Art Has Opened People’s Eyes, Music People’s Ears and Computers People’s Minds – Erkki Kurenniemi on Music and Technology

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Abstract

Erkki Kurenniemi began his career in the early 1960s, building peculiar electro-acoustic instruments. The most famous of his instruments are the Dimi-A, based on digital sound synthesis, and the Sähkökvartetti, a collectively played electro-acoustic instrument, used by Finnish underground artists in the end of the 1960s. Besides his career as an instrument maker, physicist, inventor, electro-acoustic music composer and underground film-maker, Kurenniemi is also an extraordinary thinker, with innovative ideas about the combination of art and technology and the impact technology may have on the future of mankind.

Discussions in art and culture magazines in Finland in the 1960s focused on art’s potential as a tool in the realisation of revolution. There was a belief in the ability of art to cross borders and break rules not only in the sphere of art but also in society. Every boundary was to be questioned: the boundaries between different domains of art, between the sexes and between human beings and technology. The idea of art as separate from the surrounding reality and society was no longer valid in the 1960s. Art became more like a way to parse the world and to influence it.

In the domain of music, avant-garde efforts developed from the rebellion of young composers in the early part of the decade, via happenings, to the lively underground movement at the end of the 1960s. If the early sabotage concerts were directed against the institutions and the tradition of classical music, the underground protests were directed at commercial popular culture. But the agenda was shared: to awaken the sleepy and conservative cultural life, to create discussion in the media and to revolutionise earlier concepts of art.

One of the central figures in the Finnish musical avant-garde of the 1960s and early 1970s was a physicist, Erkki Kurenniemi (b. 1941). Kurenniemi took part in the happenings and the underground movement, and was one of the founding members of the Dimensio group in 1972. He created electro-acoustic
works, underground films and electronic instruments, and was one of the initiators of Finnish sound and new media art.

The first experiments in the field of media art in Finland had been carried out in the 1930s, when Alvar Aalto used projected images in his stage set-ups. In 1949 Veikko Eskolin, another important figure in the history of Finnish media art, created his first installation. Eskolin’s kinetic works were widely shown in Finland in the 1950s (Yli-Annala 2009: 98–100). But when it comes to the understanding of the relationship between human beings and technology, Kurenniemi can be seen as a special case. He was not a very loud character, and his public statements were always quite restrained and correct, but his message must often have been quite confusing and probably inconceivable to his contemporaries. He was a renaissance man in his own way, who merged the roles of scientist and artist so thoroughly that it is impossible to say whether he was more of a mad scientist or a hard-line avant-garde artist.

Global Issues, Artistic Solutions

The late 1960s and early 1970s was full of expectations of technology. It was commonly known that personal computers were arriving gradually, but expectations were much higher. The still unknown technology of the future was seen as a possible means of resolving serious global issues such as overpopulation, environmental problems, famine and inequality. But nobody knew when and how these problems were to be solved. This technological utopianism was also present in the art works.

One example of the multilayered themes that technological change offered to art is the Finnish interdisciplinary World Fair pavilion project Man in the Electronic Community, produced at EXPO 1967 in Montreal. The pavilion space was long and low, and at the end was a cosmos-like planetarium. The interior was designed by Ilmari Tapiovaara. The exhibition consisted of a slide-show put together by the interior designer’s son Timo Tapiovaara and an electro-acoustic composition, Information Explosion, by Erkki Salmenhaara, with Erkki Kurenniemi as technical adviser.

The idea of an “information explosion” was present in every part of the project. The footage, which consisted of approximately 800 images, presented the problems of developing countries, ceremonies from different cultures, modern factories, bits of electronic apparatus, animal tests, traffic signs and religious symbols. Of the original 800 images, 300 have been documented in Ilmari Tapiovaara’s collection in the Helsinki Design Museum. The sound material in Salmenhaara’s composition Information Explosion is similarly varied. The musical material