

Kaarina Kaikkonen
And It Was Empty

University of Wyoming Art Museum, Spring 2007
Educational packet developed for grades K-12

Introduction

In this museum visit students will view the work of Finnish artist Kaarina Kaikkonen. Kaikkonen is a visionary sculptor who uses found objects such as second-hand clothing, toilet paper, women's shoes, or potato sacks to create moderate to large-scale installations that articulate the architectural or open space that contains her work.

History

Kaarina Kaikkonen's work is often in the form of an installation, so it is helpful to first consider what we mean when we talk about installation art. Mark Rosenthal discusses this art form in *Understanding Installation Art from Duchamp to Holzer*.

Artists have expressed their own personal ideas and stories through their visual art for thousands of years. One of those ways is through what we now call installation art. There is a tendency to think of this form of art as being contemporary, and often extreme in nature. But this isn't the case.



Kaarina Kaikkonen, *And It Was Empty*, installation view, courtesy of the artist

Though seemingly shocking in its revolutionary appearance by comparison with painting and sculpture, installation has always been with us. For instance, when artists painted on the walls of the caves in Lascaux, they were creating a variation of what is known as site-specific installation: art that is made for a particular place, so much so that it cannot easily be moved because the work is not an object but is attached to the surroundings. Indeed the Lascaux artists made canny use of the undulating wall surfaces to help render the features of the animals. When painting the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo repeated the site specific approach; similarly, when he created the Laurentian Library foyer, he, like an architect, determined every aspect of the physical experience to be had there.

An installation may be defined as anything the artist wants to do when given a room in which to work, a definition that deliberately creates a broad swath of possibilities. In an installation there is unlikely to be a single object, but an assemblage, attached or not. Conversely, an installation may consist of no objects at all but a spatial experience, not unlike an architectural manifestation. Regardless, the viewer is usually in an enclosed space, swept up in a work of art much larger in expanse than an individual object can normally create. As with the term composition in the traditionally understood context of art, the artist has created an arrangement that is an integrated, cohesive, carefully contrived whole.

As with any genre or art technique having a range of qualities, installation is a way of working, like painting or watercolor, chosen because of its inherent options and exploited for these effects. (Understanding Installation from Duchamp to Holzer, Mark Rosenthal, Prestel Publishing, NY, 2003)

According to Rosenthal, there are two broadly defined types of installation: filled-space and site-specific.

Filled spaces are fairly easily redone at other locations because there is coherence between the parts of each, one to the other, rather than the parts cohering with the whole space in a significant way. This type may even be isolated from its site: to describe the composition of a filled-space installation is not likely to include the surroundings. By contrast, a site-specific installation will have spent considerable time exploring the location of the work; hence an analysis of the composition of a site-specific installation must include its locale, because it derives its very form and perhaps physical substance, too, as well as its meaning from the context. Moving it is impossible, since the work cannot be understood or seen except in relation to the place. The viewer witnesses a dialogue, as it were, between the artist and the space.



Kaarina Kaikkonen, *And It Was Empty*, installation view, courtesy of the artist

Kaikkonen's installations:

Kaikkonen has exhibited extensively in Scandinavia and Europe. She is a recipient of the Finnish State Award (1989) and was invited to exhibit in the Echigo-Tsumnari Triennial (Nigata, Japan; 2006), the Biennale Balticum at the Rauma Art Museum (Finland 2006), Omniart | Art Basel (Miami 2004 and 2005), and the 8th Havana Biennial at the Wifredo Lam Center for Contemporary Art (Cuba 2003), She lives and works in Helsinki.

Kaarina Kaikkonen began using men's jackets in her work in 1987. She usually purchases them from flea markets and thrift shops; sometimes friends give her their old ones. . . . men's jackets are conservatively styled, the kind worn by white-collar businessmen in the office or for social occasions that call for more formal attire. When Kaikkonen chooses the jackets for assembly into her work she selects by size, style, and color in order to create the desired overall composition. Jackets have become a leitmotif, subliminal reminders of her deceased father and, by extension, of other absent individuals. However, disembodied jackets offer multivalent

readings similar to those suggested by Christian Boltanski's shoes, Leslie Dill's dresses, Magdalena Abakanowicz's headless bronze or burlap figures, or Doris Salcedo's furniture with strands of human hair. These artists are among many who have chosen a repeated everyday material to signify memory, absence, loss, desired or imagined presence.

. . . the emotional and visual power of Kaikkonen's site-specific installation is often as much the result of the selected site as it is the artist's crafted arrangement of the jackets themselves. . . a contemplation of the abundance of art's motifs that numbs the majority of those living in modern societies. Irrespective of whether we consider popular or high-brow art, the great amount of subjects manifest themselves in enormous numbers of signs, symbols, and artistic practices that become more and more difficult to understand, regardless of the information stream in the information society.

Kaikkonen has continued to challenge herself, finding architectural spaces in urban as well as rural locales to enrich and to encourage new readings of the garment motif. *Way* (2002), one of the most impressive outdoor installations, enhanced the classical architecture of Helsinki Cathedral. Thousands of jackets, overlapping on every step leading to the porch of the church, served as stand-ins for those who worshiped there or just came to visit the historic building. In that work, as in others, the artist successfully merged a repetitive motif with the architecture that housed it to provoke a new interpretation of agency and site. In *Beyond Reach* (2003), Kaikkonen found another place to impart spiritual references, covering the floor of a former church, now an art gallery, with jackets instead of the worshippers who had once filled the pews during services. *Towards Light* (2003) was an outdoor installation appended to the side of a typical Finnish country house. Jackets rippled in the wind as they had in Havana. Although the air created a sense of kinetic movement, the artist conveyed an element of life as an environmental statement. And so it goes, Kaikkonen's men's jackets, laced limpidly or rigidly, spread out or pressed together, in different sizes, shapes, styles, and colors, refer to subjects that are not painted or drawn, but sculpted and assembled to express existential territories of the human condition. (Julia P. Herzberg, 2004)

Statement on the artist's work

When Kaarina Kaikkonen was asked why her installation was made of men's used suit coats and why she calls it, "And it Was Empty", she explained that the installation on one level was about the death of her father. When Kaarina was ten years old she witnessed her father having a heart attack. The two of them were alone in the kitchen and she said that he was facing her and looking into her eyes as he died. The suit coats are a reminder that he always dressed in a white shirt, tie and suit jacket.

On another level, she commented that the work is also about landscape and the fact that "nature is bigger than people, and will outlast us all."

She noted that each viewer will think and feel something different when viewing this installation, based upon their personal experiences and the information they bring with them to the viewing.

Lesson Overview

Students will learn about the work of Finnish artist Kaarina Kaikkonen and about her techniques and processes of creating her site-specific installations. Specifically, they will learn about how Kaikkonen created the *And It Was Empty* installation exhibited in the Colorado Gallery. They will learn about the variety of materials she chose to work with, and of the many ways an installation can be created indoors or outdoors. They will learn how Kaikkonen works in different environments and settings. Students will learn about Kaarina Kaikkonen's works and her artistic life. They will explore the

meaning of installation art and sculpture, and the difference between sculptural (three dimensional) and non-sculptural (two dimensional) work. Students will observe, sketch, and take notes in the Colorado Gallery on Kaikkonen's installation.



Kaarina Kaikkonen, *And It Was Empty*, installation view, courtesy of the artist

Students and teachers will consider the concepts behind the art work. They will discuss how a site-specific installation is often as much the result of the selected site as it is the artist's crafted arrangement of the jackets themselves. They will explore, and think about and discuss the materials used and the construction of the installation.

In the Shelton Studio students will be given the opportunity to complete their own art work using recycled materials and found objects, considering color, shape and line and its relationship to mass and volume.

Students and teachers may research and engage in conversations about Kaikkonen's work before arriving at the art museum, using study guides (available on-line) to explore her ideas. While here they will spend time in the galleries closely observing the work, discussing it, writing about it and even sketching it. They will begin conversations about the theories behind the work which will lay the groundwork for future opportunities to pursue these ideas in their home classrooms and schools.

Essential Questions

Grades K-6

- What is inspiration?
- How does inspiration help to create an art work?
- Where do you think the inspiration for Kaikkonen's work came from?
- How can everyday, used objects become art?
- What does transformation mean when talking of an art work?
- What is repetition in art? How can repetition convey emotion? Thought?

Grades 6-12

- How can discarded suit coats be transformed into art?
- When you view Kaikkonen's installation, *And It Was Empty*, do you feel or think that the museum is part of the art exhibit or separate from the art exhibit?
- How would you express or describe the meaning of the title of her installation?
- Would you consider this art work to be a site-specific or a filled-space installation?
- How important is the setting (museum gallery) to the character of the art work?
- Is the site of the work of art neutral? What do you think the installation's role is in commenting on the site?
- How do installations change our perspective (on the space the art occupies, on the topic or concept presented, etc.)? Is this any different than other kinds of art?
- Does Kaikkonen's work exemplify installation art for the modern world?
- Is her work global in nature?

Art Questions to Consider

Grades K-12

- Describe what you see.
- In what ways does Kaikkonen use her materials? Explain.
- Why does Kaikkonen call her installation a landscape?
- Why the color selection of jackets?
- How does she use repetition to transform her jackets into art?
- How does she utilize the space in the museum as part of her art work?

Pre-visit Activities

In order to prepare students for their museum visit and extend learning possibilities, we suggest that teachers and students consider the following activities:

- Students will read and research about installation art and about the artists who are installation artists in art magazines, books at the library, and on the internet.
- Students will research information on the artist Kaarina Kaikkonen.
- Students will explore found used objects and their relationships to them and their environment and space.
- Students will consider new ways to use old materials, building a list of ideas and concepts to explore.



Kaarina Kaikkonen, *And It Was Empty*, installation view, courtesy of the artist

Museum Activities

Part 1 – Time frame: 45 minutes (minimum) Colorado Gallery

- Students will closely observe the installation, *And It Was Empty*.
- They will identify objects, colors, shapes, and spaces.
- Students will discuss what they see with museum educators.
- They will explore Kaikkonen's work in relationship to other installation artists and in relationship to work that is not installation art.
- They will explore the concepts of site-specific and filled-space installations.
- Using worksheets, students will respond in writing or drawing to the work they see by recording their observations and their own thoughts about the work.
- Students will engage in discussions about their observations and their answers and sketches with one another and with the teachers.

Part 2 – Time frame: 45 minutes (minimum) Shelton Studio

The following projects may be considered individually, or combined, or museum staff will work with teachers to develop specific projects which support ongoing classroom work.

- As a group, students will work on a site-specific installation in a designated area using materials on hand in the Shelton Studio to create a piece of art that uses repetition of materials to explore the idea of transformation.
- Students will work with unusual materials and found objects to create their own art work that conveys an idea, story, or meaning.
- Working within a designated space (small box, or constructed corner, etc.), students will create personal installations using unusual materials and found objects to convey an idea or concept.

Post-visit activities

We have found that students achieve maximum benefit from a museum visit when time is scheduled for post-visit activities. Here are some suggestions:

- Students discuss or write about their museum experiences, reviewing what they learned, what has special meaning for them, how they will use new information and skills.
- Students continue to research the work of artist Kaarina Kaikkonen and other site-specific installation artists (an essay, art work, research paper).
- Students create their own site-specific installation in various architectural spaces to explore the relationship of installation to site.
- Students read about and explore other installation art forms.
- Students identify a concept/idea to convey by collecting their own materials (recycled materials and found objects) and by constructing their own art work as a means to present a concept to others.

Prerequisite skills/knowledge

Museum staff will work with teachers to ensure that all projects are age and skills appropriate. At the very minimum:

- Students should have some familiarity with sketching and drawing objects.
- Students should be able to manipulate materials in a sculptural way (place objects in a 3-dimensional space).
- Students should be able to identify some shapes and colors.
- Students should know what a site is and what an installation is.

Suggested use in the curriculum

The study of Kaarina Kaikkonen's installation, plus the historical knowledge gained from studying the work of the site-specific installation artists ties to multiple curricular areas, including art, history, writing, reading, geography, science, math, and philosophy. Museum staff will work with teachers to address specific Wyoming Teaching Standards and to align museum projects and studies with ongoing classroom curricular units.

Some recommended resources

These are just a few of the many resources available. We welcome other suggestions that teachers and students find helpful which can be added to the list.

- UW Art Museum website: www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum
- Exhibition descriptive materials (contact the museum education program for more information)
- *Understanding Installation Art from Duchamp to Holzer*, Mark Rosenthal Prestel Publishing, NY, 2003.

- *Kaarina Kaikkonen's Art: Mother's Dancing Shoes*, (This is an excellent retrospective catalog of exceptional images and essays written in English.)
- Internet resources on Kaarina Kaikkonen

Materials to be supplied to each student

Materials for selected Shelton Studio projects are provided by the art museum.

Assessments and documentation of museum tour and studio experiences

In order to ensure that our museum tour program is meeting the needs of teachers and students, we ask that participants complete evaluation surveys. Surveys will be distributed to teachers and students, but they are also available on-line as a pdf file to be downloaded, or they may be requested via e-mail (wbredeho@uwyo.edu).

1. Students will self-assess using a quick survey that asks them to consider their response to the gallery discussions and research, and their studio experience.
2. Teachers will assess the overall visit by completing a quick survey that asks for their observation and assessment of students' experiences, as well as assessment of the overall process of the museum visit.
3. Museum staff and artists/teachers will record their observations and assessments.
4. When studio time permits, we will ask students to briefly discuss their art work completed in the Shelton Studio visit.
5. Museum staff may take photographs of students and teachers to document the learning taking place and the work produced during a museum visit. These are available upon written request to teachers who would like to use them as art of teaching and student portfolios.