

Interview of Marjatta Oja

The interview took place in October 2024 and was conducted by **Lorella Scacco**

Marjatta Oja (1962, Forssa, Finland) lives and works in Helsinki. She has studied at the Free Art School in Helsinki, the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera in Milan and in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki, where she completed her doctoral studies in 2011. In the Finnish art scene, she is a pioneer to start using video and slide projection as a central element in her work. Her main goal is to infuse image with depth, liveliness and three-dimensionality into “situation sculpture”.

Oja's works have been presented in exhibitions and events since the late 1980s in Finland, Scandinavia, Europe, Asia and the USA. Her work is in the collections of, among other institutions, the Modern Museet in Stockholm and the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma in Helsinki.

When did you first start using video? What type of equipment did you use at the time?

I used a video camera for the first time c. 1986. At that time it was possible to rent a vhs-portable-suitcase-pack from video rental places. I asked my friend Tiina Kaukanen to join me on shooting trips and we were very fascinated with the new device. I remember I rented it several times till the possibility ended. The same year I got into the Academy of Fine Arts but I didn't include any video in my application to get in. If I remember right it wasn't even possible. Video as an art form wasn't yet totally accepted.

Why was video camera as a device particularly attractive for you at the time?

At first I felt it was very funny as I was also interested in using a still camera. Later, the first years in the Academy, I started to question the painting form as it was so far removed from everyday life, which I found a remarkable subject in art. Video was easy, even too easy a way to make an image. And furthermore, a lively moving image, which had to get tamed to everyday life.

Where did you have your educational background? And in video how did you start?

After high school I spent a year in Orivesi Opisto in fine art studies, then evening and summer courses at the Free Art School in Helsinki, then basic degree studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki and one year at Brera Accademia di Belle Arti in Milan. Later I returned to the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki and continued till the end of my studies, to graduate as Doctor of Fine Arts.

In my first year at the Academy I insisted on participating in the first video course of the school. That was difficult because it was targeted to students in the higher classes. But I succeeded.

The first videos I shot as I explained before. I seriously thought about art video works when I started to experiment in the end of the 1980s in my studio at the Academy. I had returned from Italy summer 1989 and space had become important for me. I looked for satisfaction with the results and soon I noticed I was working with something new. I also asked and got the only video projector, which was called 'video cannon', to use in my

studio. Another important fact is that I had an open-minded teacher who supported me by discussions about my experiments, Oliver Whitehead. The first works were a big surprise for the very new group of founders of Muu ry, which later led to the start of AV-arkki in Helsinki.

Helsinki Filmmakers' Co-op was mainly dedicated to experimental film. Could you talk to us about how was your experience with this artists' group? Have you experimented there with the video camera?

That time when that group was started, I became friends with the founder, Sami van Ingen, and I followed closely the exciting starting process. It was strange to start to work with an older form of moving image, but that time the quality of the film-image was so much better than video, that I found it worth the experiment. And of course, as the film was very worky material, I looked forward to the possibilities to transfer film-materials to easier an easier medium, video. At the same time I got my first prize for my art. The slow film making slowed also my, maybe too quick, development. It was also interesting to study the history of film in co-op, to follow the experiments of other participating young people and also to get to know Philip Hoffman, the Canadian experimental film-maker. He was invited to conduct a course in Helsinki Filmmakers' Co-op.

Apart from a few video experiments in the late 1970s, video art entered late in Finland in comparison with other Nordic and European countries. In your opinion, what is the reason?

Good question. It didn't seem late. If it is so, I think the reason might have been that painting was highly valued and there was a commercial boom of expressionist painters in Helsinki. The best ones were shown at Mikkola's gallery, which stayed far from the experiments I was making.

Maybe, the period before, had been influenced by USSR in 1970s, and then the opposite cultural direction towards USA started and a modernistic-expressionistic era, although it was late. Somehow, I feel that the nearness of the USSR had made people connect themselves to cultural events there, through studying in Leningrad or Moscow. And as the western cultural development had influenced the east slowly, it also slowed down the Finns, from the western point of view.

In any case, reading history, Finns have always been open-minded to new technologies. For example, I got to know about the early photographers in Finland, the earliest 1842. Compared to many other countries in Middle Europe they were very bold here in the far north.

How did you produce, show, distribute, and promote your videos in the 1980s?

I graduated in 1990 from the Academy of Fine Arts with the first spatial video works that I started 1989. It meant that the works were well shown, distributed and promoted in the graduate show. My *Bath* work was taken to participate in the Nordic video art exhibition, which toured in Scandinavia. And Moderna Museet bought it, which meant a big promotion to my works generally. The art scene in Helsinki was convinced and maybe my success helped video art to break through in Finland. At least, suddenly, I was asked everywhere. I had my first solo show with new spatial video works in Gallerie Pieni Agora founded by Virpi Näsänen, and the Finnish National Gallery in Helsinki bought my work.

How were your videos received by the critics and audiences in Finland at the time?

I got a critics' special prize called Kritiikin Kannukset and a couple of other prizes after that. So I think I was very well noticed. The main reason might have been that I was the first artist using video projection in Finland. I didn't notice the general reception of my works by the audience, as they visited the exhibitions independently. So I was always surprised when somebody contacted me. Now afterwards, when I notice the media boom of any artist, I am thinking that soon it will be over, as happened to me.

Finnish video promoters wanted me to call my works 'video installations' because it would have been easier internationally to understand what my works were. But it was very difficult for me because I had noticed that artists using video projection after my works, used that name, 'video installation', for whatever video which was projected in the exhibition space. I thought there is something else, the specific nature of my works, which separates them from, for example, short films which are in video format projected in the exhibition space.

Which are the most relevant film festivals or video screenings in Europe and in other nations you took part in the 1980s?

1990

Kuopio International Video Festival/Kuopion kansainväliset videofestivaalit
Helsinki Festival/ Helsingin juhlaviikot

1990-1991

Interface-nordic video art, touring exhibition/kiertonäyttely : Nordic Art Centre/Pohjoismainen taidekeskus, Helsinki Moderna Museet, Stockholm
Frölunda Kulturhuset, Gothenburg
Århusin video festival, Århus, Denmark

1991

MuuMediaFestival, Helsinki
Helsinki Festival/Helsingin juhlaviikot The Night of the Arts, Helsinki
Hämeenlinna Art Festival
Kettupäivät Short Film Festival/lyhytfilmikatselmus, Helsinki
Gothenburg photo festival Ruotsi
Arnhem AVE video festival, The Netherlands