

SPACE TUNER: SCULPTURE AS CATALYST IN THE WORK OF ANTERO TOIKKA



‘A work of art tunes the space,
and the space tunes an experience’
(Toikka, 2000: 2)

Art, as this quotation rightly suggests, has the wherewithal to tune both space and experience. To *tune* is ‘to adapt, put into accord, or make responsive, in respect of some physical quality or condition’ (OED: vol. 17, 670). The sculpture of Antero Toikka is especially adept at eliciting a response from its surroundings. It tunes space. As such, I wish to address a selection of his work from two interrelated perspectives: the spatial and the contextual.

Let us begin with a piece that deals with that most intimate of spaces: a corner. *Nurkka* (1988) consists of a tetrahedron-shaped piece of concrete accompanied by four photographs (see Kaitavuori, 1993: 192). Together these serve to both depict and define the intersection of two walls and a floor. In the images, we are made aware of the presence and absence of the deliberately placed object. We see it in reality whilst at the same time the photographs prompt us to imagine its disappearance. The pictures evoke both spatial and temporal displacement. They point to a time when this space was merely an unexceptional corner, and remind us that it is destined to revert to this mundane status. Moreover, any subtle differences between the photographed-corner and the actual-corner reveal that this work has either been set-up elsewhere or that changes have occurred since its installation. The subsequent search for disparities heightens the viewer’s visual faculties and we take in facets that would otherwise be overlooked: from patterns on the floor, to adhesions and abrasions on the wall.

As the title implies, *Nurkka* (Corner) is as much about context as it is content. It is a peculiarly self-effacing composition. The work modestly fades into the corner. Where does the sculpture stop and the corner begin, and vice versa? Paradoxically this is surely only apparent when the work is dismantled. For *Nurkka* is included in the collection of the Finnish National Gallery (B II 940) and, as with any such artefact, it appears and disappears as exhibitions come and go. From the moment it is carefully packed away it enters another dimension: that of the museum store. When there the space of the corner is folded up, collapsed and compressed. Its function is rendered latent as it awaits new corners to inhabit and temporarily transform.

Now this points to an important aspect of Toikka's oeuvre. It can be understood if one likens his sculpture to a *catalyst*. The Swedish chemist Jöns Jakob Berzelius (1779–1848) coined the term 'catalysis' to describe 'the effect produced in facilitating a chemical reaction, by the presence of a substance, which itself undergoes no permanent change' (OED: vol. 2, 968). *Nurkka* does something very similar. It could occupy any number of disparate corners. In every one it would trigger a series of reactions: each being subtly modified by the exact nature of its surroundings. After every siting it could be 'recovered unchanged' (Lawrence, 1995: 88), ready to be relocated elsewhere. The effects of catalysts have been likened to chain reactions in their ability to repeat reactive processes (Parker, 1993: 166). The same is true of *Nurkka*.

The 'catalytic force' (Berzelius cited in Abbott, 1983: 18) of sculpture is even more pronounced in Toikka's overtly itinerant works. Like *Nurkka* they occupy spaces and change them both physically and metaphorically. *Wanderer* (*Vaeltaja*, 2000) epitomises this phenomenon. It has formed one element of 'Landscape Gallery', a series of ten sculptures sited along highway five – a 180km route in eastern Finland linking Varkaus and Sonkajärvi (Raatikainen, 2002). As the title suggests, this tripod-like form has intentionally been moved and removed. Each site marks a stage in what amounts to a chain reactive process.

Another term for catalysis is 'contact action' (OED: vol. 2, 968). This is a markedly apposite phrase for encapsulating the effect of Toikka's sculptures on the space around them. During 1991-92 his work *Himmeli* (1991) toured the city of Helsinki, temporarily occupying a different site each month. Its *active contact* is recorded in the images and recollections of each occupation: the red, angular steel form was at one time juxtaposed against the rocky fortifications on Suomenlinna; on another occasion it echoed the rigid symmetry of the Ateneum art gallery.¹

Taking on the mantle of a catalyst *Himmeli* facilitates a reaction. This sense is intensified if one amalgamates *catalysis* with a further definition of the verb 'tune' where it means to 'put into a proper condition for producing some effect' (OED: vol. 17, 670). Toikka's work is extremely effective at marshalling (or *conditioning*) the space around it. This is amplified by the nomadic nature of certain works. They wring new changes and inspire novel experiences from

¹ See <http://www.taidemuseo.hel.fi/suomi/veisto/himmeli.htm> [accessed 30.01.04]

every site they occupy. Permanence and intransigence are eschewed in favour of alternative sites and relationships. As such they lack any unconditional character or *absolute identity*. Toikka's deliberations on art, space and experience cited at the beginning of this article were themselves prompted by the ideas of Kari-Pekka Enqvist (born 1954), a Professor of Cosmology at Helsinki University. These particularly relate to his observations concerning 'matter fields'. Enqvist asserts that they possess 'no absolute identity' but rather arise and exist in relation to a vacuum (Enqvist, 1999). An appreciation that art too lacks any unconditional character has been fruitfully seized upon by the works of Toikka discussed thus far.

The fact that Toikka's appreciation of art has been informed by science is significant. It gives a degree of legitimacy to the analogies drawn between the process of catalysis ('contact action') and the nature of sculpture. The validity of this is further strengthened by the explicit impetus that science has given to Toikka's work. An instance of this is the group show curated by Toikka entitled *The Sun, Moon and Stars* (Reykjavik 22 April – 14 May 2000). All the exhibits were linked by these stellar phenomena. Toikka's submission bore the title *Galaxy clusters*. It took as its theme the 'all-sky survey' of galaxies undertaken in 1983 by the multinational *Infrared Astronomical Satellite* (IRAS). The data from this investigation was reprocessed to produce the *IRAS Sky Survey Atlas* (ISSA) – an 'atlas of images covering the entire sky'.² In many ways the visual quality of its findings rival those images taken by the more famous Hubble Space Telescope currently in orbit some 380 miles above the Earth.³ An evocation of this is Toikka's *Galaxy clusters*, which deploys the aesthetic potential of the ISSA data in brilliant fashion. Toikka has remarked (2000: 33) that IRAS mapped some 15,500 galaxies within a cube, the sides of which are the equivalent to 7,200 times the diameter of The Milky Way. *Galaxy clusters* consists of a pair of steel plates that takes two orthogonal planes through the centre of this cube. The flat surfaces are pierced by sinuous openings. These voids in fact represent regions of higher density than the un-perforated sections. Where we are – The Milky Way – is at the centre of this nothingness, hovering in the space formed by Toikka's sculpture.

In *Galaxy clusters* a cube is represented by two planes: we mentally reconstruct the missing components. Likewise, the tilted form of *Himmeli* gives the impression that it is a complete cube that has been partially submerged into the ground. Both works evince the importance of solid and void. In *Galaxy clusters* these two states are inverted: density is accorded translucence, emptiness opacity. Similarly it is a lattice of steel rails that sketches out the dimensions of *Himmeli*. The spaces in between are as significant as the linear gestures of metal. Such spatial conjuring was at one time played out on a much larger scale. To mark the millennium the red cuboid *Himmeli* was joined by two analogous works: the blue, spherical *Omega* (1993) and a yellow pyramidal piece entitled *Alfa* (2000). Positioned at distances of one kilometre apart the sculptures became points in an equilateral triangle mapped out in a region of eastern Helsinki. In this

² See <http://lambda.gsfc.nasa.gov/product/iras> [accessed 10.02.04].

³ For instances of this see <http://hubblesite.org> [accessed 10.02.04].

arrangement each sculpture formed one element of an illustrative whole: at micro and macro level they literally functioned like *diagrams* in that each represented 'an illustrative figure which, without representing the exact appearance of an object, gives an outline or general scheme of it, so as to exhibit the shape and relations of its various parts' (OED: vol. 4, 597). This recalls the manner in which *Nurkka* charts the corner of a wall but without describing it entirely. Analogously *Galaxy clusters* invokes unimaginably vast distances which are conveyed in diagrammatic form.

It is therefore especially fitting that such disparities of scale resonate in another manner when it comes to *Galaxy clusters*. For the diminutiveness of its dimensions are exacerbated yet further in comparison to the towering *Valo ja aine* (*Light and matter*, 2002). This sublime composition reiterates the sentiments expressed in the earlier sculpture. On this occasion a vast wall of polished stainless steel is inscribed with the same curving cosmological form. It functions like an enormous celestial mirror against the eternally shifting skies. At night four up-lights create columns of illumination, the beams of which are reflected and refracted by the burnished wall. *Valo ja aine* constitutes an aesthetically and thematically apposite adjunct to Helsinki University's *Physicum* building (Kumpula, 2001; architects: Lahdelma & Mahlamäki). It is in tune with its surroundings. A further catalyst in other words, but this time one that is intended to endure.

Sources

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