

Practice, Interface, and Outcome: Two Interviews in Helsinki

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Critical art practices that use moving images as a medium and that are self-reflective emerged relatively late in the art scene in Finland. The post-Second World War relationship between the Soviet Union and Western Europe instigated a weariness towards the avant-garde, and the mainly leftist-minded intelligentsia were skeptical about “experimentality” and considered it a bourgeois activity (Rastas 2007, 192). Media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo has described the slow arrival of outside artistic influences in the field of experimental audio-visual arts in Cold War Finland as a “belated arising” (Huhtamo 1991, 10).

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the influence of conceptual art brought interdisciplinary and process-led approaches to the film-based arts in Finland. One of the pioneers was Eino Ruutsalo and his hands-on films. By applying methods of his painting practice to his moving-image works, Ruutsalo ploughed a road for the Finnish video and media arts (Home 2013). For Ruutsalo,¹ as for many of his peers, the foundational event that inspired awareness of experimental film occurred in 1968, when Adam P. Sitney stopped over in Finland on his European tour and presented his New American Cinema program as part of the Dipoli Art Happening. The dozens of new films by artists such as Stan Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, Andy Warhol, and others, screened over five days, blew the audiences’ minds away. It was the first time such experimental films had ever been seen in Finland, and with Sitney’s enthusiastic introductions these works had a long-lasting impact on nearly everyone who attended the events. Elina Katainen wrote to the *Kino-magazine* about how “the audience sat as though they were seeing a film for the first time – feeling the same kind of joy as surely the last century’s viewers experienced when they saw the Lumières’s train” (Katainen 1968).

In the fields of experimental music and early electronic arts, things had been developing years before the Dipoli event – and it is safe to say that work by artists like Erkki Kureniemi had a great impact on Finnish visual arts of the time. Later, in the early 1970s, artist and critic Jan-Olof Mallander followed Nam June Paik’s artistic practice and was also in contact with Paik (Katainen 1968). In his 1970

article for *Iiris* magazine, Mallander calls Paik the Che Guevara of art: "He has started at least a thousand guerrilla wars inside art. Follow him!" (87).

430 However, the media arts scene in Finland was limited to a few singular artists until the late 1980s, when the emergence of cheaper analog video technology offered various possibilities to produce and exhibit through newly founded artist collectives and organizations such as the distribution centre AV-arkki, the artists' association Muu, the Helsinki Film Workshop, and the annual Muu Media Festival.² All these groups were interlinked by some of the same artists and were formed to fill different gaps left by the established artist unions, art museums, and filmmakers' organizations – namely, to provide platforms for the emerging new art forms such as video art, media art, experimental film, and performance. By this time, many if not most artists interested in new forms of art had been overseas themselves and brought back with them a huge array of ideas and energy for developing the Finnish art scene. These artist-run organizations become the outlets for this new energy. The Muu Media Festival also had a great influence by enabling a multitude of international artworks to be seen and by bringing international artists to Finland who would often show their work, give talks, do workshops, and teach. At the same time, the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation (Yle) started to screen some video art and make advanced purchases of experimental Finnish media art, contributing to the general awareness of the field as well as directing resources to the production of this kind of art form. Thus, over the years, the production values of some experimental media arts projects have been relatively high thanks to the funding bodies of national cultural foundations, governmental and copyright funding, and the role of the Finnish Broadcasting Corporation as an active partner in funding and airing experimental moving-image works.

One can only speculate how the "belated arising" of the Finnish media art scene has encouraged vital and unique practices and artworks. Much of the art practice in the Finnish media arts appeared over a short time out of a vacuum of tradition and outside influences. The unique Finnish language and culture might have something to do with it, as well as the relatively secure and consistent funding. This emergence has created a string of exceptional artists, starting with pioneers like Eino Ruutsalo and Erkki Kureniemi to contemporaries like Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Mika Taanila, and Erkki Nissinen, whose influences can be felt both nationally and internationally.

In the following, I offer a short discussion with two Finnish artists, Jani Purhonen and Mika Taanila, about their recent practices of very different kinds from the point of view of process and intention.

Reversal Process: Paper Film Experiments of Jani Purhonen

A loop of delicate Japanese style Kozo paper whirls through a massive 35mm Bauer projector with ever increasing instability ... the strong Xenon light penetrates the paper and casts a flurry of butterfly wing-like images on the screen ... before long the beautiful textures of the papers, super magnified fibres and the animated figures (that are really a series of holes in the material) are overcome by fatigue – the sprocket holes in the paper are wasted by the merciless pounding of the German machined steel parts of the projector. The paper loop breaks and we have only bright light beaming on the screen.

– van Ingen 2015

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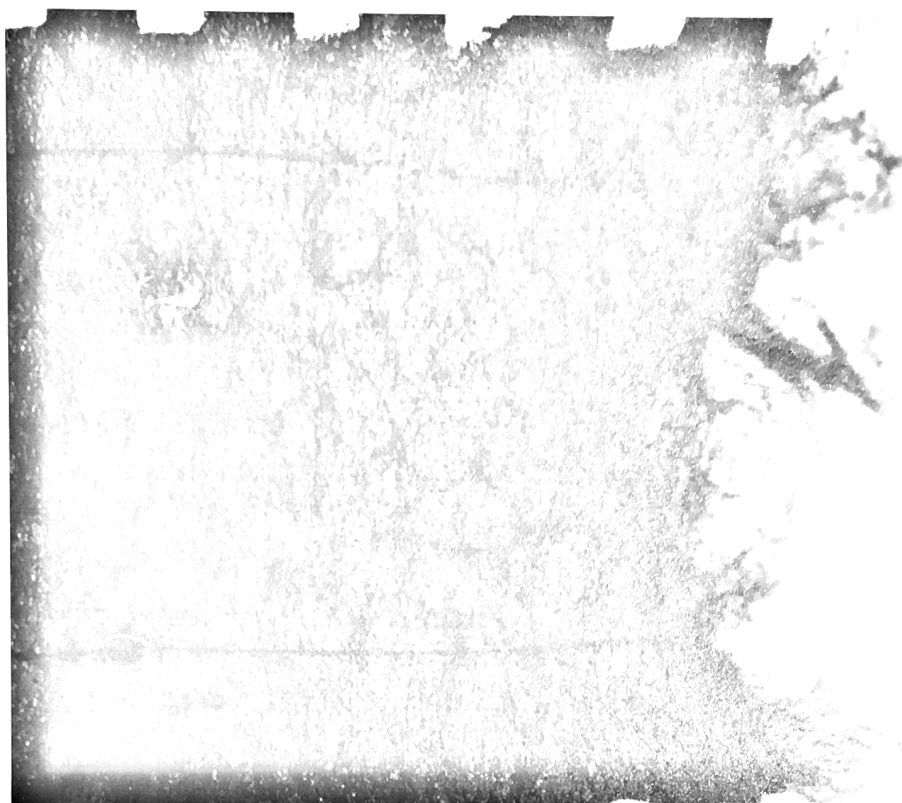
Artist Jani Purhonen's³ experimental film processes and exhibited works fuse together into a practice in which some of his works seem to be in development while on display – the audience is encountering a process rather than a completed, final artwork.

The interfaces of analog and digital film are particularly interesting in his paper film experiments. In this instance, the digital acts as a method for charting or aligning the physical material at hand and for making cut-out animations in the material as well – or, in more practical terms, it acts as a way to precisely shape and cut the handmade paper to fit the projector.

Purhonen noticed that he could use animation software to create cut-out animation outlines and combine these with the shapes of the film format itself – and use the result as templates for a digital paper cutter. He would then use this to make his paper “film” strips. Thus, making the film shape and creating the animation happen in a single workflow.⁴

JANI PURHONEN: The animation that is solely made out of just reducing paper (cut-outs) has a texture in itself and can be accomplished quite delicately and precisely. But what intrigues me is how the material is present in this process, and it is in a different level than if the shapes themselves would be the subject. This animation is really (a series of) simple holes, a couple of shapes that move in space. They are like holes burned by the light. Later I made a version that had stripes or lines that were in motion – these fused into each other and formed shapes. For this I devised a projector of my own that runs the paper film with the intention that the film would not have to break but that it could run in it for hours. But that is already another story.

In his practice, Purhonen sieves from the histories of the film medium but intentionally formulates his works as hybrids between the traditional film technologies and the digital with an aim that this collision has “a point.” In Purhonen's prac-



29.1

Frame enlargement from a Kozo paper film experiment by Jani Purhonen.

tice, the experimental process and exhibited works fuse together. In a way, his audience is encountering a process – or different versions of it.

JP: This does not really have to be defined. When you present something it becomes like a circle in which for some it appears as a ready artwork; for others a work can be part of a process – part of a longer progression. It is useless to define what is what. Things get defined afterwards. The *situation* can be the shape of the artwork – never to be repeated as such, but then the material that has been used can also be a kind of a work in itself.

The Multidisciplinary Rift

Mannerlaatta is a lettrist film that is based on a specifically compiled text and on text-like elements, such as lists, punctuation marks and pauses. Traditionally the reader is in control of at what pace they choose to read. This time the pace is pre-set by someone else. Text “happens” to the reader.

– Mika Taanila, project proposal⁵

In filmmaker and visual artist Mika Taanila’s new feature-length narrative project *Mannerlaatta* (*Tectonic Plate*),⁶ we encounter an extraordinary concoction of chance-encountered image creation and conceptualism in a tightly woven package

of clear-headed thinking and poetry. Taanila is one of the most prominent artists of the Finnish art scene, but also a renowned filmmaker and curator. His previous film, *Return of the Atom* (2015),⁷ had its debut at the Toronto International Film Festival a week before I had a chance to talk⁸ with him about his upcoming film in the cafeteria of his local gas station – one of his favourite meeting places.

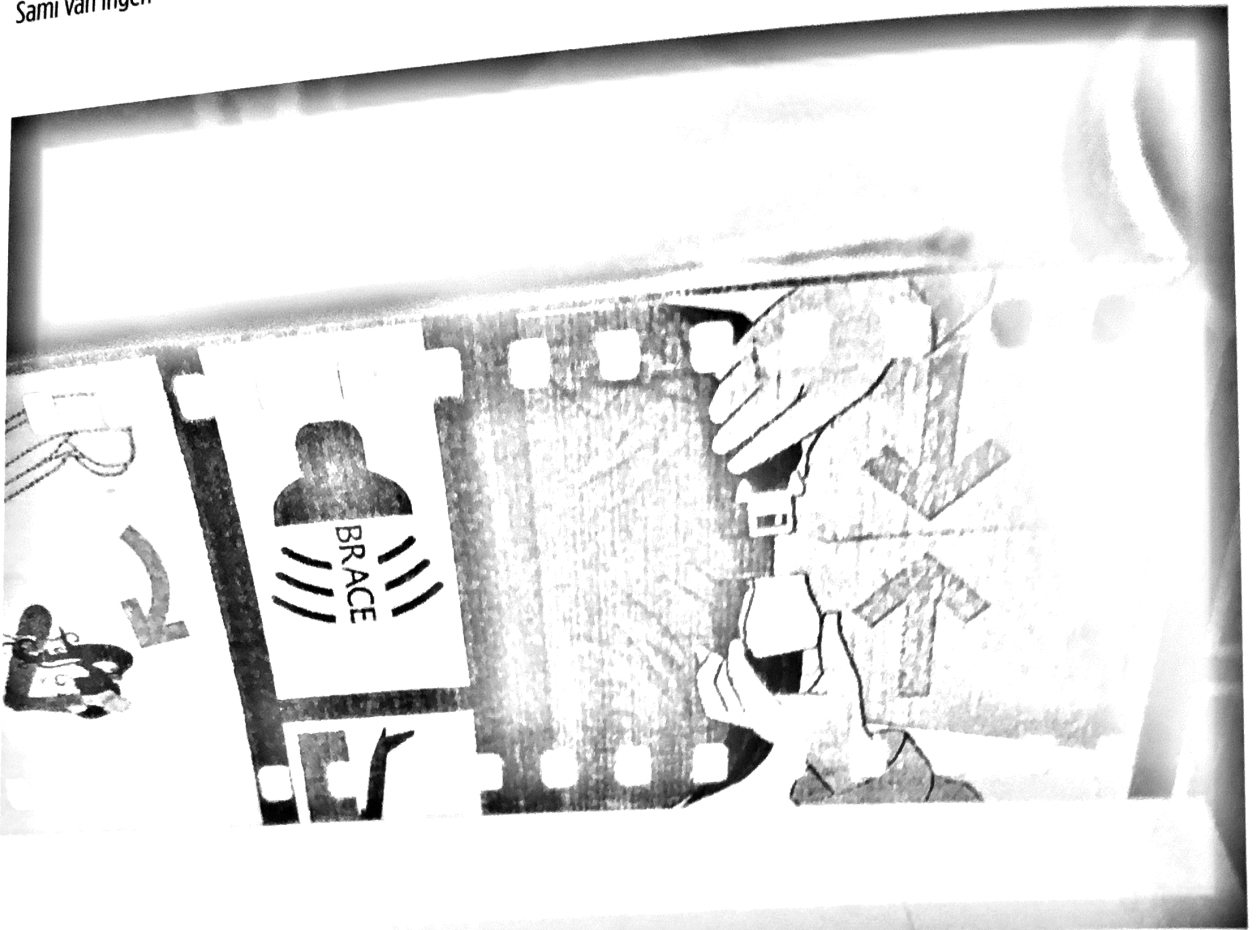
SAMI VAN INGEN: Could you tell me about your starting points for *Mannerlaatta*, your upcoming project, and how it has started to develop towards this kind of a process and form?

MIKA TAANILA: Several things that I have been interested in for a long time and have not had the opportunity, possibility, or ideas to work with earlier, come together here in this piece. I am very interested in this thing called film without film. In other words minimalistic or conceptual cinema in which the normal narrative elements are stripped away to see what kind of a skeleton is left – but in a way we are still dealing with cinema in some way.

Previously, Taanila had shared his fascination with film without film with the audience in his curatorial practice. The 2004 Film without Film screening he curated at the Kiasma Theatre in Helsinki as part of the Avanto Festival was a groundbreaking event in the Finnish media arts scene;⁹ more recently, in 2014, Taanila curated the massive and ambitious “Memories Can’t Wait – Film without Film” program for the 60th International Short Film Festival in Oberhausen with over thirty historical and new pieces stretching over eleven programs. For Oberhausen, Taanila selected “frugal, ascetic things that are connected by the fact that they happen in a cinema”¹⁰ and confined his selection to works that involved the moving image, including analog film, video, or digital moving image.

MT: Another starting point for this work [*Mannerlaatta*] is photocopying, which as a medium has intrigued me since my teen years. I ran, with Anton Nikkilä, a c-cassette label called *Valtavat Ihme Silmälasit Records*¹¹ and band projects such like Swissair, Musiikkivyöry, and others. And we did our cover art to these projects by photocopying. Also, the fanzine scene in those days was all based on black and white photocopying. I was involved and grew up into all that – in my impressionable teen years.

Taanila produced the majority of material for *Mannerlaatta* by photocopying images directly onto clear 35mm film using a normal black and white laser photocopier. The film consists of three elements: the photocopied film, photograms, and the poetry. There is no actual camera used at any point. For Taanila this relates to his interest in film without film.



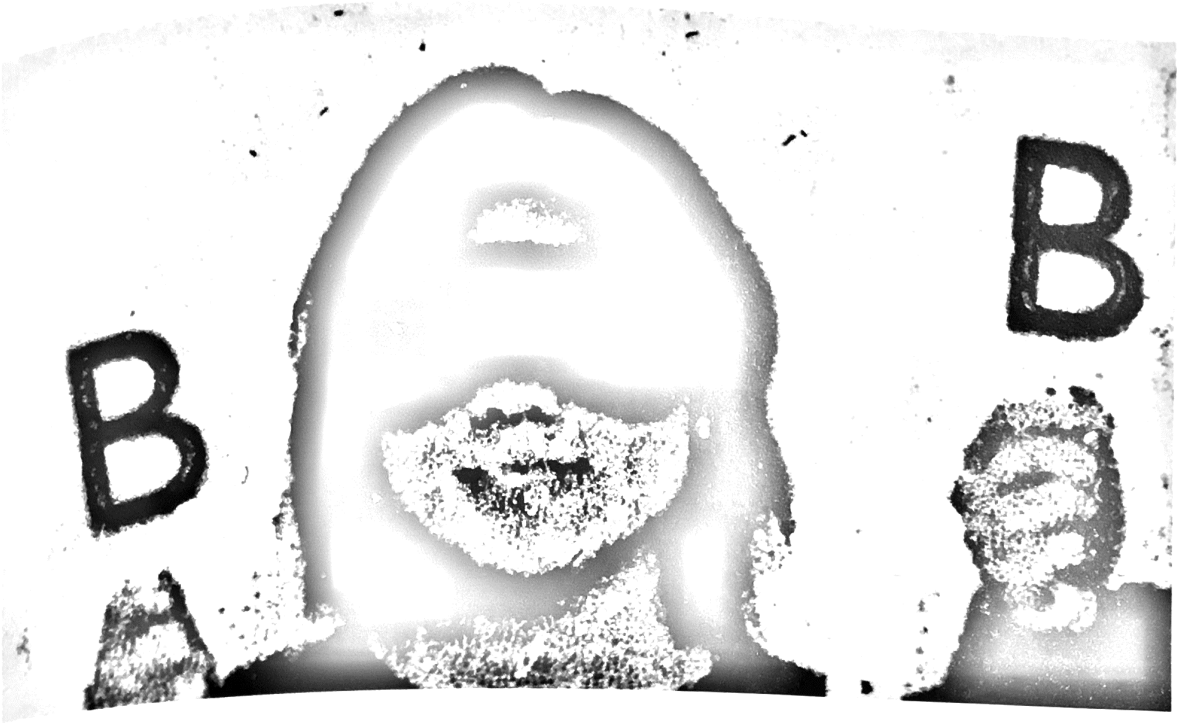
29.2

Making of Mika Taanila's *Mannerlaatta* (*Tectonic Plate*) (2016).

MT: Then the third element is the text that poet Harry Salmenniemi has written specially for this film. This is a feature-length narrative film, and the idea here is to stretch the concept of the narrative as far as possible. With what sparse means can you tell an eighty-minute story?

In Harry Salmenniemi's text, the protagonist travels extensively and is "inexplicably"¹² stuck in an airport hotel recovering from jet lag. While waiting to board the next plane for the next trip, the protagonist multitasks with several devices. Time management, the fractioning of our world through media devices, and our decreased attention span become subplots.

MT: Thematically, there are a lot of things that relate to air travel and time zones as well as the fear of flying that circulate inside the film. The idea is that the moving elements [photograms and photocopied film] represent – in an old fashioned way – a subjective or first-person angle or point of view. In other words, the physical reality the protagonist of the film sees around him/her gets manifested itself this way, particularly the printed media and different kind of screens that surround us in our everyday life.



29.3
Frame enlargement from Mika Taanila's *Mannerlaatta (Tectonic Plate)* (2016).

Then on the other hand, there is the text in a form of a monologue that drives the film forward. This sounds a bit incoherent, which it is. After all, *Mannerlaatta* is made up of only these very sparse black and white elements! Over time I have gotten more and more fond of certain kinds of limitations and restrictions. For example, in this film there is a rule that there can be only two kinds of material, no camera, absolutely no speech, or somebody who would read these texts. Naturally I have made up these rules by myself. There is a lot of textual material for the audience to read in *Mannerlaatta*, and in some ways it is a multidisciplinary film, located between cinema and literature. Therefore, I have called it a lettrist film: *a lettrist film about the fear of flying*, or something like that.

Through the text, the lists, and the imagery itself, Taanila makes the connection between *Mannerlaatta* and the tradition of Lettrist films – much of the photocopied material is made up of directly copied lists, documents, and written records like airplane safety information cards, breakfast menus, and boarding passes.

In a process so heavily based on creating tangible, hands-on source material, all these bits and pieces of film strip that are then treated through a somewhat random digitalizing process for final articulation become an interface between analog and digital. Does a shift in the process happen at the moment of this change? What happens to the idiosyncrasies of the real-world plastic and ink strips when reformulated as zeros and ones that exist only through vigorous recalculation of the computer?

SVL: The post-production for your film is similar to that for any other digital film production. This is naturally your own choice of method. What does this bring to the process of your film and what does it mean in your own practice?

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MT: Format and the technology used do matter. My working process is fairly intuitive and, like I said earlier, I like limitations and some kind of systematic thinking in making my films. That certain dynamic between chaos and order is very interesting and exciting to me. In this case the manufacturing or working with the material for a seventy- or eighty-minute film is very slow and I produce a relatively small, limited number of photocopies and photograms. Even though I have ideas and a system through which I produce this material, due to the nature of the process, a lot of randomness and chaos are involved, starting from the fact that there are no frame lines! There is only clear film into which I copy thousands or tens of thousands of images, and when I digitize it what is the top of the image and what is the lower part and what is left inside the frame are essentially arbitrary.

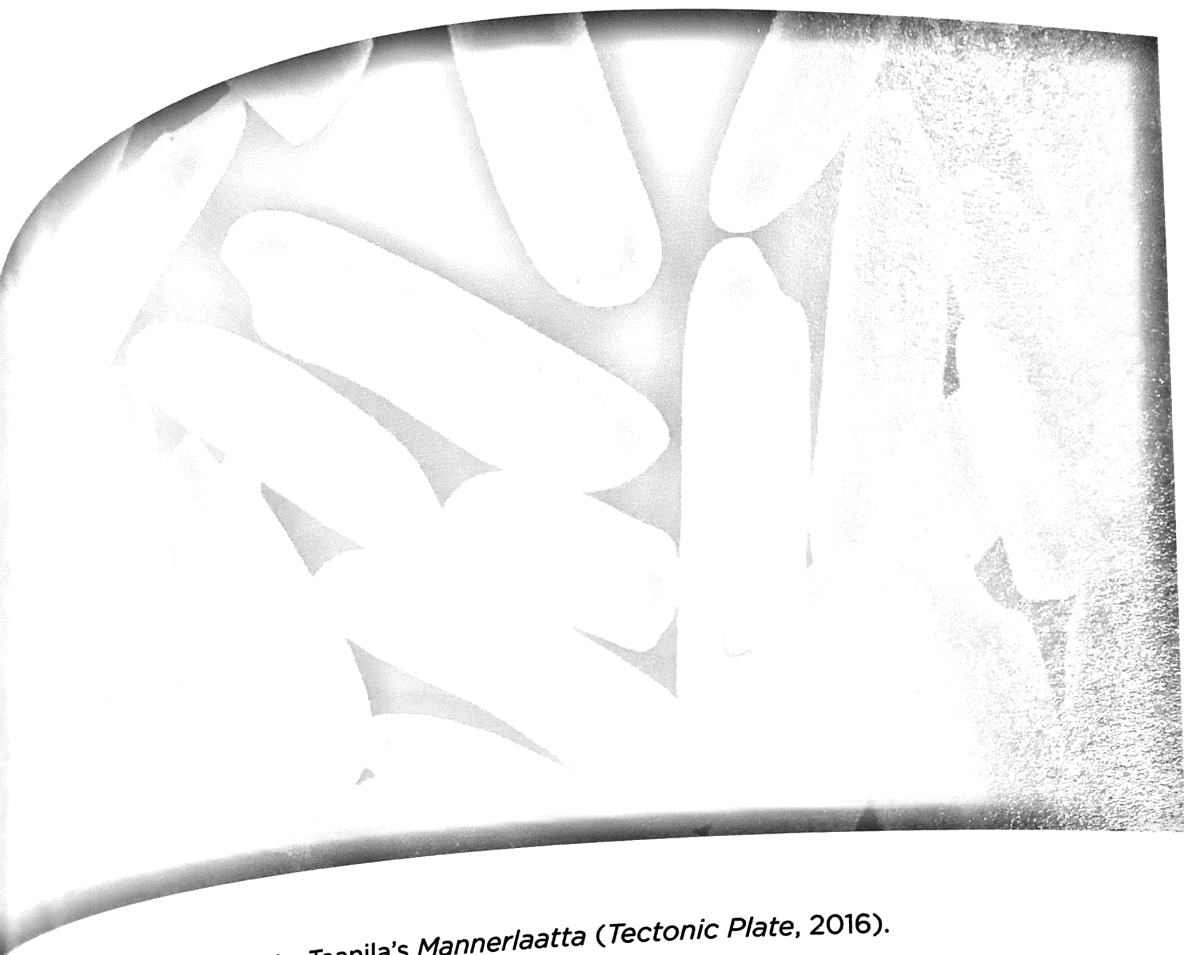
Later in the interview, Taanila emphasizes the significance of having no frameline in the created material. He finds this lack as a pleasurable and key aspect of the whole project:

MT: I work on the photograms in photographer Martti Jämsä's darkroom under a very dim green light, in the twilight of darkness. How the objects I place on the film settle is very arbitrary, and I like this even if I try my best to work as systematically as possible. But these two formats, photograms and photocopying directly to film, are by their nature so chaotic and unpredictable that it produces surprises, and that is the satisfaction here. The idea is that there is quite a limited amount of material, in minutes or frames, then I transfer it into digital form and start to study and organize it – articulate it anew. That's when the more systematic or sequential arranging or thinking comes in.

There are a lot of similar images such as loops and several rhythms and textures. For these ends digital editing is an ideal and gratifying method for frame-by-frame editing and composition. So, in my practice there are two extremes – the chaotic and impulsive way of producing the images analogically and then the research or articulation digitally.

SVL: In a way, it seems like the digital is not just a part of your process but is a way to examine and rearticulate the consequential nature that is inherent in the way you create your analog images.

MT: I have seen it work, particularly here, when I am dealing with aspects of moving-image textures and rhythms. Through digital means the process permits micro- and macro-level editing and that brings great enjoyment. Even if *Mannerlaatta* is a narrative movie it has quite a musical editing style, in the way the images roll out into existence.



29.4
Frame enlargement from Mika Taanila's *Mannerlaatta* (*Tectonic Plate*, 2016).

Instead of working with a film crew like Taanila often does, he bleached scrap film with toilet peroxide and pushed it through office appliances in order to make the film stock totally blank. The other way he obtained "window clear film" was by buying Orwo 35 mm reversal film and having it processed in a film lab without it being exposed at all. In a way, he takes the place of the cinematographer, and the photocopier becomes his camera. The clear film becomes his canvas, onto which he paints powdered black ink dust with his copier. The traces of this dust – as if by magic – end up as beaming images modulating on the cinema screen in front of the audience.

SVL: One defining aspect about working with the photocopier is the length of the strips of film you can put through it. Does that affect the visual rhythms or dynamics of the final film?

MT: In one "take," twenty frames fit well. By squeezing a bit, maybe twenty-two frames! This choppy, unsettling rhythm suits the film well. Even though in the digital process I will do a lot of speed alterations as well as flips, reversal and mirror images – the whole palette comes to play. However, the starting point is still something very simple and austere.

When I completed my doctoral research on analog film practices in the context of fine art and experimental film (van Ingen 2012), the world was very different than it was when I started it some five or six years earlier. Analog film had all but disappeared as a filmmaking medium, and the seemingly never-ending debates about the virtues of film over electronic media had, ~~thereby~~ ^{thereby} ~~kind~~, ^{subdued}. For artists interested in exploring the depths of the over one hundred-year old film medium, it was a mixed blessing – the previously unattainable technology was being sold off for scrap and thus became suddenly available. On the other hand, the possibilities to screen one's works from actual film became difficult, and slowly near impossible.

However, if we step off the well-trodden path of sentimentality and nostalgia to look at what is happening through this time of technological transformation, we see new artistic ways of looking at and using available resources. The processes of both Purhonen and Taanila are good examples of this.

Exploring the limits of expression and digging out the inherent but undiscovered depths of the film medium have gained a new relevance: the fusion of analog and digital to create new, previously unheard-of avenues for artistic exploration.

Notes

- 1 Discussion between Marko Home and the author regarding Home's research on Eino Ruutsalo, 28 November 2015.
- 2 AV-arkki, the Distribution Centre for Finnish Media Art, is a non-profit artists' association founded in 1989. MUU was founded in 1987 as an artist-run interdisciplinary artist association whose aim was to represent and promote new and experimental forms of art such as media art, performance, video, environmental, space and conceptual art, sound and other experimental modes of cultural production. The Helsinki Film Workshop was founded in 1998 and was run actively for more than ten years. Muu Media Festival (1989–98) was the largest annual event of its kind in the Nordic countries at the time.
- 3 Helsinki-based artist Jani Purhonen's practice focuses on sound, new media, and new manifestations of film.
- 4 Interview with Jani Purhonen in room 323 of the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki, 21 October 2015.
- 5 *Tectonic Plate*, English project description, promotional document by Mika Taanila, 2015.

- 6 *Mannerlaatta / The Tectonic Plate*. Director: Mika Taanila. The writer, Harry Salmenniemi, is one of the most prominent young Finnish contemporary poets. Music by Mika Vainio, one of the pioneers of minimalist techno. Produced by Jussi Eerola for Elokuvayhtiö Testifilmi Oy. Premiered in spring 2016.
- 7 Co-directed with Jussi Eerola.
- 8 Interview with Mika Taanila in Eläintarha Neste Oil gas station's cafeteria, Helsinki, 16 October 2015.
- 9 Film Without Film in Avanto festival screened in Kiasma Theatre, 21 November 2004. "The works in the Film without Film screening are experimental works that break the boundaries of the medium and approach the concepts of cinema through varying strategies and techniques. Included are some historically important expanded cinema performances reconstructed with meticulous accuracy (*Nivea and zzz: hamburg special*), early interactive cinema à la Ernst Schmidt Jr. (*Hells Angels*), conceptual films (*Instant Film, Nothing*) and new, straight from the oven commissions from some of our favourite artists (Mark Boswell, Ian Helliwell, Malcolm Le Grice). The Program will climax with British Anthony McCall's magical *Line Describing a Cone*, a film happening classic that has not been seen in Finland before." Mika Taanila, Avanto Festival catalogue 2004, Helsinki. Parentheses in original.
- 10 Interview with Mika Taanila in Eläintarha Neste Oil gas station's cafeteria, Helsinki, 16 October 2015.
- 11 "Enormous Miracle Glasses Records."
- 12 Interview with Mika Taanila, 16 October 2015.

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- 2015. Screening of the paper film of Jani Purhonen in the Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki.