

Finland: Media Art in a Modernist Climate

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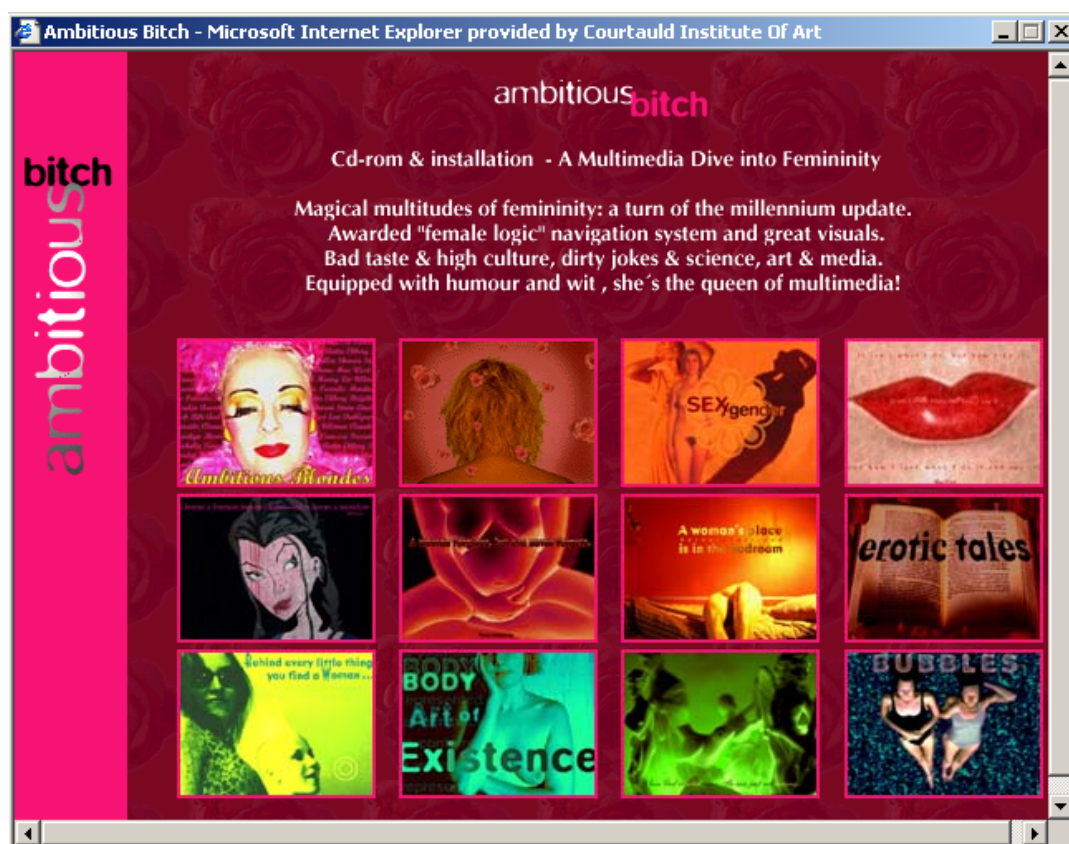


Figure 1 Marita Liulia *Ambitious Bitch* CD-ROM 1996

In Britain Thatcher's second recession certainly hit hard, but it was not entirely unexpected, nor did it herald a great change for everyone. After all, the eighties were best for those who had the means to shout loudest about just how good they were. In Finland the situation was very different. Measured by per capita income, it was one of the richest countries in the world. Its highly protected economy provided an excellent standard of living and welfare benefits for its people. In marked contrast to Britain, modernity was triumphant, and modernism had not only not been defeated, but was comfortably installed in the publicly funded cultural establishment. So, when the recession came, it had a profound economic and cultural effect. Incomes fell, unemployment soared, and living standards drastically declined. It was a belated crash course in 'postmodern' neoliberalism, and Finns are still living with the political and economic fallout, governed by a coalition government in which conservatives, social-democrats and greens agree that there is no alternative.

Nevertheless, modernism is still a force in Finland, most visibly manifesting itself in the emerging forms of the huge new museum for contemporary art rising in the centre of Helsinki. Painters like Matti Kujasalo make elegant and playful constructivist paintings which are shown internationally. So it is not surprising that, in reaction, postmodernism in its raw state is also in full flower. The mix of a modernist establishment in the art world and the sudden shock of a deep recession may have brought about a hasty attachment to tendencies in postmodernism—particularly European thinkers such as Baudrillard, Lyotard and Kristeva—which is regarded

rather more sceptically here. While the sixties and the seventies had seen much engaged political art, in the eighties it became what Leena-Maija Rossi describes as an 'unwritten rule' not to describe works as explicitly political. The recession deepened the effect but politics has crept back through work dealing with issues of feminism and identity.¹

While here the collapse of the private galleries led many artists to change their career plans, in Finland the private scene was never so important. Even sponsorship is limited since donations do not offer tax advantages. Yet the recession seemed to weaken the previously dominant power of the Artists' Union and the Art Academy. As in Britain, recession led to the creation of independent artists' associations and more artist-curated projects. In 1987 a group of artists founded MUU, which was to become the principal organisation challenging the dominance of institutional modernism. 'Muu' in Finnish means 'other' and the name came from the forms artists had to complete to apply for funding; when it came to ticking the box which described the proposed work, after painting, sculpture, photography and so on, there was always a last box, 'other'.² Under 'other' were grouped media art, performance, installation, environmental and conceptual art. MUU is a curatorial organisation which arranges exhibitions and events, and provides facilities for artists to make work using computers, sound systems and video.

MUU is not predominantly though not solely concerned with 'media art', and the promotion of media art is a new form of establishment politics. It is part of a broad economic strategy in which Finland is intended to become the high-tech Japan of Europe. Ten per cent of all Finns already have access to the Net, one of the highest proportions in the world, and the state plans for this to reach seventy per cent by the end of the decade. Much investment is being put into the development of the software industry. There are some very positive aspects to this: Finland is one of the few countries trying to provide equal access to the Internet by providing connections through public libraries.

Media art is an integral part of this strategy. When the international exhibition, *ARS95* was held in Helsinki last year, one of its four sections was devoted to 'artificial reality'. It was introduced by a catalogue essay which was a typical piece of cyber-puffery, claiming not only that media art was particularly suited to women because as a new development it was 'free of masculine traditions', but that 'In 1984 George Orwell predicted that the spread of electronics would lead to a surveillance state. The reverse has happened: the Internet has become a freeway where everything is permitted.'³

What do artists get from such a compact? Money, plainly. As Tapio Mäkelä, current director of MUU—which is state funded—has put it: 'the more dependent you are on technology, the more dependent you are on its providers, on money'.⁴ But more than this, artists gain a social role, a part in bringing about the modernisation of the culture and the country.

¹ See Leena-Maija Rossi, 'Seeing Red. Ideology, Politics and the Finnish Art of the 1990s', *Magazyn Sztuki*, no. 8, April 1995, pp. 226-35.

² Irmeli Kokko interviewed by Beata Maciejewska, "'MUU" in Finnish Means "Other"', *Magazyn Sztuki*, no. 8, April 1995, p. 307.

³ Asko Mäkelä, 'Artificial Reality—Searching for the Nature of Life', Museum for Contemporary Art/ Finnish National Gallery, *ARS95*, Helsinki 1995, p. 53.

⁴ Tapio Mäkelä, 'Critical Strategies—What Makes Media Art?', in MUU, *Breaking Eyes. A Nordic Media Art Exhibition*, Helsinki 1996, p. 38.

What is the use of art to this strategy of software and communications development? First, it creates a positive image around the technology. Works like Marita Liulia's *Ambitious Bitch*, a feminist work on CD-ROM much celebrated in Finland and abroad, can draw young, educated people into a world otherwise seen as being over-technical. The change in the image of computing from the anorak-ridden days of the seventies is a cultural matter. More generally, media art helps to elide the gap between culture and science, art and machinery. Postmodern theory is at one with this aim: a consequence of claiming that science is only a manifestation of culture is to give to any science which owns up to this the allure of culture. Such theory also successfully muddies analysis of what this technology is, how it works, what it does, and who own it. A programme of modernisation is furnished with a postmodern fig-leaf; and this modest covering is most effective in the cultural realm. Finland is hardly the only country to pursue such a strategy.

Yet there is, of course, much critical thinking. Andy Best and Merja Puustinen, working under the name AMPCOM, have produced an anti-cyber-hype work on the Web. *Dad@* shows swastikas tumbling across the screen and examines some of the more unsavoury political sites on the Web. It makes the point that the far Right, religious fundamentalists and racists of various colours have their act together in cyberspace. The links are there, so horrified art-world intellectuals can tour fascist and spook sites, including the CIA, the British National Party and the Finnish Fatherland Patriotic Union.

Even critique can be useful to the system, however, and state funders often seem more concerned about the media of media art than its content. Yet there are various logic bombs lurking in the squeaky clean post/modern future. The most obvious is that the neo-liberal doctrine of the Net enthusiasts (as in *Wired*) is no accident. State support is crucial to the development of a computer industry, but that development also exacerbates the current orientation of the global economy towards inequality and the ever greater commodification of information. Maintaining any form of social democracy, or for that matter meaningful democracy, in these circumstances is an increasingly contradictory project.

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