next to them for two minutes.

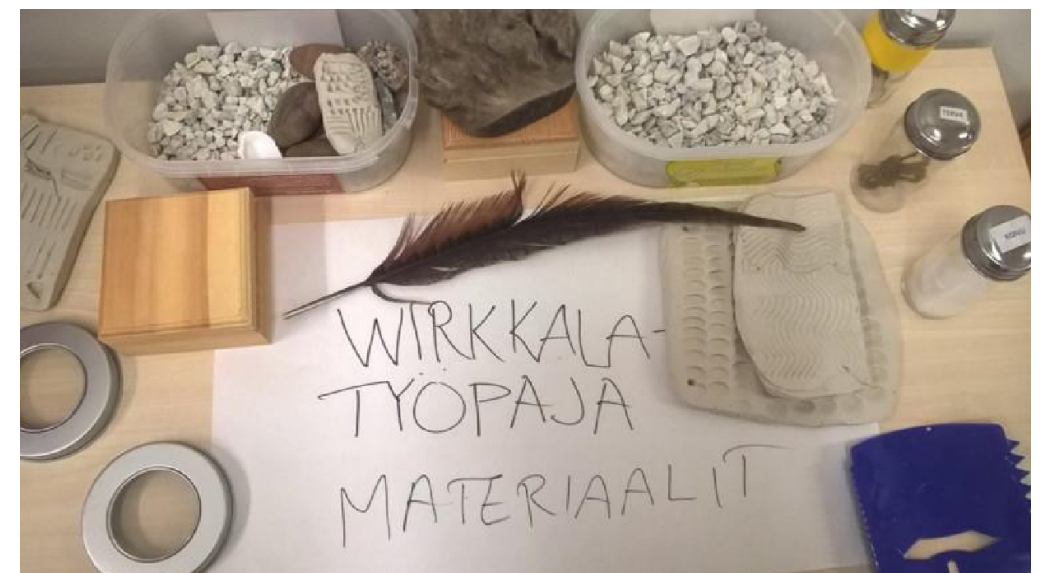
See: [https://www.ted.com/talks/marina\\_abramovic\\_an\\_art\\_made\\_of\\_trust\\_vulnerability\\_and\\_connection](https://www.ted.com/talks/marina_abramovic_an_art_made_of_trust_vulnerability_and_connection)

A museum does not necessarily need to give the public what the public wants; it is welcome to challenge them. Where this occurs, people do not remain trapped in their own world of beliefs but are given an opportunity to learn something new. A museum should not bend over backwards to cater to its visitors' every whim but should engage them in the work going on and the experiences to be had there. A sincere effort to accommodate different people naturally requires different approaches; for example, some visitors will need help in overcoming sensory deficits.





At the beginning of 2016, art education students Karoliina Salo, Elisa Huhtinen and Kati Konkka planned a series of workshops entitled “Eyes in your Fingers” (see sidebar). The workshops were held in conjunction with the exhibition Still/Life–Tapio Wirkkala Retrospective (31 October 2015 – 28 February 2016) commemorating the 100th anniversary of the birth of the successful Finnish designer Tapio Wirkkala. Informing the planning and implementation of the workshops making up “Eyes in your Fingers”, as well as the process underlying Wirkkala’s design, is the idea of being present in a certain place at a certain time.







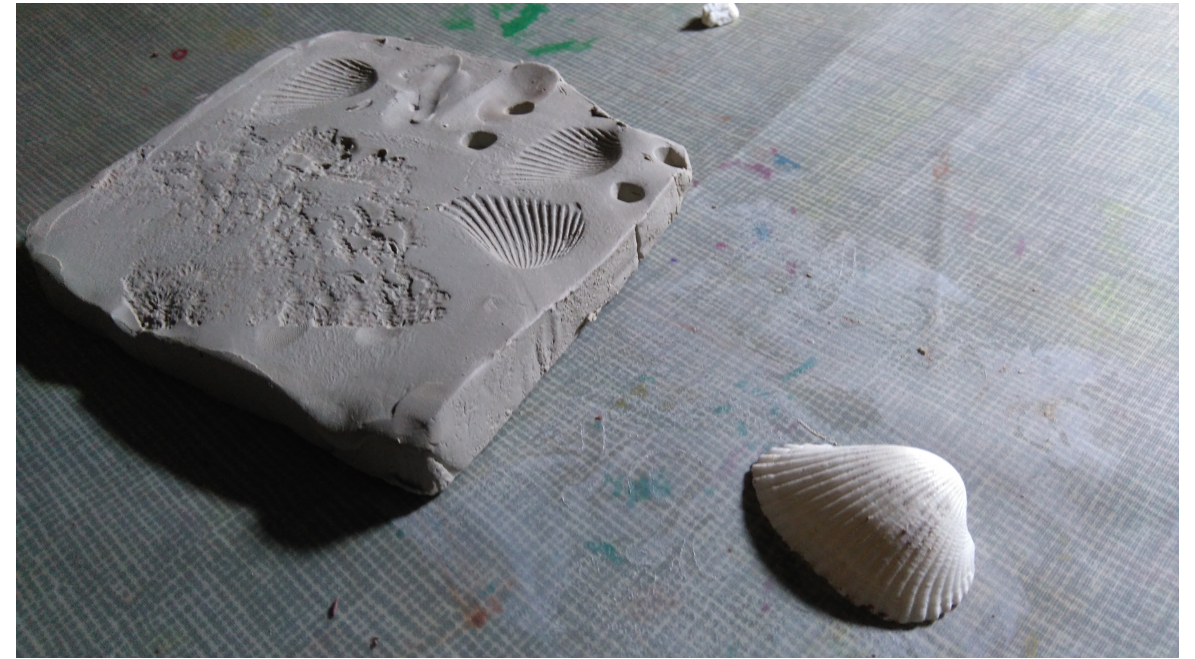
Searching for elements of nature as a part of 'Eyes in the Fingers' workshop





Designing a surface as a part of the workshop

The participants had the opportunity to experience the initial stages of the design process. They were first told that Tapio Wirkkala was a well-known designer internationally in his lifetime who returned to Finnish Lapland time and again to relax and find inspiration in the nature there. Participants put their hands in “inspiration pouches” containing bark, pine cones, feathers, leaves and other natural materials. They were then divided into smaller groups and went to view the exhibition. Each group was given an element to look for: water and ice, wood, plants or animals. They were then given the task of looking for objects among the practical and artistic objects on exhibit which brought to mind their elementor which they thought might have been inspired by it. The findings were then shared with all of the participants. The moderator of the workshop augmented the discussion with additional information on the work. Then, in the studio space, the



participants were given clay, traditional tools for working with clay and various natural materials. They went on to study the contours of clay surfaces by freely experimenting with the tools provided.



Photos of the workshop:  
Elisa Huhtinen, Kati  
Konkka and Karoliina  
Salo



The participants ranged from five-year-old pre-schoolers to teenage students and adults. They all had the same aims but, given their diverse interests, the way they expressed themselves and the things they highlight differed. The workshop moderators engaged with the participants as individuals, using means appropriate to each group to keep their attention and to discuss what it means to be a designer. The children found it easier to listen and explore the contents of pouches when sitting on cushions on the floor; the teenagers were happy to reflect on the objects they found that represented the different elements; and the adults gladly listened to details of Tapio Wirkkala's personal life, wife, children and artistic creations.

Instead of tailoring activities to suit different user groups and fragmenting the museum experience, it might be preferable to think of the work museums do as bringing a wholeness to our humanity. This means planning activities for the human being in all of us and planning them so that they can be adapted to suit all visitors. The educational aim comes first, the means second. A museum-centred educational aim could be defined as genuine engagement of the public in constructing culture and making it visible. In the ubiquitous society of the future, many different facets of our lives will proceed simultaneously and overlap. This trend presents museums of contemporary art with a new task: to offer people a "temple of the mind" that provides the tools to enrich their humanity, to achieve a feeling of wholeness as a person and construct a shared culture.

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