

Max Ryyänen

TEACHING PORTFOLIO

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This is where I feel at home professionally. We have a break during an intensive workshop for dancers, performance artists, film makers and critics in Cesis (Latvia). It is august 2015 and after teaching together with choreographer Lily Skove (L.A.), ballet professor Annemari Autere (Nice), and film maker / choreographer Valerijs Olehno (Riga) – we have all visited each other’s sessions – intensive discussions pop up. This is where teaching goes flux.



(More than being a scholar) I identify with teaching. I work as a Senior University Lecturer in Theory of Visual Culture at the Department of Art in Aalto University (Espoo), and I have practically had the same job since February 2006.

I mostly teach in the program Visual Culture and Contemporary Art (<http://vicca.fi/>, 125 students), where I am also the head of the program. I teach (and supervise) doctoral students too (one is just defending her dissertation on the female grotesque), and I can't say that I wouldn't have enough work at 'home', but I gain so much from doing visits and workshops where I can interact with new people, that I keep doing them however much I would be in a hurry.

I teach film theory, academic skills, philosophies and theories of art, art critique, kitsch and camp studies, and political philosophy. Some courses are lecture-based, some workshops, but most of them are constructed around a theme.

For example in *Modes of Writing* we study different ways of using text from rap music to recipes and body art. We aspire to get into grips with what writing could be outside of the academic and literary patterns. We have a Skype session with poet and creative writing professor Mamta Sagar and her students at the Srishti College of Art in Bangalore India (see pic below from her workshop where we met in 2017), we have two rap journalists (Särre and Koko Hubara, the latter being a writer too) visiting and talking about their sense of literature in hip hop culture, I will do an experimental lecture by writing on the wall, and we will have students presenting their input in the end of the course.



On some courses the teaching needs to be more basic. On the Philosophy and Theory of Art I try to get students into thinking about the long history of theoretical thinking about the arts, and to also realize that both new and old texts, both Western and Non-Western, provide ways of grabbing the problems. On this course I teach a wide variety of thinkers from Abhinavagupta, Al-Ghazzali, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno to Susan Sontag, Gianni Vattimo and Celeste Olalquiaga, and the point is to provide the students with a reading of the variety of traditions at stake here.

When teaching professionals the most important thing seems to be breaking the ice. For example critics – I have taught e.g. critics of the Guardian and the main newspapers of Prague, Riga, Vilnius, Bratislava and Berlin – are often very cynical, which is easy to understand if they e.g. see and write about 250 exhibitions or 150 performances every year. I have been surprising the participants e.g. by bringing in the artist to the sessions where we read critiques of his/her work, a ‘trap’ which has forced some too routine-based authors to take a new dialogical stance toward the work. The most memorable one was when the performer and Pina Bausch choreographer Raimund Hughe suddenly popped up on our course to read the critiques written about his solo work in a workshop I gave at the Exodos Theatre Festival in Ljubljana in 2008. Hughe had been a critic himself and he analyzed the critiques in a very engaged manner and students had to explain what they had written. I had put the most disturbing texts aside but I hadn’t told this to the students, so I saw some of them were sweating throughout the discussion. Hughe himself said he enjoyed this, and I have since used this in my critique teaching.

In the beginning, every year, with a new group of people who’s main interest is not theory, I feel that it is important to make theory somehow easy to approach. I call the first lectures of the year geisha lectures. I try to softly and as seductively as possible show what philosophy/aesthetics/theory are about, and why one could have benefits from studying these disciplines. On these inaugurating lectures I often talk a lot of loose stuff to make it easier for the participants/students to join the discussion, and so far it has worked quite well, although I am always exhausted afterwards.

I have tried to develop myself a lot by experimenting. Usually the major part of my course is based on something I know by heart, and then 20-30 is about trying out new ideas. New forms of teaching

are always illuminative, and they help students to see that doing theory is an art form as well. I have been giving short lectures the length of short films that I have showed (e.g. 4 minutes 13 seconds) and I have lectured by writing with a computer (big size text on the wall).

My craziest teaching gig? I was asked to teach Picasso for Citroën dealers in 2001. Most of them wanted to just know what Picasso paintings cost... but one dealer actually owned a cheap Picasso sketch! The gig went well and I was also asked to write about Roland Barthes for the Citroen client magazine.

1 TEACHING EXPERIENCE (INCLUDING SUPERVISION)

I started my teaching career by being twice the tutor in aesthetics during my studies (1996, 1997). In 1998 a friend who was linguist then fixed me classes at Kerava Language School, where I worked for one year (1997-1998) as a teacher of Swedish. I was surprised about the strength of the 'aura of the teacher' – students listened carefully to everything I said – but I did not really enjoy teaching languages as I was often just supposed to give the 'right' answer.

This was to change when I started teaching scholarly matters. January 2000 I taught my first university course, as a teacher per hours at Helsinki University. It was a course in aesthetics, more exactly a course in the aesthetics of popular culture, and I felt more at home. There were no right answers anymore, but there were arguments and theories we could discuss and analyze.

I received a teaching position as a lecturer in February 2006, at the Department of Art and Media at the University of Art and Design Helsinki (later Aalto ARTS), and started to teach academic skills, aesthetics, urban studies, film theory, history of mass culture and mass media, art critique, and something I called gallery and museum philosophy. For years I was responsible for the Introduction Course of the whole MA program of Visual Culture (to which all the teachers contributed), and now I am doing the same as I am the director of the expanded version of the same, Visual Culture and Contemporary Art (vicca.fi). As the students, who are all artists and most of them political, come from 25 different countries it is sometimes craving to get people together, but it seems to work mostly.

I still have a living relationship to my main Alma Mater, the University of Helsinki, through being adjunct professor in the faculty of human sciences (docent), but lately I haven't been teaching there. So far I have anyway lectured in **18 universities and colleges**, without forgetting a broad variety of private organizations/festivals (F.I.T., SPACE), all and all in **9 countries** – and **close to 100 courses**.

I have good memories from e.g. **Lancaster University, Trondheim Art Academy, the Royal University College of Fine Arts Stockholm, the Academy of Fine Art and Design Bratislava, Riga Academy of Culture, the Academy of Art in Tallinn, the University of Turku, the**

University of Lapland, the Theatre Academy of Finland, and festivals like Exodos Ljubljana, Homo Alibi Riga, New Dance in a New Venue and New Baltic Dance Vilnius.

(For a concise list of teaching visits, see: <http://maxryynanen.net/teaching/>, or look at a short list in the end of this portfolio)

As a **supervisor** of **MA theses** (~8 ongoing / **70 finished**) and **PhD dissertations** (**1 finished (Henriikka Huunan-Seppälä), 3 ongoing**) I have always been of the breed that wants to understand where the student is heading, and who then joins this ‘trip’ as a kind of an executive (‘hip hop’) producer. I would be a bad supervisor for someone who does not have aspirations to go his/her own way, so I am happy that my teaching position is in an art university unit. My main method with insecure students is to be very warm and spontaneous, to open up dialogue – but in the end I can also crave a lot, especially concerning the student’s personal way of thinking, on how to get that to a communicable plane. I am besides ViCCA / Aalto ARTS supervising students in fashion (same school), media (same school) and photography (University of Art and Design Bratislava). When supervising, I often have to enter territories, where I am not familiar with the materials and perspectives involved. But then I think the main thing is to try to use my experience to help the student to build his/her project.

When the teaching encourages experimentalism, it is hard to assess courses – but sometimes that is of course still important. I try to take a pedagogical stance on this. I tell the students very clearly that my points of view stem from a certain tradition and they might choose another road. (I sincerely believe in multiculturalism in the world of art and scholarly work.) On courses where I give grades, I give the students the matrix I use for the assessment, to make it more transparent. E.g. in a 0-5 point assessment I have often used the following (simplified here): 1 point for sending me an essay (right length) that makes sense, 1 for including legitimate thinkers/facts in the text, 1 for a good analysis and use of sources of knowledge, 1 for a good structure, and 1 for ‘je ne sais qua’, for just being good however hard that is to explain in words. I state clearly that it is good to attend the lectures for a better understanding of me and the traditions I represent so that the student would get a glimpse of the enigmatic issue ‘what is really good work’. I have noticed that students like dogmas. This is why I never give extra time for submitting essays for courses. I always make this clear in the beginning of the course, and I have noticed that I still get as many in the end – so I save their Christmas and summer holidays by not accepting late contributions.

Assessing MA theses is hard work in this business, but it is a bit easier – as the work is more profound and rich in content than an essay for a course, and because the student really has to dig up knowledge and to work out something on his/her own, there is a lot to grab. It is easier to assess MA theses for Science Universities (like Helsinki University) because the criteria are very simple, but it is much more rewarding and philosophical work to assess MA theses in an ‘art school’.

I have been on the **board of 3 PhD theses defenses**, one in the University of Eastern Finland (2013, Virpi Kaukio, Environmental Aesthetics, opponent) and another in Jyväskylä University (Susanne Ylönen, 2015, opponent), then one in Turku University (Musicology): Sini Mononen (2018, evaluator). I have an invitation to be **on the board in Madrid (Complutensa)** in September 2019 for a work in artistic research (Mari Vergara; I already evaluated the work), and this will be my fourth one. In the first two ones I was the opponent throughout the ritual. My main goal in both

cases was to leave a beautiful memory, in the sense exclaimed by the Stoics, later reawakened by Michel Foucault. Academic rituals are intense and focused dialogues, where the candidate is tested, but in the end embraced with the perennial tradition.

Often I feel that I am like a theory plumber wherever I am working at. When new discussions are fostered, I am often asked to come to discuss and talk. I like the role, though.

2 DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING, EXPERIENCE IN COURSE AND CURRICULUM

I have taken part in building two MA programs for Aalto ARTS, “Visual Culture”, which was active from 2006 to 2014, and “Visual Culture and Contemporary Art” (2014-), so I have experience and knowledge on program building (and the incredible amount of time it takes).

I sat in the educational board of the school from 2006 to 2009, which gave insight into the variety of possible problems one can have in university.

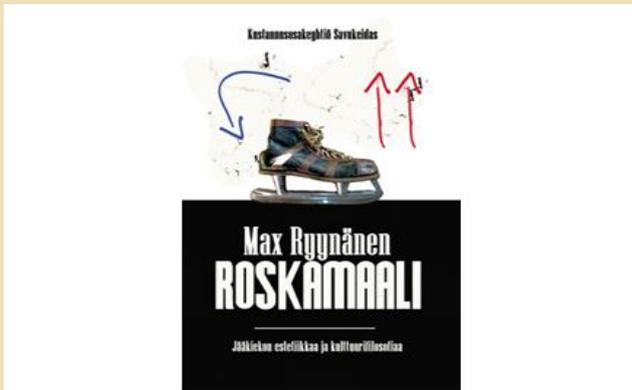
I am not an active user of technology, but more of a Socratic teacher. I like to have contact with my students, and I like to be present – but later on I often add facts, hints on good literature and other comments to course blogs that I have in the internet. The blogs are what I use for my teaching really a lot, and the students find all the materials there. For me the blog is like a manuscript and an archive, and on most theme courses I feel that the outcome should be a pedagogical art work, a work which lingers into the topic and the methodologies, and where the whole is more than its particles. Year after year I keep updating the blogs, until it is time for a new concept. This is my way of developing my own courses.

3 TEACHING MATERIALS

As there are so many introduction books nowadays I have grown uncomfortable with them. They often give you the idea that you could package theoretical thinking somewhat easily, but as art, good theoretical thinking is too complex for that. You need to study it in detail and as a whole to really get it. Even on intro courses I make students read original texts. Afterwards they are usually very happy about this.

On the other hand I have found it nice to write essayistically so that everyone could easily approach the study. One could say that I have been hiding pedagogical attitudes and teaching materials in easy-to-grab products. In Roskamaali (“Garbage Goal”, Savukeidas 2012) I analyzed ice hockey from the point of view of aesthetics and art theory. I was happy that I got response from hockey journalists and hockey players on issues that actually were classical problems of aesthetics – from

harmony to the appreciation of movement, but originally I meant it to be a pedagogical Trojan horse. (See pic below.)



4 TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

I don't have any systematic beliefs or ideas about what teaching should be. Like art, I think teaching is an open concept (maybe a 'chain concept', as Wittgenstein would put it). You could maybe also call it site-specific or case sensitive: it has to find new ways of working in different places, in different times, and different people.

5 PEDAGOGICAL EDUCATION

2005-2007 Taikopeda (25 cr).

2012-2015 Pedagogical studies for Aalto ARTS (60 cr).

The first time that I studied pedagogy was on a **summer course** with Jude Carroll, Jörgen Bang and Kirsti Lonka in Tartu University – summer 2001. It made me think about how to supervise, how to assess and how to teach – better. The course, organized with Nordplus funding, was so good that I immediately entered pedagogical education when I had the possibility to do it.

I studied art university pedagogy in **Taikopeda** in **2005-2007**. I finished with **25 credits** of studies in a programme that included people from the Sibelius Academy, the Theatre Academy, The University of Art and Design Helsinki and the Academy of Fine Art.

2012-2015 I studied in a programme (**60 credits**) for Teacher Education in Aalto University – and this one I finished in late 2015, so by getting myself to become a legitimate teacher according to Finnish Law.

(All an all I have 88 credits of pedagogical studies.)

6 EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

2006-2009 Head of the MA programme Visual Culture at the University of Art and Design Helsinki

2017- Head of the MA programme Visual Culture, Curating, and Contemporary Art (Aalto)

2010 Vice Head of the Department of Art and Media

Most theorists work course by course (per hours) or apply for one or two year funding (in Finland the job situation is very very hard), but I have been lucky. I have had a steady job (I started 2006 and got tenured late 2009) for 12 years.

I also spent my three first years of teaching as the head of the MA programme for visual culture in the University of Art and Design Helsinki, continuing then for a year and a half as the professor deputy and a year as the vice director of the whole department.

2017 I started again as the head of Visual Culture and Contemporary Art (vicca.fi). Having 130 students aboard and being the supervisor for 6 people working here is quite a challenge, and there is a lot of administration, but it is also very rewarding. One can really have an impact, if one works successfully.

I have actually been very lucky to learn about administrative procedures on all levels. Besides my history as the vice director of the department and the head of two different MA programs, I have been e.g. a member of the education board of my university, and I have been happy to realize that I am one of those not typical people who are able to read, write and do things although they'd have a lot to do also administratively speaking. I produce even when I am loaded with leadership. I am also thankful that I started in a very small department and could learn all these roles.

7 OTHER TEACHING MERITS

Thinking about other teaching merits, my most important output might be my written reflections of teaching. My main interest here has been to discuss the role of theory teaching in art programmes and debating the role of pedagogy in the art field. The four texts I have written (some co-written, see below) have helped me to understand what I am doing.

“Teaching as a Work of Art.” With Taina Rajanti and Pia Euro. In Teija Löytönen (ed). *Synnyt/Births* (Finnish Journal for Art Education) 2015: 2. 41-61.

Art and Education - or the dark side of pedagogy. A dialogue. With Christiana Galanopoulou. *Synnyt/Origins. Finnish Studies on Art.* 2011 September. 1-16.

“Lopputyön teoreettisen osan ohjaamisen erityisongelmia taideyliopistoissa.” [Problems in Supervising Theoretical MA Theses in Art Universities.] *Synnyt* 2007: 2. 54-61.

”Kättilö kasvattajana ja kasvatettavana. Teorian opettamisesta taiteilijoille.” [The Midwife as an Educator – and Someone Being Educated.] *Synnyt. Taidekasvatuksen tiedonala* 2006: 4. 34-40.

APPENDIX: A SHORT LIST OF WORKSHOPS, TEACHING PER HOURS, COURSES AT OTHER UNIVERSITIES AND VISITING LECTURES

Forthcoming

Estonian Academy of Art, Heretical Introduction to Visual Culture (artists, curators, art historians), January 2020.

2019

Estonian Academy of Art, Heretical Introduction to Visual Culture (artists, curators, art historians), January

2018

Visited **Burtnieki (Latvia)** as a member of the [LAUKKU](#) collective and taught visual culture studies for social workers and their clients in an experimental societal event curated by Inta Balode. Cooperation with curator Valts Mikelsons and coreographer Linda Krumina.

I spent a week teaching A Heretical Introduction to Visual Culture in the **Estonian Academy of Art** January 15-18 (CIRRUS). The students were from curation, art history and visual culture.

2017

I visited the Latvian **Academy of Culture**, Feb 4-6, and taught *Authorship & Agency*, i.e. what is an author and what is there to learn from our artistic and philosophical agencies if we start to reflect on them. The students were from the school's MA programmes of film, coreography and theatre. Readings included e.g. Foucault's "What is an author?" Pic from Liepaja beach (Inta Balode).



2015

New Dance in a New Venue 2015 at **Saldus (Latvia)**. Teaching dance writing together with Annemari Autere, Elina Gatjukevica, Luciana Achiugar, Moa Sahlin and Sesselja Magnusdottir. Producer: Inta Balode. August 2015.



Visiting lectures: The Boundaries of Aesthetics study group at Helsinki University (4 hrs) on the future of the aesthetics of popular culture (Nov).

2014

New Dance in a New Venue at **Cesis (Latvia)**: One week lab for dance professionals with Lily Skove, Valerijš Olehno and Annemari Autere for Writing Movement (org.: Inta Balode): philosophy of the body/mind, somaesthetics and the theme machine/animal. October.



University of Lapland at Rovaniemi (Finland): a one week course for art students on sound, light and philosophy with Antti Ikonen. February.

Visiting lectures: Aesthetics for MA students of Lighting at the Art University Helsinki (one day visit).

2013

New Dance in a New Venue at Rezekne (Latvia): Lab for critics & producers with Kristina Sörensen, Annemari Autere, Ingrida Gerb and Olga Zitluhina for Writing Movement. Org.: Inta Balode. Somaesthetics and philosophy of regionality. August.

2011

Academy of Art and Design at Bratislava Slovakia: visiting lecture on a Course on Art Theory (Jozef Kovalcik).

2010

Homo Alibi Theatre Festival at Riga Latvia / SPACE, Programmers on the Move: Visiting lecture at the New Latvian Theatre Institute (org.: Laura Stasane).

Art Academy Trondheim Norway: Visual Arts & Architecture: urban studies & contemporary art.

2008

Exodos Theater Festival at Ljubljana Slovenia: Festivals in Transition / Mobile Lab: Theme of the writing LAB: gonzo journalism. Guests: Rok Vevar & Raimund Hoghe.

Homo Alibi Theater Festival at Riga Latvia: Festivals in Transition / Mobile Lab: Theme of writing LAB: interpretation. Guest: Penny Francis.

University of Helsinki: Aesthetics / Semiotics: Kitsch & Camp (Together with Susanna Välimäki).

Theater Academy of Finland: Degree Program in Lighting: visiting lecture (day) on aesthetics and light art.

Helsinki School of Economics: Language and Culture: lecture on art.

2007

Royal University College of Fine Arts at Stockholm: Contemporary Art: lecture on semiotics of art.

Open University of Helsinki: Aesthetics / Semiotics: aesthetics and semiotics of media

Theater Academy: Degree Program in Lighting: visiting lecture (day) on aesthetics and light art.

University of Art and Design Helsinki: Department of Film: lecture on film and urban studies.

Helsinki School of Economics: Language and Culture: lecture on art.

2006

Open University of Helsinki: Aesthetics / Semiotics: Aesthetics and Semiotics of Media.

Theater Academy: Stage Design: visiting lecture (day) on aesthetics and light art.

University of Art and Design Helsinki: Textile Design: lecture on kitsch.

Helsinki School of Economics: Language and Culture: lecture on art.

University of Turku: Idea History: lecture on urban aesthetics.

2005

Open University of Helsinki: Semiotics: Semiotics of MTV.

2004

University of Art and Design Helsinki: Environmental MA program: Entertainment Environments.

University of Art and Design Helsinki: Department of Visual Culture: introduction to aesthetics.

2003

University of Helsinki: Aesthetics: Art Critique.

University of Lancaster UK: Philosophy: Aesthetics of Pop Art (teaching exchange).

2002

University of Art and Design Helsinki: Art Education: Aesthetics and Semiotics of Popular Culture.

2001

University of Helsinki: Aesthetics: Art Critique.

Open University of Helsinki: Aesthetics: Aesthetics of Kitsch.

2000

Helsinki Open University: Semiotics: semiotics of popular culture

University of Helsinki: Aesthetics: popular culture critique.

I have also been teaching and lecturing at e.g. Finnish university colleges (Helsinki, Turku, Tampere, Kuopio, Kankaanpää).