

The Art of Complaining

interview with Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver-Kochta-Kalleinen of Complaints Choir by Georgia Kotretsos

Artists, Tellervo Kalleinen and Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen tells us of the Finnish *Valituskuoro* expression, which means *Complaints Choir* and describes situations where a lot of people are complaining simultaneously.

It all started with the Birmingham Choir in 2005, when Tellervo and Oliver decided to take the old Finnish idiomatic 12 letter saying literally. The most recent choir, the Chicago Choir took place in early November 2007, yet a total of 13 "Complaints Choirs" have been performed in between the two by over 550 complainers. It's a community project gone wild by giving the act of complaining a stage, a spotlight, and a context.

and get good ideas about how to improve the society. We do feel that the project hits the nerve of many individuals though. The fact that *Valituskuoro* has started some kind of a worldwide phenomenon tells how people have an urge to express their dissatisfaction and at the same time smile for their own endless list of complaints.

Oliver Kochta-Kalleinen: I lived for 17 years in East Germany and another 17 years in different countries in Western Europe; the fact is that people complained everywhere. In the East they complained about the lack of choice, in the West about the abundance of choice. Even in Paradise people complained. So, if complaining is symptomatic of anything, it's the

plain about things they have not the slightest influence upon, for example, the weather? Here complaining is not at all about changing things, but rather about building a communal feeling: I am not alone with my little problems, we share the same burden — of a totally unacceptable climate for example...

In Finland we had a lot of complaints about mobile phones: "My friend is more interested in his phone than in me," or "People only tell their opinions via SMS chat rooms." Another big issue was related to the work environment, for example that the boss has much better shoes and jobs are outsourced to China. People in Helsinki were less concerned about the social impact, but the choir in fact did change Finland:

have taken place. On your site www.complaintschoir.org you have a "do-it" page where anyone by following your method can initiate a complaints choir project in their city. You have identified a need in people and have modeled a creative solution that has proven to be easily applied worldwide. As artists how do you feel about the contagious dimensions your project has taken?

OKK: It is a very ambivalent feeling. On the one hand it is the best thing that can happen to an artist, that something you have initiated starts to be taken over by the people. People take the matters into their own hands. When we occasionally receive a DVD with a choir performance from somewhere around the



Complaints Choir of Birmingham, 2005

What I enjoy about the project is the loose ends of complaining itself, because it is for minor and also for major personal or public matters. One may complain formally or informally, verbally or in writing, privately or publicly and that's what's interesting. For a culture to have such a pointed, witty expression that describes its complaining society is a linguistic sunny-Sunday outing. To be frank, they had me at *Valituskuoro*!

Read along and visit the **Complaints Choir** website, www.complaintschoir.com, to watch the performances. It is an exceptional model of community-based art worth discussing.

Georgia Kotretsos: By inviting people to lodge their complaints, to protest, to express their objections, to speak (sing) out, to make a statement of disapproval, to stage that very act and perform it in public, you offer the participants a platform to communicate their petty every-day gripes as well as issues that affect and concern every citizen. You invite them "to take responsibility for their complaints," to stand up straight and face collectively their own reflection. The participants sing together and to one another, they do not exclude themselves from what they are singing about. It's not an act of pointing their finger to a third party but of distributing responsibility first among themselves and then among their listeners. What are your thoughts on the socio-political "*Valituskuoro*" dimensions in practice?

Tellervo Kalleinen: In the first place *Valituskuoro* is a great tool for self-reflection. The project embodies the fact that people do put a lot of energy in complaining — and it makes the participants and everybody who gets in touch with the project ask themselves: what do I want to do with this energy?

Sometimes we are asked if we expect that *Valituskuoro* creates changes in the society. We don't expect that politicians listen to the song

incapability of the human species to be unconditionally happy. This is quite well expressed in a line of the Hamburg Complaints Choir; one half of the choir shouts: "I have not enough time!" (Because I am overworked), the other half replies: "I have too much time!" (Because I am unemployed).

We defined complaining as "dissatisfaction without action," nevertheless behind most of the complaints there is an idea or a belief or a value that a person is committed to. Complaints have therefore built-in the potential of being a transformative power. The truth about the revolution in East Germany is that it only happened because a critical mass of people complained about the fact that they cannot buy bananas round the year (only at Christmas) etc. It was a consumer revolution.

That said, we are relieved that not everybody starts a revolution just because they are dissatisfied with their neighbor. We would live in quite unstable times.

It seems evident to us that people would rather complain about their immediate surroundings which impacts everyday life than about abstract political issues. But we disagree with the assumption that a personal complaint is not socially engaged. If somebody complains that he has too much time, it is a very personal thing on one hand, but it also points to a deep flaw of the neoliberal society, namely that people get discarded because there is no use for them in the production flow.

When I asked one participant of the St. Petersburg Complaints Choir why there are hardly any complaints about Putin's regime and so many about (the lack of) romantic relationships, he answered: "What do you think is more important: Putin or Love?" You choose.

There is another fundamental aspect to the culture of complaining. Why do people com-

in the chorus line we complained about the fact that Finland always loses against Sweden in Ice hockey and Eurovision. Just a few weeks later, Lordi of Finland won the Eurovision and the country was healed from a deep trauma.

In Birmingham, there were a lot of complaints about the city—considered to be the asshole of England—since it is very ugly and has a collection of failed urban developments and architectural sins. But in Birmingham we had also a lot of very personal complaints, e.g. some young man complained that his beard wouldn't grow, even though he wanted to be a captain — but a captain without full beard is not taken seriously.

In Hamburg the choir became very political, because it took place in a so-called problem suburb; people saw the chance to address very burning political issues to their city government, one woman even left the choir because for her it was not political enough — she couldn't handle a complaint about broken underwear beside her own "more serious" complaint. The Complaints Choir creates a lot of media attention, and it is through the TV and newspaper interviews with the choir members that a lot of issues actually get aired which otherwise couldn't have been addressed; the project creates a backdoor into the media space.

St. Petersburg's emphasized deep basic human issues like: "I complain about existential horror." Still, the complaints in all four cities were more similar than different; they were all related to a western, urban consumer society.)

GK: Since 2005, the Birmingham (2005), the Helsinki (2006), the Hamburg (2006), the St. Petersburg (2006), the Poikkilaasko (2006), the Bodø (2006), the Penn State (2007), the Canada/As it happens (2007), the Juneau (2007), the Cabriola Island (2007), the Jerusalem (2007), the Melbourne (2007), the Budapest (2007), and the Chicago choirs

world, it is always a bit of a touching moment. When we saw for the first time the Poikkilaasko children's choir, I almost had tears in my eyes. Also, I enjoyed following the Budapest Choir, since they really got into it. We were really happy about their public success.

In the beginning we thought that we will just organize the project in one or two cities and that's it. We were surprised how popular the project became. The first "artistic" decision was to put the videos in full length on our website. Tellervo was afraid that this might affect our exhibition activity — who would show the videos, if they are all available online? We found that this is really not the case.

Shortly after that, somebody uploaded the video clips to YouTube and also a lot of blogs wrote about it. Finally, in November 2006, the Birmingham video was featured on the front page of YouTube resulting in a massive increase of traffic to our website, which almost broke down. Then we started to receive a lot of e-mails from people telling us that they would like to organize a choir in their city. It was then we made the second "artistic" decision, to include a DIY section on the website and encourage people to do it. In that way the project became not only a participatory work but in fact a true community work.

With this comes a loss of control over it, but the question is, could we ever control it anyway? In the end this path would mean to register a trademark for "Complaints Choir," maybe even a patent etc., and then we would have to spend all our time to defend our "property." This would run counter to the whole idea of the work — since the choirs are a collaborative effort mainly by volunteers. To maintain a strict copyright would also be in contradiction with our belief in open content.

The downside is that you have to accept people doing a Complaints Choir but missing the

photo: Springhill Institute



photo: Yuriy Rumyantsev

Complaints Choir of St. Petersburg, 2006

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central points. We had a couple of overconfident musicians, who thought that they could write the lyrics and the song alone and then just hand it to an existing choir.

We also did not like too much when CBS radio organized an all Canada choir, the complaints coming anonymous from radio listeners and then a professional choir hired to perform.

In other occasions we had some people with a pre-fixed agenda, they wanted to do a complaints choir of Berlin, but they already knew beforehand what it all should be about: a protest against the cutting of some trees.

Now I think that it is just great what is happening — and what an interesting experience it has been to loose control to that extent. What else can an artist hope than for the work to live its own life — so strongly that the artist him/herself becomes unimportant?

The enthusiasm of the people organizing a complaints choir must be quite strong because it is a lot of work. If you want to do it in a proper way it requires commitment for quite a long period: minimum three months work from the organizers and three weeks from the participants. By “proper” I mean that you don’t make it just as a joke project with your friends. The idea is that the participants are found through open call — and it is taken care that

own motivation, a personal agenda which lets them overcome all the little hurdles and which brings them to the first meeting. Even though our projects have time limits, it demands quite a lot from the participants in terms of time, energy and involvement.

One important consideration for the invitation is that it should be well formulated. The art lies in saying just enough to grab the attention, to have some goal to focus on, while leaving sufficient room for the imagination. Since we don’t remunerate the participants we can compensate them just with a unique experience, plus a DVD...

ple. Very often you have community projects in which the artist had a great idea, but there is no community interested in the project. It would be wise to skip the project, but often the art institution and/or the artist try to convince people to take part. That is very bad. It is our main principle: never coax anyone into the project. If nobody signs up, nobody cares about it.

The enthusiasm is, of course, the main ingredient that carries the project along. If you would have fifty depressed people singing their boring complaints with a total lack of energy, it would be quite unbearable. So, the enthusiasm transforms the complaining into something powerful.



photo: Petri Summanen

Complaints Choir of Helsinki, 2006

On other occasions people do it in a rush, they don’t allow enough time for preparation and/or rehearsals. So the choir members are not very familiar with the song, they sing their lines from the sheet and the performance lacks the enthusiasm that is so essential to it.

Also, we did not like so much when the song consisted mainly of solo complaints, and just a general chorus was sung together.

And we don’t like if people don’t drop us a line when they organize a choir. It is so easy to contact us, and we kindly request this on our site.

It was a bit strange when an artist couple organized a complaints choir within a show at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. That is a fine place where we would like to have an exhibition ourselves, so that felt a bit weird, but the open content policy says: no discrimination against any profession!

So, egomaniacs, commercialization, pre-fixed agendas, sloppy performances, anti-collectivism, non-attribution, etc. etc... The open approach that we chose provides enough opportunity to grumble and complain, but in the end the great dynamic that this approach allowed and the feedback we have received from those choirs that succeeded far outweighs the difficulties.

TK: This has been a very unusual experience and we weren’t prepared for it. Oliver was more ready to go with the wave and support the rising phenomenon from its first moment. I had a harder time struggling with my ego, which was set to the traditional mode of an artist: you have to defend your ideas. These feelings rose to the surface especially when other professional artists started to create complaints choirs in their own countries—or when a big national broadcast company and one big radio station in two different countries organized their own complaints choirs without mentioning where the idea came from.

people from different backgrounds and social classes hear the invitation. Anybody who wants is welcome to the choir. It is also important for us that the final complaints for the song are chosen democratically by the choir members.

GK: So, basically we have a community project gone out of hand, in a good way. The fascinating thing is that through this open call voluntary people of “different backgrounds and social classes” who are not necessarily artists are participating in an art project where they are invited to perform. Singing in a choir is not a new idea, but discussing the Complaints Choir within an art context the participants become central figures of this very discussion. Do you feel the participants are aware of the context they’re singing from and how do you read their willingness to come forward with such enthusiasm in regards to community projects that rely on participation?

OKK: That is not absolutely exact, since the participation includes also working out the text of the complaints song together with the other participants. It is important that the people understand the song as their song. There are also shared meals and other group-building activities. The final performance is only one aspect of participation.

If you have 50 participants, you most likely have 50 different reasons why people want to participate. Some like singing, others are professional complainers, some are bored with their job and want to do something crazy, someone just takes part because she is interested in the good looking boy that has signed up to the project. Who knows?

We like the idea of an open invitation. Since we don’t have any prior relationship with the people that might respond to the invitation — there is no social pressure in the play — people can ignore, reject or accept the invitation. But when they accept, we are sure they have their



photo: Clare Britt

Complaints Choir of Chicago, 2007

TK: It is important to me that our art projects don’t stay at the level of a symbolic gesture. Since we do these projects with real people, something should really happen, a group dynamic should develop with real emotions and unpredictability. Otherwise, people would simply become illustrations of our idea. If the result is something that the participants and we could never even have dreamed of doing alone, then we are happy.

OKK: Also, we like the idea of invitation because it somehow defines our roles in relation to the participants; it is like an invitation to a party: we are the hosts and we try to create a good atmosphere, but whether or not it is a good party depends largely on the people that come. In defining our roles, we could say that we try to be good party hosts. And we clean up the mess the next morning...

We have sometimes been criticized — particularly with the Complaints Choir — that the participants are not representative of the social texture of the respective cities. This might have something to do with the distribution of our invitation, which was of course not a cleverly conceived marketing campaign with exact data on target groups etc. Instead it was an improvised distribution of newspaper ads, flyers in neighborhoods and a wild e-mailing session. Still, I never felt that the choir represented a homogenous group; as I said before, everybody had their own personal, maybe idiosyncratic, irreducible motivation to take part and created a strong feeling of diversity in the group. That the audience experienced the choir as homogenous has in my view more to do with the group dynamics. We actually managed to create a strong group identity within only three weeks, which might give the appearance that this choir has been around for years.

I think people are quite aware of what they are getting into when they sign up to the project. It is a bad mistake to underestimate peo-

TK: Your question leads me to one of my favorite topics: Does the artist exploit the participants? If the participants are not from the art world, it can be really difficult for them to really understand the context they enter. That’s why the artist has a big responsibility to ensure that the enthusiasm of the participants is not “used in a wrong way.”

It is impossible for anybody to take part in a Complaints Choir project without a warm self-irony. That makes the participants “well protected”—when you see them singing out their complaints with a smile on their face, you don’t laugh at the singers, you laugh with them.

Nothing is more beautiful than enthusiasm.

GK: Where has this intense and demanding art ride taken you? What’s next?

OKK – TK: The next work of ours is growing directly out of our experience with Complaints Choir. When we organized “Complaints Choir of Helsinki” the issue of work was brought up over and over again. The bad atmosphere in working places was a topic that seemed to strongly touch the hearts of Finnish complainers. So we thought that the topic of work deserves its own project. We’ll make that in Sweden in autumn 2007—thinking that Swedes might have a similar Protestant relationship to work like Finns do. We invite the workers and employees of Göteborg to direct short film scenes that tell what they really think about their job, about their boss and their co-workers. We give the opportunity to everybody to go completely ballistic and to bring their hidden office fantasies into reality — with the help of a film team and professional actors. All those ideas that have been brewing in the head during long dull working hours, all those monologues during sleepless nights directed at co-workers, all those imagined showdowns in the boss’s office — all are good material for these scenes. **BP**