

Jaana Erkkilä-Hill, DA  
Professor, Visual Arts  
University of Lapland  
jaana.erkkila-hill@ulapland.fi

## **Understanding the marginal through art practice**

Hannah Arendt: "*Once they had left their homeland they remained homeless, once they had left their state they became stateless; once they had been deprived of their human rights they were rightless, the scum of the earth.*"

My presentation is about how to use art practice as a method to create knowledge, and to process that knowledge in order to understand the marginal. The case is about looking at homelessness as phenomena, how it is created and what are the mechanisms in society that pushes individuals into margins. In this case I created a story that took inspiration from somebody's life that I followed through a window.

I have always been interested in people in the margins and I guess that this interest has come from my encounters with all kinds of people through literature and a great diversity among people with whom I have shared life in different places and circumstances. The world of stories open up new ways of seeing life. Through different art forms we can experience a life of others', at least we can try to understand something that is different from our ways, out of our firsthand experience.

Miss Toplin



I recall a memory from the past, some thirty years ago. It was spring, a light evening in May and I was working in the print making studio in the Finnish State Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki. There were big windows in the studio and a table in front of them. From my table I could see the National Opera on the other side of the back yard. And between these two national institutions of arts there was the back yard and five big containers for litter. In the three middle ones there were people living in.

I worked on my copper plates and looked at a small group of men and a woman sitting on the containers and chatting like any company of friends in their garden. They saw me looking at them and waved their hands and I returned the greeting. After a while they opened the containers, climbed in and went to sleep, I suppose. I continued my work, but could not stop thinking about people in the back yard of cultural corner stones of the nation. Living in a big grey container, in which you could not even stretch your legs did not feel right, not even in spring when ice has melted away and temperature is supposed to get milder.

I started to create a story about a homeless woman, Miss Toplin, who lived in a garbage bin. I wanted to understand how some of us might end up in the streets, being homeless, scum of the earth. Nobody plans such a future for him or herself. We all dream about a good life, but for some of us it never happens.



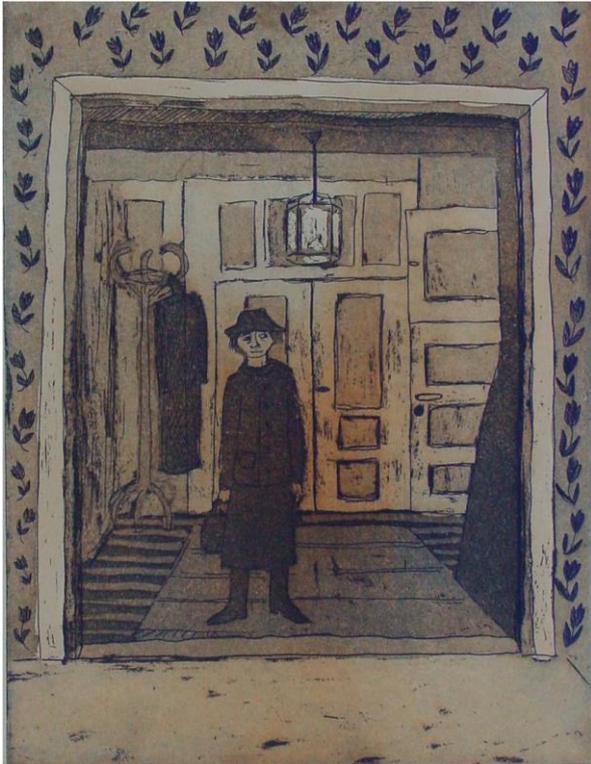
*Miss Toplin lives in this town. The town is not too big, not too small either. It is a town just right size for human beings. You can walk up and down, from one side of the town to the other end without feeling exhausted. And the town is by a sea which is a very good thing, indeed. If your feet ever get tired, you can dip them in a cool water and feel how everything will be fine after all. You can sit down and quietly look at the unknown future on the other side of the sea.*

*What is a future, Miss Toplin was wondering. She had difficulties in understanding even her own past. While walking up and down the streets she saw this peculiar figure wavering in reflections from show windows and she could not quite make up her mind whether she knew this creature or not. How far can a future be, when you are old and fragile like a dry branch cracking in a wind? Could future be further away than death?*

According to statistics there are around 7000 homeless people in Finland and about 1800 of them are women. The number of homeless women is increasing. In UK the number of deaths among homeless in London during the year 2016 is 160 by November. The average age of dying among homeless people is 47. In UK there are no statistics about how many people are homeless, because it varies how you define homelessness. Still only in London it is estimated that around 8000 people sleep rough every night.

My way of trying to understand the homeless and on the other hand ideas about home has always gone through art practice combined with searching for information. When I am in UK I always buy the Big Issue. The Finnish version is Iso Numero. Through narratives, visual and written, I am trying to see and understand the mechanisms in our society that marginalizes people, makes them invisible and when visible, makes them feeling ashamed and guilty about their condition.

The most common reason for people to be marginalized is and has been poverty. If you are wealthy, you can afford being eccentric. But if your material resources are limited, anything and everything that stands out as out of normal or mediocrity is looked upon as a proof against you. You are called unemployed only if you need social benefits for your living. You can be equally out of work market, but not be called unemployed if you have capital to live on.



*Miss Toplin has heard people talking about trish-trash, scum of the earth, and she knows that by the expression they mean other human beings, people even in better circumstances than herself. Trish-trash folk that they talk about is living in houses with central heating. They have cold and hot water running from tub, a luxury that Miss Toplin can hardly recall. Those who regard themselves something different from trish-trash think that certain parts of the town are not good to live in; only scum of the earth resides there. So how does it happen, Miss Toplin asks herself, do some parts of the town make people to become scum of the earth or are the people who are trish-trash making the parts of the town undesirable for anyone else? Who is planning these parts of the towns and who is planning where everyone lives? It cannot be the scum itself, because the scum cannot think and plan, it can only spread smell and diseases. Right?*

*The good people, those who write letters to the editor, do not want homeless to live too close to them. If you take homeless people in your neighborhood the value of your house goes down and down and what good is that for! Not even those who are dealing with the homeless all day long in their offices want to live too close to them. You need to get a little bit distance from your work. Professional helpers want to live*

*in good parts of the town with clean and perfumed neighbors, because they have good education and that should give you good company, not the scum of the earth.*

Through fiction it is possible to say aloud things that we all somehow know are true, but we could not make such statements in a strictly academic paper. I can claim within a story about Miss Toplin that people who professionally work with homeless people, and by that I mean social workers in the first place, do not really want to associate with their clients in their free time, not especially as neighbors. Further on one can extend the argument and say that people in general don't want to be too close to those ones who are in margins, outside our well organized society with written and unwritten rules. Are we afraid that marginality could be a virus or a bacteria and infect us too? Or is it too inconvenient to be constantly reminded that we live in an unjust world? According to my experience we can raise many essential questions through storytelling and visual narratives. We can speak out in different voices and find our own narrative voice.



*Miss Toplin thought always the little town where she lived as her home. But she could not quite make it clear how she was always outside, when actually when being at home you should be inside. What it means to be out or in? People say that they are eating out, but how can they possibly sit inside in a nice restaurant and it is only Miss Toplin who is outside and looks puzzled and hungry? And when she goes home into her container, she is still outside, although she is in? Confusing thoughts. Who could explain when someone is in and when she is out? Where is inside and where is outside?*

There is an increasing number of researchers especially in the fields of ethnography, sociology, anthropology and arts-based research who are seriously looking for different ways to write academic texts. William G. Tierney has suggested already twenty years ago (1997) that we really should move on towards more experiential writing from the standardized model of academic research reports. Anthropologists have used fictive narratives as part of their research reports years back. Zora Neale Hurston has written a story in Bakhtian style as early as 1935 in order to tell about black American population in South parts of USA. I used Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic writing in my PhD dissertation to describe how someone can take power over the others and how you can overcome oppression by laughing at it.

Patricia Leavy has written a book about Fiction as Research Practice. And if we want to look really back into history, Edmund Husserl claimed that fiction can reveal truth much better than so called hard facts. Sigmund Freud made his psychiatric cases into stories and explained that only this way can he show what happens in human mind. Mircea Eliade said that fiction is a way to wrap knowledge in such a form that it is possible to understand. In Finnish field of artistic and arts-based research especially Juha Varto has been influential in promoting fiction as a way to create knowledge. Porter H. Abbot argues that we humans as a specie cannot believe that something is true, unless we can make it into a story. He writes about narrative voice that is essential for creating knowledge and understanding anything at all.

Carolyn Ellis refers to Tolstoy's story about Death of Ivan Ivanovich and how the story actually tells more about death than any sociological research report that she has ever read. Tolstoy has been an inspiration for Ellis, a social scientist, and she has found a new way to write. She describes how she went through a process of nine years to find her authentic voice as an academic writer and to change the paradigm of writing sociological texts.



Sometimes a process of making art, writing, doing research takes sideways. You start following a path that feels interesting, inviting. It might be that you have experienced something that feels relevant, but you cannot quite know in which way. In my story about Miss Toplin many ingredients were mixed with one another. My Miss Toplin is a collection of several images put together. There is the first lady in the container. Some years later I saw an old woman singing in underground in St.Petersburg. The woman had a beautiful although aged voice. She was fragile, had an old winter coat and a plastic box hanging in her neck. She became part of Miss Toplin story. I imagined her as an opera singer or music teacher in her young days and now, in her eighties she was singing in the streets and hoping to get some coins for buying food. I thought how little we know about the reasons that have led some people to streets, hallways and tunnels in undergrounds of big cities.

The story about Miss Toplin has developed through the years. I believe strongly in slow processes where understanding grows and takes new forms. I feel that as artists and designers we have a great responsibility to use our gift in order to speak a different language. I see my art and research as political, although I don't use documentary photography or film as a mean to create knowledge. My way is a story teller's way, a way of imaginative worlds and images behind closed eyes.



*The wind was blowing. Miss Toplin sat down on a rock by the sea and opened her mouth in order to get fresh air. She needed oxygen. Human beings need oxygen to stay alive. Suddenly she felt how her empty stomach created such heavy thoughts in her head that her head was about to fall off. How can it be that an empty stomach can make your head so heavy that it falls off? She was alright with the oxygen, but it did not bring any relief for a hungry belly, nor did it keep her head fast in its place. A*

*headless person is no good for the society, nor a body without a head. But what about someone without a heart? What if there is only a hole where a heart should be, and the wind blows through you all the time?*

We are living troubled times when more and more people go hungry and homeless. I think that there is a limit how much information we are able to get through media that shows documentary material in audio-visual forms. We need information that speaks to our hearts. Rationally we can put refugees, asylum seekers, homeless ones and people in prisons aside and say that we have done our duty; they have messed their own lives and there is nothing we can do about it. But when we face them as our fellow human beings through visual and literal narratives, we have to take action, or otherwise we are the ones without heart, and the wind can blow through the hole in our chest and there is nowhere we can hide our inhumanity.