



Walking on water, living adventurously – Travelling Laboratories for Artistic Thinking

There is a well-known story about three wise men who followed a star and left their valuable presents to a newborn baby somewhere in the Middle East over two thousand years ago. It is a strange story about looking for meaning and value in something that is unknown; a story about following your intuition and giving luxurious presents, gold, myrrh, frankincense to someone who might have needed more food and nappies. I see this story as a metaphor for an artist's way of travelling through the world: to follow a star to unknown destinations, to search for the miraculous and not to worry about the trouble it takes. A story about leaving your valuable presents without knowing how they will be used and returning home without too much fuss.

An artist's way through the world could be described as walking on water, believing in miracles, trusting on one's intuition. To voluntarily live in the geographic or social periphery and make one's living in the margins demands courage, faith and a certain kind of stubborn trust in a possibility to live a sustainable life outside the centres and big masses. Throughout history there have been creative people who made a conscious decision to move back to nature, or actually never leave it in the first place. Henry Thoreau reflects on his own life and the choice he made in his essay "Where I lived and what I lived for" (1854/2005). Ideas about simple and authentic life along ethical principles are familiar among artists and some of the most famous writers on art and life have been Tolstoy and Ruskin.

My approach in this article is to present an idea of 'artistic thinking' as an approach to a more sustainable life in an increasingly complicated world. I draw from my experience as an artist and academic living in the Northern parts of Europe, where nature and the terms that it dictates are still an essential part of everyday life for better and worse. I see the artist's way as an attitude and as such transformable into other areas of life and livelihood.

My aim is to re-visit old ways of thinking and to respond to future but currently unknown demands of a new era by walking on water, living adventurously. My focus is on contemporary art and how that could be expressed and implemented outside the traditional art world of museums, galleries, art educational organisations and institutions. I use the idea of Joseph Beuys, who declared that everyman is an artist. By that idea he did not mean that everyone was a painter or a producer of artefacts, but that everyone could become an active and critical thinker and learn to see the world from a different perspective. For Beuys art was social activism and critical thinking combined with aesthetic output.

My method in exploring artistic thinking and walking as an act of art and thinking has included gathering data in experiential knowledge by walking and using the act of writing and reading as research. The methods are widely used in the field of artistic and arts-based research. The language I use is metaphorical, sometimes poetic, often narrative, and all this is common in academic papers by artist-researchers and others in the field of humanist and sociological studies. Carolyn Ellis (1997, p. 116) wrote more than twenty years ago, that she wanted to speak differently in a research

context, not only speak about using different voices. Patricia Leavy (2013) argues strongly for using fiction as research practice. Going back in time we can refer to Mircea Eliade and Edmund Husserl both of whom have argued that fiction often reveals new knowledge from more unexpected angles than arguments based in so called hard evidence. Through fiction and artistic expression in its multiple forms we can reveal knowledge that would be hard, even impossible to reach by any other means.

I am writing as an artist-researcher and using the right to express my own observations and experiential knowledge in my argument. Since my concept of 'travelling laboratories for Artistic Thinking' is a concept, not a physical unchangeable place or site, but rather something that happens in one's imagination, I am not including images that might mislead a reader towards fixed idea about this Lab. The images included are more metaphorical than representative of specific activities that have been experimented with in various cases. Even using the word "laboratory" has a flavor of irony because I see artistic thinking as something that cannot be measured and studied in laboratory circumstances.

Artistic thinking and walking



Photo: Jaana Erkkilä, Shoes worn out, carrying memories.

Walking has been used as a medium by several artists in the past and also in the field of contemporary art. There is a long list especially of writers who have praised the benefits of walking throughout the centuries. Walking as a medium in the field of contemporary visual arts has enabled artists to articulate ideas about time and space. Walking gives freedom of movement and expression, it creates a personal engagement with environment and feeds imagination. A journey can be seen as a work of art. Cynthia Morrison-Bell (2013, p.1) asks, what else is needed to make art than time, space and the body, the artist's own? The artist Richard Long has worked for decades on art about mobility, lightness and freedom. His art consists of simple creative acts of walking and marking about place, locality and time, distance and measurement.

Finnish author Pentti Haanpää (1905 – 1955) did long walks and later on he travelled by bicycle. Reading his notes on those seemingly idle and aimless wanderings in cold and harsh circumstances one asks, why on earth would one walk such distances, to sleep in barns and empty sauna buildings? Why to walk in rain and early summer snow storm? What kind of inner calling makes you hit the road and spend weeks and sometimes months walking through endless roads that run by fields, lonely villages and forests? But when reading his short notes, observations on weather, sounds of wind, descriptions of coldness creeping over his bones in early June when snow is still falling and the birds have lost their voice, one feels at home, at home in a world that still exists here in the North. You need to experience the landscape, the environment and living conditions in the North in order to know through your bodily experience what the author is writing about.

From a farming community's point of view Haanpää might have looked like an idle traveler. Through my own experience as a practicing artist and according to his diaries I know that he was working seriously on observation, collecting material for writing, recording experiential knowledge from the environment, weather circumstances, about the human condition. Haanpää travelled an artist's way in exploring what it means to be a human being. Several authors around the world have turned their travelling into literature, but the journey can be taken by anyone and used purely for one's own understanding about the world, without necessarily any product that could be shared with a wider audience. The idea that an experience is valuable without its documentation and sharing in social media or other public

context is alien to our contemporary world according to my view. Describing an experience afterwards is always risky, because memory is selective and drawn by a narrative mind. A crucial thing is what we want to achieve through fictive memorising. Are we interested in human experience or something else?

Peter Englund begins one of his essays, *About History of Silence*, by describing how he heard snow falling down in a winter afternoon in Uppsala. He had been cycling through snow storm and when he stopped it happened: the wind stopped blowing, there were no cars in a street and it was all silent. And suddenly he heard something that made quiet rattling sound and first he could not make sense what it was. He understood that it was the sound of quietly falling snow (2003, p.13). I urge us to stop our running in order to hear the snowflakes falling. Snow does not tell stories to someone who is in a constant hurry.



Photo: Jaana Erkkilä, *Hibernating in Slow lab*

When I walk to my work in winter mornings I listen to the sounds of snow under my shoes, wind rattling in trees. I can see the sky behind the hills faraway, a silhouette of a forest in the distance. There is very little traffic anywhere and I don't meet many

people on my way. Sometimes snow is crispy, sometimes like powder, soft, humid, heavy or light and it sounds different in different temperatures. What does it matter how snow sounds or what the wind says about the world?

Ole Henrik Magga claims that knowledge of one's own environment creates one's identity. Without knowledge of one's own landscape, a large portion of one's own identity disappears (2010, p.15). My feet know my history. I can recall the exact moment when I understood where part of me came from and where I would always belong to, even if I did not physically keep the contact with the land. It was a summer day and I was running along a path feeling the warmth of dry soil under my bare feet. Suddenly time stopped and I saw in a flash how I had run along the same path during every summer of my life and it felt like I was going to run the path until I die. Time and home had a different meaning for me after that and there was a new understanding about a possible loss that could not yet be named.

Walking as an act of art puts focus on awareness and presence. In the *Travelling laboratories for artistic thinking* I combine an artistic way of being present with walking. A journey can have a break and stop for sketching, documenting, writing or working on land art using natural materials that happen to be available, or the stop can take place just for quiet observation. Through artistic thinking while walking we learn about observing and seeing what is around us and how to possibly use that awareness for making something out of it. In his book *A Philosophy of Walking* Frédéric Gros refers among others to Nietzsche, who has written "We do not belong to those who have ideas only among books, when stimulated by books. It is our habit to think outdoors – walking, leaping, climbing, dancing, preferably on lonely mountains or near sea where even the trails become thoughtful."

A simple act of walking seen in the context of the contemporary art world takes us into the realm of imagination and re-thinking of what art could be. Artistic thinking can be understood as abstract construction of imaginative worlds, but equally it can take a form of visual expression or a literal narrative that is based either on fact or fiction. What shifts or transforms our thinking and the act of walking from ordinary to artistic is the framework and purpose of the action. In the realms of art we deal with aims and goals that do not have to have anything to do with what so called reality is about, even if the art work itself was a document of what can be seen and observed.

An artist may have a spiritual dimension in her or his walking, but a pilgrimage is something different from walking as an act of art. A pilgrimage is a walk with a goal; its focus lies in the future (Ford 2011, p.125). Walking as artistic thinking is about the presence, here and now, whereas a pilgrimage is clearly heading towards a sacred place or a defined destiny. When you are on a pilgrimage you don't change your goal intuitively according to your inner callings.

Artistic thinking frees us from result orientated way of thinking (by this I mean that the nature of result has not been defined beforehand) and acting and enables us to enter a free space of seeing and listening the world around us. An artistic approach to the world is not so much about creating something out of one's imagination as about seeing and listening to signals that come from the world around us and then interpreting and giving a communicable form to those signals. Artistic thinking is about seeing the invisible and about listening to the inaudible in a world of multiple of sounds and visual noise.

Why combine artistic thinking with walking? To walk is to be on a journey and to be on a journey means that you are between two places on your way from A to B. The artistic and/or creative process is often seen as being on the threshold, in a state of transmission, being not yet there neither here; it is about liminality. Even if when walking you might know where you are aiming at, you cannot know all that you are going to face during your journey. There is a strong element of unpredictability. A real process of making art, of artistic thinking is thick with unpredictable particles. And all real innovations by which I mean new unexpected findings, are about unpredictable obstacles, unexpected signals coming on your way and your capacity to be aware of what is given to you. Walking is an act of liminality. Walking symbolises and gives a framework for an artistic thinking process and it also enables the participants to take artistic actions during their walking.

Artists could be called the nomads of contemporary times, travelers who find home where their work takes them. Artists do travel between countries and continents, but also between identities, ways of making their everyday living. Artists travel between personal and common, from individual to community based existence; they rise from ashes over and over again like Phoenix. Travelling like an artist means travelling for better understanding, making sense of the world, hoping for enlightenment.

Travelling Laboratory serves sustainable tourism likewise it has an emphasis on sustainable living and creative well-being. To travel like an artist means not to leave your brain behind and get rid of your everyday life. To travel like an artist means that you look at your life with new eyes, for new perspectives and find new meanings in old ways. *Artistic nomadism* means flexibility, being present where you are, being free to take an unexpected route and change your plans according to your intuition.

Artistic thinking could be seen as a form of resilience, a capacity to live in uncertainty and to remain in a state of creative presence. Art practice is about discipline and so is walking. To be on a road makes you continue even if you do not see the destination.

Travelling without going anywhere

Looking at life with new eyes can be done wherever and whenever. You can travel like an artist and go nowhere. American painter Agnes Martin withdrew herself from art world and moved to New Mexico to live and paint in simplicity. In other words she continued her normal work, but on her own terms and conditions. Her texts about art, silence and disciplined work are rare gems in the rich literature on philosophy of art.

You can travel in your own environment without going anywhere longer than walking distance. Gertrude Emily Benham (1867 – 1938) was called “a very quiet and harmless traveler” (2009, p.5). Although she walked extensively on every continent, I like the description of her as a very quiet and harmless traveler. I wish that more of us could be described as such and that is why I want to introduce a traveler who goes nowhere. You can travel even in your own room, through your imagination and entering the universe of other people’s imaginative worlds through works of art.

You might ask what good is it for tourism to encourage people not to travel and what kind of traveler is the one who never goes anywhere. I think that we have to change our ideas about travelling. The change might come by force through the current situation with millions of refugees being on the road, not all of them are in Europe yet, but approaching the gates of our back yard. I can see how our elitist tourism has to find new ways. We have soon, if we have not already, exploited every corner of

the world: small islands, distant mountains, jungles, deserts, every continent. We have succeeded in destroying indigenous cultures and ways of living in the name of tourism and livelihood.

English and French explorers who traveled in Lapland 1800's called the local people savages. Our culture and nature of people are often described as being silent and hard to communicate with. We can happily be silent in a company, if there is nothing to be said or shared. Speaking just to keep noise going on is looked upon as stupid and useless. We are not especially interested in small talk. There is a proverb saying "Hiljaa hyvä tulee" and you can understand it in two ways: making slowly makes it good – or making silently makes it good. The word *hiljaa* can be understood both as silently and slowly. You could interpret the meaning as concentrating on what you do contributes the outcome. To have a focus results in quality.

Seven Brothers by Aleksis Kivi is considered to be the first novel ever written in Finnish. It was published in 1870 and it is a story about seven brothers living in Southern Finland in the county called Häme. The novel is a mixture of social analyses of Finnish society during the time when the book came out, descriptions of experiences in nature, dreams and religious experiences. A red line runs through the novel, the story about the brothers who found it too hard to learn to read and fled into deep forest called Impivaara where they lived as outlaws until their sauna burned down in a cold winter night and they had to return to their home village and integrate back to the norms of the society. Their process of growing up was slow and painful and they were truly fighting against modern ideas, such as education. When we in Finland want to refer to someone as a slow person in action or in understanding we say that she or he is 'slow' like someone from Häme.

Silence and slowness have something in common in Finnish culture and I find it rather amusing that while being silent and slow we have managed to develop one of the world's largest network of broadband connections less than 150 years after the first novel, *Seven Brothers* by Aleksis Kivi, was published in the Finnish language. In January 2015 Jaakko Nousiainen was defending his doctoral thesis in University of Lapland on Expanding opera into mobile media. One might ask, if you have to become civilized, why not to do it properly and for all at the same time?

In Finland, there is an extraordinary situation for a technologically developed country: there is plenty of silence, lots of space, one of the most advanced digital communication systems in the world and a nation that values self-sufficiency, privacy and solitude. There is a strange longing for silence and not doing anything, although sounds of silence are the dominant sounds everywhere if we forget about couple of larger cities in the country. The demand for silent retreats has grown in recent years and participants come also from countryside and places where you are literally all the time in the middle of nowhere. You want to be even more silent. Broadband connections are advertised by showing a single laptop looking into landscape with no person in sight. What does this mean, this need for withdrawing from the world, taking a refuge to Impivaara?

In spite of a new kind of global nomadism, we tend to be very site-specific when it comes to our favorite working and living environments. There is a strange need to return home and the home can be in many places and for many purposes at the same time. There are certain landscapes, places and sites we want to visit over and over again perhaps just to get a glimpse of something that puts our thoughts and/or emotions in the right place. We want to see in order to remember. We want to have our view whether it is an open field, a forest or a busy heart of a metropolitan area. We want to take our walks in the manner of Nietzsche, Thoreau, Emerson, Kant, Haanpää and the rest of the crew.

Perhaps moving from a site-specific agenda of observation and perception towards a mind-specific way of working through action in the physical world and in one's own mind can open up new possibilities for sustainable ways of working in depth and travelling without going anywhere and without a feeling of longing to a specific place. Mircea Eliade writes about a human need for getting to another space and time from the physical reality where we find ourselves (2003, pp.35 – 37). Not so long ago religious ceremonies offered both individual and corporate possibilities to reach other realities. Today, artistic thinking and action are some of the possible methods replacing religious rites on our journey looking for the miraculous.

People could once again become quiet and harmless travelers who do not need an intercontinental flight in order to experience something out of the ordinary. Through artistic thinking the ordinary can be transformed to extraordinary. If we are seriously

concerned about cultural and ecological sustainability, we should not encourage building new tourist resorts or routes for transportation. Walking and cycling or plain mind travelling at home should be made such a fashionable brand that people would hesitate to book a holiday anywhere further than walking distance. Art can reach millions of people all around the world through contemporary digital technology. Even to read an old fashion printed book about distant and imaginative worlds is more sustainable than transporting millions of people all the time on tourist journeys to places where nature and local culture is in danger of being destroyed.

Art is about immaterial ideas expressed in forms that can be approached through senses or just ideas and concepts that never need to become objects, sounds or even smells. The magic is to see the invisible and to believe that it is enough. There is no need to go anywhere. A moment in the present is all we need.

From abstract concepts of artistic thinking into practical cases of activities

Travelling Laboratories for Slow Thinking is an ongoing cross-disciplinary research project led by professor Jaana Erkkilä-Hill in the University of Lapland. A research period 2016 – 2017 has been funded by TEKES (Finnish Funding Agency for Innovations). The project is international and multidisciplinary including two research groups, one from the Faculty of Art and Design led by Erkkilä-Hill working with Dr Janne Sinisammal, and the other one from Multidimensional Tourism Institute MTI, Faculty of Social Sciences, led by professor of Cultural Studies of Tourism Soile Veijola working with Dr Emily Höckert, Dr Noora Vikman, Ma Janne Honkasilta and Ma Janne Säynäjäkangas. Our international experts come from UK (professor Paul Dieppe, Dr Sarah Goldingay and Dr Ann Light) and Australia (professor David Carlin). We have been working together with five business partners who represent tourism and field of health & well-being. *Travelling laboratories for Slow Thinking* combines artistic thinking, walking and silence for well-being.

All our business partners have been interested in the idea of using what you have in your natural environment: nature, silence and possibilities of using artistic and creative methods in promoting sustainable tourism and well-being. We have run

pilots studies and tests in different circumstances using participatory methods to engage our partners in a process of finding their specific focus and ideas that could work just for their enterprise.

In the planning process of the activities that could be possible and innovative for a new kind of sustainable tourism Soile Veijola and Jaana Erkkilä-Hill tried to identify such activities that have traditionally been part of community building all around the world and especially in a Finnish context. One example is voluntary work, or rather a neighbourhood coming together and making something useful and constructive, like helping someone to build their house, harvest or clean outdoor playgrounds. A holiday could include working for a good cause, or just actively participating in creating an inviting environment. Making and doing something together creates possibilities to talk and get to know one another in a different way from usual recreational activities. There were such plans as getting an old and abandoned house and reconstructing it into an art work with holiday makers. That one is still waiting for to be conducted in a “real world” situation.



Photo: Paavo Erkkilä, Creating encounters, voluntary workers in a field

Soile Veijola invited the whole research group and the business partners for a two day gathering in an old and nearly abandoned village between Rovaniemi and Kemijärvi in Finnish Lapland. We stayed in a simple guesthouse that was partly occupied by migrant workers picking blueberries in Lapland. The gathering took place in a community house within a walking distance from where we stayed overnight. There were young chefs preparing local food and the menu was based on

what was available. The program included workshops and brainstorming, but also experiencing silence, meditating and going for a listening walk led by Noora Vikman. The walk was a simple act of walking silently one after another, listening to sounds of a forest, making stops and paying attention to what was around us. Eventually we were invited to sit down and just be quiet. The walk could have taken place everywhere and one of the business partners later on included it into their services in a slightly modified form. The program included cleaning an old sauna-building that had been out of use for quite a while, and afterwards heating the sauna and bathing in it. Feedback from the business partners and all participants was really positive and the idea of using a simple place for the gathering was appreciated. The lack of internet access was also received as positive and freed everybody from being mentally in several places at the same time. Logging-off is a luxury today!

Jaana Erkkilä-Hill has led several workshops for one of the business partners, Kitinkannus, a rehabilitation centre for war veterans. The goal was to create new ways of interaction between clients, their families and the staff working in the centre. The leading idea was to promote situations where all could meet on an equal platform and how a rehabilitation centre could turn into wider concept of sustainable well-being tourism using what there is already available. Because of the physical limitations that many of the clients have in Kitinkannus we took the forest indoors: there were boxes filled with sand and others filled with all kind of natural materials that could be found just outside of the center that is located in a forest. The participants created small still lives using the materials and while playing with trees, moss, grass, stones and mushrooms. they shared their memories from a forest. For some of the clients it was a moving experience of being able to feel the smell of a forest and put your face in a soft piece of under vegetation, inhale and to feel natural materials in your hands. The experience was shared by the staff, clients and their visitors, and all were equals in the moment of making a journey without going anywhere.

Travelling Laboratories for Slow Thinking emphasises that there is time in the world. Even a short time is enough if we do not try to do too many things in it. And our possibilities are endless in the realm of artistic thinking. The research goes on in different forms. We are moving between theory and praxis and letting each to be nourished by the other.

Conclusions

Creative wellbeing could be defined as something achieved through intuitive knowledge that is a private awareness of one's innermost being. According to Chuang-yuan Chang in the sphere of intuitive knowledge there is no separation between the knower and the known; the subject and object are identified (2011, 68). Intuitive knowledge cannot be transmitted and explained in ordinary intellectual and reasoning ways. This is a question of artistic thinking and the experiential knowledge that is gained through arts based activities, through walking as artistic thinking.

Artistic thinking is not about making money. Creative wellbeing is not a business. Still we need both money and business to live in a contemporary society. As an artist-researcher I am able to show examples of how to approach creative wellbeing, but the way cannot be framed in a model or a form that would work for every individual in the same way. As soon as something is nailed and put into a form that can be repeated over and over again we are not dealing with art or creativity. It is a question of a concept, and good as such, but let's call it industry, not art. Anyhow I do hope that there are other people who can turn activities driven by artistic thinking into livelihood and businesses in the field of well-being and sustainable tourism.

References:

- Chuang-yuan Chang (2011). *Creativity and Taoism. A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art and Poetry*. London: Singing Dragon.
- Eliade, M. (2003). *Pyhä ja profaani*. Loki-kirjat: Helsinki.
- Ellis, C. (1997). Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Emotionally about Our Lives. Teoksessa Denzin N.K. & Lincoln Yvonna.S. (toim.) *Representation and the Text. Re-framing the narrative Voice*. State University New York, 115-139.
- Englund, P. (2005). *Hiljaisuuden historia*. Werner Söderström Oy: Juva.
- Erkkilä J. (2013). Art in Carehome Environment. Article in *Artworks – the Arts&Business Journal* issue 1/2013. Publishing Kew AB. Stockholm.
- Erkkilä J. (2013). Should the Arts Work? Article in *Artworks – the Arts&Business Journal*, issue 3/2013. Publishing Kew AB. Stockholm.
- Gros F. (2014). *A Philosophy of Walking*. Verso: London.

- Haanpää, P. (1976). *Muistiinmerkintöjä vuosilta 1925 – 1939*. Otava: Helsinki.
- Howgego, R.J. (2009). *A very quiet and harmless traveller – Gertrude Emily Benham. A biography*. Plymouth City Museum.
- Kivi, A. (1870/1991). *Seven Brothers*. Translated by Richard Impola. F A T (Finnish-American translators Association).
- Leavy, P. (2013). *Fiction as Research Practice*. Short Stories, Novellas and Novels. New York: Routledge.
- Magga, O. H. (2010). *In Realms of Belonging* by Patrick Huse. Publications of the Regional Museum of Lapland 16.
- Martin A. (1990). *Hiljaisuus taloni lattialla/The Silence on the floor of my house*. Vapaa Taidekoulu: Helsinki.
- Morrison-Bell, C.(2013). *Foreword in Walk On, 40 years of Art Walking*, eds. Cynthia Morrison-Bell, Mike Collar, Tim Ingold, Alistair Robinson. Cornerhouse Publications: Manchester.
- Nousiainen, J. (2015). *Expanding opera into mobile media*. Acta Universitatis Lapponiensis 294. Pohjolan Painotuote, Rovaniemi.
- Thoreau, D. (1854/2005). *Where I Lived and What I Lived for*. Penguin Books: London.
- Veijola, S. (2016). *Silences of Undressed Places: Further Tourist Experiments on Slowness and Stillness*. 25th Nordic Symposium of Hospitality and Tourism, Turku, 30 September 2016. Authenticity -- Productive dichotomies, creative discourses. www.utu.fi/25thnordicsymposium.
- Veijola, S. (2014). *Towards Silent Communities*. In Soile Veijola, Jennie Germann Molz, Olli Pyyhtinen, Emily Höckert & Alexander Grit: *Tourism and its Untidy Guests: Alternative Ontologies for Future Hospitalities*. London: Palgrave, 68-95.