

# ***Gold Factory* – An experimental art project with dry toilets**

## **AUTHORS**

**Ayumi Matsuzaka\*** (artist; Japan / Berlin, Germany)

Elbestr. 35, 12045 Berlin, Germany. E-mail: [contact@ayumi-matsuzaka.com](mailto:contact@ayumi-matsuzaka.com)

URL: [www.ayumi-matsuzaka.com](http://www.ayumi-matsuzaka.com)

**Piia Salmi\*** (artist; Finland)

Puutikkalanraitti 85, 14960 Puutikkala, Finland. E-mail: [piia.salmi@uta.fi](mailto:piia.salmi@uta.fi)

**Fabrice Lecouffe** (graphic designer, community initiator; Ubud, Bali, Indonesia)

E-mail: [witgraphicdesign@gmail.com](mailto:witgraphicdesign@gmail.com)

URL: [witgraphicdesign.blogspot.com](http://witgraphicdesign.blogspot.com)

Together; artist group *Sunday Afternoon*, \*presenters

## **ABSTRACT**

The initial spark behind the *Gold Factory* project was the contrast between three different cultural and artistic ideas about a special structure ‘dry toilet’. The views and ideas resulted in an experimental art project concept. It was created for the Japanese Tsumari Triennial 2009, which shows international contemporary art. Our underlying idea is that an art project can resemble living matter; that an idea takes form through influence of many participants. For us, this constitutes participatory art.

*Gold Factory* makes use of basic composting dry toilets. The wooden toilet houses are called ‘gold factories’. Several toilet houses are constructed on site at a community which is hosting the project. The houses are distributed in several public/semi-public places. Local volunteers are found to help build and maintain, and different parts of the community become connected through the *Gold Factory* houses. This is one level of participation.

The second level of participation comes with the further users of the gold factories: ideally the *Gold Factory* project takes place, where there is a steady flow of visitors or tourists to the project area. Each visitor who enters a toilet house and gives a “donation” *becomes participant* to the project and is, in fact, producing *gold*. What people produce in the gold factories (compost) is later used to enrich the soil of the community.

## **KEYWORDS**

community, contemporary art, circulation of matter, local attention and discussion, participatory art, research of local habits

## ***Gold Factory* – An experimental art project with dry toilets**

### **Introduction**

The concept of *Gold Factory* was created by a group of three creative people in Finland in summer 2008. The concept is a collaboration between artists Ayumi Matsuzaka and Piia Salmi and communication designer Fabrice Lecouffe. The project proposal was submitted to the jury of Tsumari Triennial 2009.

In the beginning the group discussed the Finnish habits that connect to the traditional outhouse. Each of us had their own experiences, some from childhood, some were of awkward kind and some experiences were pleasant and even of aesthetic nature. Each also had some prejudices about the topic.

Then wider considerations arose – on how an art project with dry toilets could work in a setting that may have a different culture and different habits. We were interested in the different perceptions to ‘dry toilet’ and doing business in it. We thought about how to approach people in an appropriate way for this particular participatory art project. We pondered how different levels of participation could work in the project, making it richer – artistically and for the particular environment where it is taking place.

### **Methods**

What is participatory art? It is one form of making art in the versatile contemporary art field. We define participatory art for one through vitality. Artists and people of the public are talking together, acting together, testing each other’s attitudes, viewpoints and limits of tolerance. This method of creating art can entail surprises for both parties.

Each society and culture has particular way of receiving and perceiving art. Acceptance of an experimental art project on one hand and the acceptance of its subject matter are two interesting points when setting up a project concept. How does an art project, which intervenes directly in everyday routines of society, access people and win a meaningful contact to them? In order to win acceptance, what kind of information should be offered, and in which order, and what kind of feelings should be inspired in potential co-operation partners and participants? How does the particular artwork connect with their life style?

We imagine that similar kind of strategic planning is needed when educating about sanitation issues and promoting dry toilet solutions. Toilet and sanitation can be taboo issues. In case of dry toilet the daily human product is not flushed away to oblivion, it is dealt with and made use of. The thought may need some time or persuasion to be accepted. We are keen to collaborate with scientists, educators, social workers, and other specialists. Generally, artists and communication designers could learn from the research and practical expertise – and offer their savvy and new ideas to the realization of various development projects.

Our first step is to observe new environments, learning about local behaviours and daily habits; the second step is to find ways getting in contact with people. How can we shift the boundaries so that we can find common ground, where we artists are also recognised as being part of the environment?

To demonstrate how a Gold Factory project could be realized, here a summary of the project proposal for Tsumari Triennial area, Japan:

The main aims of the Gold Factory project are:

- 1) To create connections between human and surrounding landscape, human and soil, human and their private meditations – for those who visit the toilets and enjoy a private moment.
- 2) To invite to a new perception of space at *Gold Factory* toilet houses.
- 3) To make participants part of great, invisible circle of life when they use *Gold Factory*.
- 4) To connect the visitors with the land of the area where *Gold Factory* takes place, for example with help of local farmers. The local people can be in new way connected to their own land.
- 5) As an art project, to offer individual experiences of compost toilet and its immediate environment, cultural habits, and “producing gold”, but in a way that is without forced and deliberate educational/didactic tinge.

We will build four wooden toilet houses, which are called *Gold Factories*. They will stand on private property of four local farmers, who agree to co-operate with us. Four villages will be connected through the houses. Each *Gold Factory* location is near a Triennial event/exhibition place, yet they have a clear identity that separates them from regular public toilets: a distinctive Scandinavian appearance. The interiors are to be decorated by each farmer family according to their own taste.

*Gold Factory* offers visitors and locals a private space in the landscape of Tsumari area. Visitors are invited to enjoy a moment of privacy in one of the four *Gold Factories*. The function of the houses is obvious and everyday, but the perception of space and situation is different from usual.

Each visitor, who uses a *Gold Factory* house, becomes a participant. At the moment of visiting, the guest is not informed of their “participation”. Nevertheless, when they use the toilet house they become participant and a part of *Gold Factory*. They are part of the cycle of Tsumari nature.

Local people may want to appreciate different seasons of the year in their toilet houses. They are the ones, who have a privileged seasonal view to this project.

A transformation of material will happen in the quieter winter months: the human waste products, which are actually great assets, turn into valuable earth. If this earth is put into use, it turns into “gold”. It is a material, which can help us to find our standing point in natural circle of things.

The farmers, on whose land a *Gold Factory* is standing, are proud to present this

new space. As seasons pass and more participants come, the farmers will collect their gold at the *Gold Factories*. They mix it with their own soil as valuable nutrition. This process belongs to the nature of Tsumari and it involves many dimensions from bacteria to wide landscape view. This mixture of life of the site and our intervention, there will be a quiet recognition of an important effect. Visitors of *Gold Factory* houses will return to Tsumari and only then recognize their important role as part of the local landscape.

This concept was born by our Japanese–French–Finnish team in the countryside of Finland in early summer 2008. Here most private summer holiday homes today still feature a traditional dry toilet with wooden structures. Our sensibilities in this environment informed our *Gold Factory* proposal.

The construction of each *Gold Factory* house itself poses a question to each person about his/her daily habits. Who enters, is compelled to position themselves in the inside space differently than usually. In the Finnish toilet house, one is sitting down, facing the door. It is a seat dedicated to “circle of life”, the circulation of essential nutrients.

Inner and outer natural phenomena come close to a person inside an outside toilet.

Collaboration partners for the project:

Local farmers

Other curious local people

Visitors of Tsumari Triennial and other events

The project was not selected for realization at the Triennial, but the *Gold Factory* concept can be modified to be realized at various other places and settings in the future.

## **Results and discussion**

An art project may leave a long-term effect on the community where it takes place. This is our aim with *Gold Factory*. During the project, the compost from the gold factories is used to enrich the soil in the community. This way many participants’ donation truly becomes a part of the project location and part of the cycle of nature. Transformation of material continues long after visitors have left. The community becomes connected to the visitors through the project and vice versa. The locals themselves can enjoy a privileged view on how the project is developing and what kind of effects it has.

Participating in *Gold Factory* involves a special kind of participation: the people who use gold factories perhaps do not know at all that they are “participating”. They may not realize that by visiting a gold factory, they are leaving something valuable behind. What they produced there, will in a small but significant way chance the earth of the place.

The overall duration of the project depends on how much attention and care it gets from the visitors and locals.

## Conclusions

Participatory art is about vitality and about affecting people through their sensibilities. It's a form of contemporary art that comes close to the skin. People may discover a specific aspect of life in an amplified form through participation in an art project such as *Gold Factory*. Any participation in *Gold Factory*, conscious or not, leaves real traces on site.

Is *Gold Factory* about raising awareness of sanitation issues? That is one part of it. It also adds people awareness of daily habits that are easy to take for granted. Especially in the western world many of us have lost contact to what we produce daily: urine and faeces. Few of us think of our (potentially direct) relation to earth, to the soil, and to what we are expecting to get from the soil.

Aside of the sanitation issue, a wide array of issues are suggested by our concept: personal experience of space, reflections of mundane daily habits, momentary and passing aesthetic experiences... Through our work, we'd like to inspire personal reflections of human role in landscape and the great circle of earth. We believe that the first-hand experience in a gold factory can give feelings of utility and connectedness.

“– – take that what was rejected, and turn it into something of value. Turning shit into gold,” said Allen Ginsberg about job of a poet. And what could indeed be more honourable task for any artist?

## Selected references

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Interview:

Raini Kiukas, DT-Keskus, Tampere, June 2008.

## **AUTHORS — Short introduction**

### **Ayumi Matsuzaka**

Artist, born 1978 in Nagasaki. Lives in Germany.

Bachelor of Art, Broadcasting, Nihon University College of Art in Tokyo, Japan, 2001

Master of Fine Art (MFA, Public Art and New Artistic Strategies), Bauhaus-University Weimar, Germany, 2004. Researching year at IUAV (Istituto Universitario di Architettura Venezia).

Participatory art projects with local people in Venice/Italy 2003, Weimar/Germany 2004, Taipei/ Taiwan 2005, Ludwigsburg/Germany, HCMC/Vietnam 2006, Lyon/France 2007, Newcastle/Australia, Luopioinen/Finland 2008, Suomenlinna/Finland 2009.

Works with participatory actions containing many media – performance, text, drawing, video.

### **Piia Salmi**

Artist, born 1973 in Luopioinen, Finland. Lives in Finland.

Diploma of visual arts at Bauhaus-University Weimar, Germany, 2002. Studies also at Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen/Scotland. Currently studying at School of Translation and Modern Languages at University of Tampere/Finland.

Project grant in 50.Venice Biennale, Venice/Italy 2003, residencies at Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, Malmö/Sweden 2006, Suomenlinna, Helsinki 2009.

Several working grants from Finland and Germany 2002 >.

Solo shows Forum Box, Helsinki/Finland 2005, Anna Amalia library Weimar/Germany 2006 and Berlin/Germany 2007.

Focus of her work are site-specific installations and interventions.

### **Fabrice Lecouffe**

Art director, graphic designer, born 1970 in Nice, France.

Freelance around the world to create without compromise

1991 > 1997 France

1997 > 2008 Vietnam

2008 > Bali, Indonesia