

## Anne Katariina Keskitalo

### Shelters - Travelling beyond Places: Kaija Kiurus's Site-Specific Art

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Kaija Kiuru (b. 1959) is an artist from Lapland living in Rovaniemi. She was studying at the Institute of Fine Arts in Lahti in 1987–91. After graduating as a sculptor, her interest shifted towards spatial and environmental art. The media Kiuru uses in her work are dictated by the project and the sites. She has built installations in galleries and textual works in urban settings, made living earth art and marked places. She has also made landscape designs for environments ravaged by human activity. Some of her works are site-specific, inspired by the place, others are movable in nature, nomadic.

Metal poles trace the outlines of a tent, enclosing white pillows. Lace and fake fur have also assumed a tent shape. Both installations by Kaija Kiuru tell a story about settling down. *Kammio (Chamber)*, 2002, is built on the frame of a dome tent, but its wall materials were gathered from flea markets. The walls are a veritable outbreak of lace of all shapes and sizes. The crocheted doilies are brimming with the energy needed for handicraft and ordinary living.(1) In all their kitschy decorativeness they allude to the peace and safety of home, the tribe of doilies resting on living-room tables. *Chamber* is fragile and sensitive. Its materials whisper about the role of woman as she who makes the sheltered atmosphere of home.

As temporary abodes and site markers,(2) the shelters Kiuru has built have their reverse side as well: settling somewhere always stands in a relationship to the fundamental rhythm of travelling and moving. The nine canvasless metal frames in the installation *Private*, 2002, do not offer shelter – rather the opposite. The form alludes to adventure and life in the open, the missing walls to nomadic life, where the tent is dismantled and the canvas transported to the next place.(3) Interpreted in this way, the temporarily pitched tent would be one stopping point in the cycle of life. The theme of shelter was inspired by photos from refugee camps and Kiuru's own thoughts on the need and freedom to travel. (4) Indeed, *Private* can be seen not only as a symbol of nomadic life, but also as a comment on the circumstances of the homeless, whose only abode is the bodily one.

For an artist, travelling and working in different locations contains a tension between two roles, that of the nest-builder and the pilgrim. In her work, the artist builds a temporary shelter for her thoughts, made of her own observations: "In order to build, or to create something, you have to attain a state of immovability. I think and build shelters for my thoughts, so that [...] they might develop into something concrete for the space that is allocated to me. Thoughts arise from travelling, and from the things I see and experience".

#### From Space to Site

In making a work that refers to the forest, Kiuru evokes the memory of authentic experiences of nature. The rectangular carpet of her installation *Metsä kuin jokainen puu (Forest Like Every Tree)*, 2001, is made of dried pine needles that introduce the fragrance of pines into the gallery. In the photographic series on the wall, the crown of a tall dead pine repeats itself, shot against the sky. The sparseness of forms and materials leaves space for the viewers' own associations and memories. The work leads us to a forest experience, inviting us to quiet our mind and meditate on the personal significance of the forest. At the same time it resonates with all the cultural representations of forest and landscape that affect our ideas

about what a forest is.(5)

The art historian Hanna Johansson has used the concept of habitation to articulate expressions in Outi Heiskanen's, Jussi Kivi's and Anne Siirtola's forest-oriented art. Setting up a shelter, making a fire and lighting a torch are all actions she describes as a "temporary opening of space."(6) In Kaija Kiuru's case, settling down in a space is temporal and spatial work, which she uses to make contact with the various elements of the site, its energy. By emphasising the importance of bodily experiences, Kiuru seems to connect with the phenomenological paradigm of site-specific art of the 1960s and 70s.(7) At the time, minimalism and earth art were changing the relationship between the viewer and the work. According to the art historian Miwon Kwon, the work was no longer considered a distinct self-contained entity, but an object whose boundaries with space and the viewer's experiences were fluid. It took the viewer's spatial, bodily-sensory experience to complete the artwork and fix its meaning.(8)

In addition to their physical location, sites have also other significance. Cultural geographer Pauli Tapani Karjalainen has written about places as a "sensual-emotional and a socio-cultural dimension".(9) From this perspective, a site can be seen as a framework of life branded with personal memories. For geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, a place is also a symbol of emotions projected on the environment.(10) The Kronan sculpture park in Luleå, Sweden, is a former barracks area. With her work *Syli (Cradle)*, 1999, Kiuru wanted to give a new meaning to the site. The work consists of a concave circle of stone with a diameter of about ten metres, and six willows surrounding it. Kiuru herself sees the work as containing symbols of healing and regenerating energy: "*Cradle* alludes to a mother's healing bosom, the value of soil, growth, the trees signify protecting arms." Kiuru chose to place the work at the very edge of the built-up area. She was intrigued by the "strangeness" of the place, its "non-place" and "intermediary" character. *Cradle* is located on the border of the forest, in the vicinity of concrete buildings, car tyres and other junk. It communicates messages about the value of the soil, of growth, of healing energy.

A site is transformed not only through the viewers' experiences, but also those of the artist. When Kiuru makes her works, she takes the measure of the site bodily, by being and moving, but she also takes photos and writes, conceptualising the ideas and feelings engendered by the site. The method demands quiet, concentration and solitude, which the artist herself describes as a meditative journey to the interior space. The vital thing is to listen to the space, to seek to interact with it. In addition to the artist's experiences, other important determinants of site-specific art are the frame set by the art world(11) and the ideology of the artist. Through its presence, *Cradle* modifies the cultural space of the Kronan sculpture park. It is like a miniature garden fixed in time that grows and changes with the seasons.

### **Settling Down and the Nostalgia of Departure**

In spite of their beauty, Kiuru's works flee from the logic of aestheticism, foregrounding instead the work's environmental, societal and social impacts.(12) For instance, the principal expressive elements of *Yhdeksän toivomusta (Nine Wishes)*, 2000, are texts and stories. The work is part of *NatUrban Realities*, an environmental art event organised by the Jyväskylä Art Museum.

The work spread out along the forested ridge in the heart of the city. Kiuru had chained nearly three hundred text signs to the pines growing on the hill. Think of me, look at me, protect me, marvel at me, need me, breathe me in, admire me, miss me, touch me, said the signs. The path of the texts and the associations awakened by its details projected the work's environmental message onto the viewer's personal emotions. As an environmental work of art, *Nine Wishes* carries the legacy of the

phenomenological paradigm of site-specific art, generating its meaning through the viewers' spatial experiences, while the ideological message adds a discursive dimension, emphasising the informative aspect and a proactive attitude to solving problems.(13)

Sited in the urban landscape next to water, *Majakka (Lighthouse)*, 2002, illuminates the night. Its house like form alludes to a more permanent form of habitation than the tent. A house complete with saddle roof and inviting lights symbolises the home, a place of departure and return. The names of vessels cut in the stainless steel with a laser glow with light, telling us of longing, the desire to leave, to travel and return. *Lighthouse* continues Kiuru's basic theme of settling and travelling, but in a way it is also suggestive of the artist's own rhythm of working, travelling from one city to the next. Kiuru interprets and communicates for us a certain relationship to the environment,(14) whispering to us silent stories about her process of alighting in places. We, the recipients, are left with the task of finding in ourselves the unconscious knowledge that allows us to strengthen our connection with the work and the environmental attitude it evokes.

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(Translated by Tomi Snellman)

(1) Pietilä-Juntura, Katriina. 2003. <http://www.tornio.fi/aaine/KKIURU.HTML> (16.9.2003)

(2) See Krauss, Rosalind E. 1985/1991. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Seventh Printing. London: The MIT Press, 277-287.

(3) I am grateful to the art historian Tuija Hautala-Hirvioja for her comments on nomadism.

(4) Pietilä-Juntura 2003.

(5) According to Altti Kuusamo, landscapes exist only in relation to other landscape images. See Kuusamo, Altti. 1990. *Kuvien edessä. Esseitä kuvien semiotiikasta*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 134; Pauli Tapani Karjalainen views landscapes in terms of three simultaneous dimensions, subjective, objective and representation. See Karjalainen Pauli Tapani. 1996. 'Kolme näkökulmaa maisemaan'. In Häyrynen, Maunu & Immonen Olli (ed.) *Maiseman Arvo[s]tus. Seminaari maiseman havaitsemisesta ja arvottamisesta Lahden Mukkulassa 1.-2.9.1995*. Saarijärvi: Lahden kansainvälinen soveltavan estetiikan instituutti & Maisemaverkosto, 8-15.

(6) Johansson, Hanna 1999. *Metsän ja kielen välissä. Fragmentteja suomalaisesta ympäristötaiteesta ja metsän merkityksestä*. In Haapala, Leevi (ed.) *Katoava taide*. Helsinki: Ateneum, 58-77.

(7) The art historian Miwon Kwon distinguishes three paradigms in site-specific art: phenomenological, discourse-specific and social-institutional. They can be commingle to function simultaneously in the projects of one artist. See Kwon, Miwon. 2000. *One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity*. In Suderburg, Erika (ed.) *Space, Site, Intervention. Situating Installation Art*, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 38-63.

(8) Kwon 2000, 38-39.

(9) Karjalainen, Pauli Tapani 1997. *Maailman paikoista paikan maailmoin -kokemisen geografiaa*. *Tiedepolitiikka* 22 (1997):4, 41-46.

(10) Tuan, Yi-Fu 1974. *Topophilia. A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 93.

(11) According to Kwon, the art institution is one framework that partakes in the definition of site-specific art. See Kwon. 2002. *One Place After Another. Site-Specific Art And Locational Identity*. London: The MIT Press, 28.

(12) Kwon stresses the ideological aspect of site-specific art, its impact on everyday life. See Kwon 2000, 38-63.

(13) Kwon 2000, 38-63.

(14) Also according to the research director and docent of aesthetics Ossi Naukkarinen, one of the crucial tasks of environmental art is to activate the viewers' relationship to the environment. See Naukkarinen, Ossi. 2003.

*Ympäristön taide*. Helsinki: Publications of the University of Art and Design. B 73, 158