

## Nature and Space in Kaija Kiuru's Art (2011)

The visual artist Kaija Kiuru (b. 1959) lives and works in Rovaniemi, Finnish Lapland. She made her debut in the Annual Exhibition of the Finnish Artists in Helsinki Art Hall in 1990, and since that year, her works have been displayed in several international and Finnish exhibitions. Kaija Kiuru is best known for her installations and environmental art. Northern nature was present in her childhood, because her father was a reindeer herder and she also learnt to know forests, bogs and rivers during the family's berry-picking and fishing trips. The relationship with nature in her childhood and youth together with studies of environmental protection and education in the 1990's created the ground on which Kiuru's art is based even today.

Small-sized works depicting fleeting moments and large, permanent landscaping works represent the extremities of Kaija Kiuru's art. The artist's production includes several site-specific environmental works. During the early part of her career, in particular, poetic and sensitive works, a kind of place-related thoughts, were an important part of expression; one example of this is *Path* (1998), which the artist made on a fell in Syltefjord, northern Norway. In this millennium, Kiuru has mainly worked on topics arising from interaction between man and the environment like the theme of shelter with different tents and roofs.

### Variations of shelter

Shelter in Kaija Kiuru's works of art is ambiguous: on one hand it refers to a tent-like sheltering structure and on the other hand to the idea of a refuge. A physical shelter leans on materiality thus providing concrete protection, like a nomadic tent protecting against rain and heat or a portable home – a yurt, *kota* hut or tepee. A physical shelter provided by a certain material is active and functional. The shelter acts as a shield, a piece of cloth against coldness or a vaccine against a disease. Immaterial shelter for its part refers to a sheltered, safe spot or condition, caretaking or a passive state of being protected. As to the materials used by Kiuru, wool and a blanket made of it refer to a cultural tradition. Especially in northern cultures, a physical shelter against weather conditions has been of vital importance, and wool, and in earlier times furs, have surrounded man throughout his life.

Materials in Kiuru's works of art can also be read in cultural contexts of femininity. Embroideries, linen marking, crocheting and sewing refer to the craftsmanship of the past generations and women's traditional work. It is a long tradition to associate textile materials and their working techniques with femininity and women's everyday lives – textile work has also been considered to be part of the process of becoming a social woman. Women's handicraft works have often been experienced to have a secondary position with no social appreciation. Kiuru's art contains a variety of traditional handicraft techniques and materials, which tells about the respect for traditions and practical culture.

Kaija Kiuru's works are referred to by the word *quiet* and she herself feels the definition describes her works well. There are two kinds of quietness: external and internal. External quietness is easier to perceive and approach. Internal quietness requires an intuition and it is often approached by artistic means. There is something human and important in the dimension of internal quietness – it is true that people recognize this area inside themselves. As a space, quietness is a place in which everything to be present. It is timelessness. The role of quietness in art is both to hide meanings and reveal them as happens in the work *Private* (2002), which consists of nine metal frames of tents and pillows with marked pillowcases. *Private* is part of the theme of shelter, which Kiuru has been working on since the year 2002.

### Environment

Environmental art and site-specific works require the creation of a physical relationship with the location. Kaija Kiuru studies the location, takes photographs, writes and examines the feelings and ideas aroused by the place. She creates a bond with the environment, which thus leads her to the basic idea and material of a work. Kiuru's aim is to find a balance between a work and the space surrounding it. The entity, i.e. the adaptation and merging of a work and the environment with each other, is important.

Kiuru has not made environmental art only in northern Finland but also in northern Sweden and Norway. She has realized her works in places varying from a built environment to untouched nature. Only in the artist's later production has the urban area obtained a steadier role but she says that she still enjoys working in a natural environment more. Kiuru is fascinated by the barrenness and vastness of northern nature. However, a work of art made out in nature is always constructed in a place and under its terms both materially and at a conceptual level. The atmosphere of a place and the associations aroused by it are the ground of the work. Kiuru says that environmental art placed out in nature is search of a connection with nature.

Kaija Kiuru has realized large and permanent entities in her landscaping works. She has, among others, designed landscape management works of art in the Pallas-Ylläs National Park in north-western Lapland. Kiuru's landscaping work by the Särkijärvi–Raattama road in Pallasjärvi covers about 32 000 m<sup>2</sup> of earth within a one-kilometre-long distance on both sides of the road. The sandy or gravelly road slope has been replaced by *Cover of the Earth* (2000 – 2003), a landscaping work consisting of forest soil plants, different trees and bushes, wild flowers, natural stone surfaces and grass areas.

### **Materials and concepts**

The materials used by Kaija Kiuru come from natural and urban environments, forests and jumble sales. The artist combines natural materials with industrially produced objects; in the work *Management Affairs* (2009), she has used birch bark and gnarls, upholstery nails and metal parts of old office chairs. In addition to old lace tablecloths, she has used different textiles like sleeping bags and blankets made of recycled rags. The artist has used sleeping bags in the works *Pupa* (2005) and *The Thread*, which she made while working in Glasgow, Scotland for two months in the year 2004.

Kiuru's production can be seen to contain features typical of conceptual art. She is one of the Finnish artists who studied in the 1980's and from the very beginning used words and texts as a natural part of visual thinking. In the textual work *At Home* (2004), Kiuru used sentences by immigrant women, which were pasted on shop windows. The text signs fastened to trees in the work *Nine Wishes* (2000) belong to the same group, and so do the names of ships and boats cut in steel in the work *Lighthouse* (2002). It is only when we read that pine tree beams and birch bark have been used as materials in *Birch Tree* (2007) and its larger version *Birch Forest* (2008) that we fully understand these works of art. The combination of the names and materials of the works opens a viewer an ironic point of view, which the seeing of the works does not yet reveal.

Texts in Kiuru's works make a viewer think about the sounds of words – even those of one word. With her environmental work *Longing* (1995), which she made during her early career, she adopted the tradition of environmental art and making of vanishing art. The work was also her conceptual debut after her return to Lapland. The career as a professional artist started from this return home, as if the idea of longing had carried her near both the old and a new starting point.

Hautala-Hirvioja, Tuija, Siukonen, Jyrki & Ylimartimo, Sisko (toim.) 2011. *Kaija Kiuru*. Rovaniemi: Lapin yliopistokustannus.