



DEAR HOCKEY

PONDERINGS ON MASCULINITY
IN ICE HOCKEY CULTURE

MA THESIS

VERTTI VIRASJOKI

2023

A” Aalto University
School of Arts, Design
and Architecture

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Aalto University
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Vertti Virasjoki, Prize of Eyez #1, 2022

Abstrakti

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Rakas jääkiekko

Pohdintoja maskuliinisuudesta jääkiekkokulttuurissa

Muotoilun laitos

Contemporary Design

2023

Sivumäärä: 66

Kieli: Englanti

Opinnäytetyö Rakas jääkiekko: Pohdintoja maskuliinisuudesta jääkiekkokulttuurissa on taiteellinen tutkimus, joka koostuu valokuvateoksista ja kirjallisesta osasta. Tutkimuksen lähtökohtana on tehdä matka sekä fyysisesti että henkisesti jääkiekon maailmaan, jossa kirjoittaja vietti suurimman osan elämästään lapsuudesta aina varhaiseen aikuisuuteen asti - mutta josta hän etäännyi lähes vuosikymmenen ajaksi.

Lähestyin tutkimusta lukemalla kauno- ja tutkimuskirjallisuutta miesten urheilukulttuurista, sukupuolen tutkimuksen kentältä, muiden ihmisten kokemuksista jääkiekkomaailmasta, sekä kirjoittamalla autoetnografisia tekstejä kokemuksistani jääkiekkokulttuurissa, keräten samalla artefakteja, jotka ovat päätyneet minulle aktiivisen pelaamisen aikana; kuten jääkiekkovarusteita, mitaleita, pokaaleja ja pelipaitoja. Prosessin aikana aloin myös luoda taideteoksia, joista omakuvavalokuvat valikoituivat sopivimmaksi muodoksi tutkia sitä, millaista on olla mies jääkiekkomaailmassa ja haastaa siihen liittyviä käsityksiä. Valokuvien luomisen kautta, yhdistelemällä omakuvien tekemisen traditioita jääkiekkokulttuuriin esineisiin, tutkin identiteettiäni monesta suunnasta: jääkiekkoilija-taiteilija, sisäpiiriläinen-ulkopuolinen, objekti-subjekti.

Kirjallinen osa sisältää kolme esseetä, joiden teemat ovat nousseet samanaikaisesti valokuvien tekoprosessista, ajasta jääkiekkokulttuurin parissa, sekä lukemisesta ja kirjoittamisesta pääteemojen maskuliinisuus ja miehuus ympärillä. Esseissä “Bring the Violence”, “Anatomy of a Hockey Player” ja “Because It’s the Cup” käsitellään aiheita kuten väkivalta, miehinen keho ja urheilun suhde muihin yhteiskunnan osa-alueisiin niin omien kokemusten kuin jääkiekkokulttuurista löytyneiden esimerkkien kautta.

Yksi tavoitteistani oli myös tutkia, millaisen maskuliinisen identiteetin jääkiekkoon osallistuminen tarjoaa ja miten se vaikuttaa ympärillä olevan maailman kokemiseen ja näkemiseen. Halusin myös löytää keinoja käydä keskustelua jääkiekkoyhteisössä, joka tuntuu jäävän vaille pohdintaa lajin inklusiivisuudesta ja monimuotoisuudesta.

Avainsanat: taiteellinen tutkimus, maskuliinisuus, identiteetti, valokuva, jääkiekko, urheilu

Abstract

Vertti Virasjoki

Dear Hockey

Ponderings on Masculinity in Ice Hockey Culture

Department of Design

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The Master Thesis Dear Hockey: Ponderings on masculinity in ice hockey culture is an artistic research that consists of photographic works and a written part. The starting point of the research is in making a journey, both physical and mental into the world of ice hockey in which the author had spent most of his life since childhood years until the early twenties – but had decidedly distanced himself from for nearly a decade.

I approached the research by reading literature about the production of gender, research about men’s sports culture and other people’s experiences from the hockey world and writing autoethnographic texts about the experiences within the ice hockey culture while collecting artefacts that I had received during the active years of playing; such as ice hockey gear, medals, trophies and jerseys. Alongside the process I started creating artworks from which the self-portraiture photographs were chosen to be the most suitable format for exploring the experientiality of what it means to be a man and challenge to notions embedded into it. Through the creation of photographs, merging thematically the tradition of making self-portraiture photographs and the cultural objects from ice hockey served as medium for exploring my identity from multiple directions: hockey player-artist, insider-outsider, object-subject.

The written part contains three essays, the themes of which have arisen from the parallel processes of making the photographs, spending time within the ice hockey culture as well as reading and writing around the main themes of masculinity and manhood. In the essays Bring the Violence, Anatomy of a Hockey Player and Because It’s the Cup themes such as violence, male body and the relation between sports and other parts of society will be discussed in more detail through personal experiences and examples from ice hockey culture.

One of my aims was also to explore what kind of masculine identity does one get introduced to by participating in ice hockey and how that affects perception of the world around. I also wanted to find ways creating discussion within the ice hockey community that seems to fall short on having conversation about the inclusivity and diversity of the sport.

Keywords: artistic research, masculinity, identity, photography, ice hockey, sports

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Trophy Husband #1, 2022



Trophy Husband #2, 2022



Sun's out Bun's out, 2022



Chosen One, 2022



Prize on Eyez #2, 2022



Forever 2nd, 2022



Extinction Rebel #1, 2022



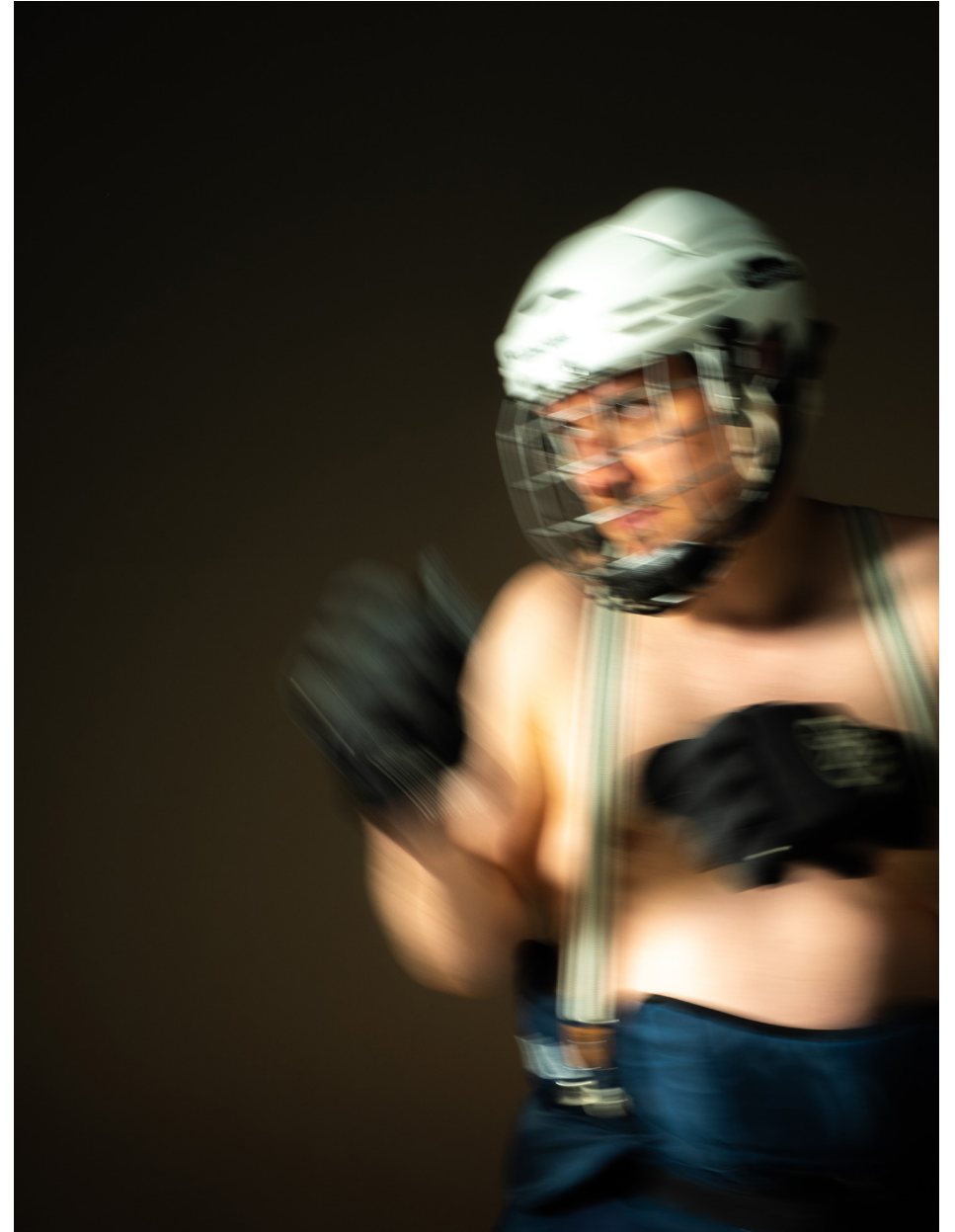
Extinction Rebel #2, 2022



Do You Want to Dance?, 2022



Dancer #1, 2022



Dancer #2, 2022



Can I Get Your Autograph, please?, 2022



Dear..., 2022



Bomb, 2022



Male Ice Hockey Player #2, 2022



Male Ice Hockey Player #1, 2022

Preface

I still remember that one early Saturday morning ice hockey practice after which my dad drove us home. I was probably 7 years old and typically the most important thing would have been to roll the VHS cassette on which the morning's episode of Spider Man had been recorded. This time though I had thing that was bothering me: we had been called *men* in the practice by the coach. I don't know what the other kids thought about it but I did not like that. It just did not feel right, and to be honest – we are talking about 7 year-old kids who definitely are not men, only kids, boys, whatever, but no men. I guess that was the mentality of the day of how to produce good ice hockey players – to make them *real* men. A lot has changed since the late 1990s: there is one *former* professional Finnish male ice hockey player who is openly homosexual¹ and sometimes you might even hear a feminine voice in the studio during the games on TV.



Figure 1. Photograph of myself from the first years of playing hockey

1 In Helsingin Sanomat article, Hyökkääjä ja homo (Eng. Forward and gay, 27.10.2019) journalist Esa Lilja interviews and writes about former professional ice hockey player, Janne Puhakka, who became the first Finnish male ice hockey player who publicly came out as gay.

Introduction

This master thesis *Dear Hockey: Ponderings on Masculinity in Ice hockey Culture* is an artistic research that consists of artistic part and a written part. In this written part I reflect on my objectives around the process of making the photographic series *Dear Hockey* and discuss the experientiality of being a (former) male ice hockey player, alongside the sensations that came along the process of making the photographs and when entering the ice hockey culture again after years.

In this written part I will contemplate the ways that maleness and masculinity are being constructed within the cultural conventions of ice hockey and how that has affected my own identity as a boy and later as a man. Starting points for this project were to dive into the world of ice hockey, a place, where I had spent most of my childhood until the early 20s to practice introspection while creating artworks that would revolve around the themes of hockey, manhood and masculinity. I would say that the whole process was as much about understanding myself better, to uncover my ways of making photographic art, but also to critically study the ice hockey culture and its impact on the image of men it creates and the world view it represents.

In the beginning of this thesis project my feelings towards ice hockey were – to put it bluntly: a game for yokel that at its best works only as tool to raise national feeling or to satisfy some primitive feelings of aggression. To be honest I had not really followed the sport of ice hockey for years after I quit playing myself at the age of 21 in 2012, but by the time I had been involved deeply in the culture for about 15 years. Even though discussions about the problematics with the so called toxic

masculinity had reached the mainstream debate, especially after the Me Too -movement began to spread virally in early October 2017, I realized I knew very little about where the ice hockey culture was standing at the moment with these discussions – if there was any of that? Or was there still the same old mentality that sports were something separate from other parts of society? As if it was this fantasy world to which the same rules, laws and conventions did not apply as for the rest of the society? I was curious of that because, that had been my culture for a decade and a half. Even though I had not been part of that culture for a long time I had come to realize that a lot of how I was interpreting the world had its roots back in those times.

I had decidedly distanced myself from the hockey culture after I had joined the culture of design and arts. These different fields did not seem a match nor did they seem like identities that could be existing simultaneously in a same person. Some of this distancing from ice hockey culture happened without a conscious decision making, but some was a result of trying to fit into this new identity of being this creative and progressive and I felt ashamed about the previous identity of being this male ice hockey player – mostly due to the reputation of ice hockey players being often these arrogant dicks, which I would assume not many of us would like to be considered as. Only later did I realize that it probably was a bit violent act towards myself to deny that there was anything that interested me in the hockey culture anymore, and that it should have been something that I would need to get rid of in order to become this 'new' me that could fit in the world and social groups I imagined myself into. Of course, over time, the people around us, environments, groups, contexts

all change and it might sometimes be very needed to get oneself in different environments than what one has been accustomed to – to be able to look back and from distance, to have more clear picture of those times and ideals that they exposed us to.

While doing a project around masculinity and manhood during Personal Exploration -course in Spring 2020 I started realizing how big of an impact different cultures and environments have had on me and how they were still playing a big part of who I was and how I perceived myself and the world around me. I felt that I needed to explore more what was in there. The worlds I had left behind seemed to represent old-fashioned, out-of-date image of a man that I didn't feel I could fit anymore. Actually I wasn't even sure if I had ever fitted into those worlds in the first place. The worlds I am talking about regarding to the Personal Exploration project that went by name How do I unsubscribe from Patriarchy? were sports culture in more general and the army – both that are emphasized by their effect on creating traditional masculine identity. In this thesis the focus of my experiences that I will be discussing and pondering on through autoethnographic writings and photographic works are on ice hockey culture due to its major influence on my identity as a man. For many years, most of what I did was dictated by supporting myself to become a better ice hockey player, my dream for a long period of time was to become a professional, in the wildest versions even an NHL player.

It seemed that there could be something interesting born if these two could be merged: ice hockey culture and making art. And in this case: using myself as an object to observe when making

photographic images, which could to some extent be considered as self-portraits. It was also by definition my own journey to explore myself – to figure out, how something that was once the most defining part of my identity, got left behind and how it actually might have never even left. It also occurred to me quite quickly that even though the culture elsewhere in society had been taking steps towards more equal and more progressive direction the culture of sports and ice hockey were still in very reactionary phase in which the old-fashioned, traditional male roles were still in play.²

Yet, there was still something that bothered me, because I could not believe that I would have been participating that culture for so long without liking – if not even loving some parts of them. Maybe I would still enjoy some parts of it the way I used to? Or maybe it wasn't for me anymore? But how do so many people still enjoy that violent, even barbaric sport so much? Maybe I need to get myself into that culture again to see how it feels? Am I just doing my preconceptions towards ice hockey now that I am on the other side of the rink? This was at the same time very confusing and intriguing and I felt an urge to understand both – this contradictory inside myself, of once being a full-on ice hockey player and shapeshifting into this so called creative person. The research questions that I am trying to answer within this thesis are: How do sociocultural constructions of masculinity within ice hockey culture influence the experiences and identities of men and boys involved in the sport? And how can self-portraiture photography contribute to understanding and representing these dynamics and ideals of a man?

Starting point and motivations

*Default Man feels he is the reference point from which all other values and cultures are judged. He might not be aware of it, but Default Man thinks he is the zero longitude.*³

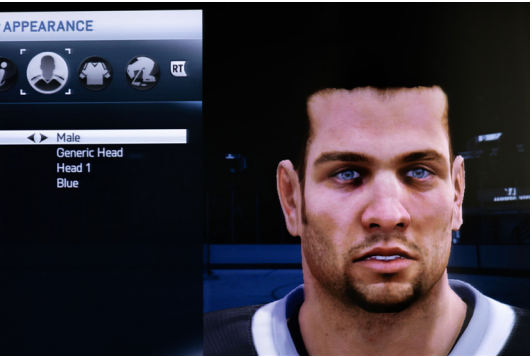


Figure 2. Photograph of a player creation mode in NHL14 on Xbox 360

On 22.02.2020 there was an article on Helsingin Sanomat titled on web: *Lätkäjätkät edustavat kaikkea, mikä suomalaisessa miehisyydessä on pielessä*,

*sanoo kirjailija Juhani Brander*⁴. The article is about a book, a collection of essays, written by Juhani Brander and called *Miehen Kuolema: Pohdintoja maskuliinisuudesta*⁵. The essays are based on Brander's personal experiences and are dealing with phenomena and issues around masculinity and manhood. Brander writes that the commonly shared ideal of what it means to be a man and masculinity is are being constructed especially in two institutions in Finnish society: army and team sports, and more precisely in this case: ice hockey. Brander writes in one of the essays in the book, titled *Lätkäjätkien maailmassa*⁶ how the culture of sports, especially in team sports, conditions the boys into the standards of hegemonic masculinity by different ways of humiliation such as locker room jokes, bullying and dehumanizing initiation rites⁷. Brander says on the article in Helsingin Sanomat that the aim of his book is to be a catalyst for conversations around these topics, not any final truth of what masculinity, men or sports culture should be like.

The next day on Helsingin Sanomat there was a response article to the previous one, titled: *HIFK:n maalivahti Frans Tuohimaa ei tunnista kirjailija Branderin kuvausta uhittelevasta lätkäjätkestä: "Minun on vaikea ymmärtää, mistä siinä puhutaan"*⁸. This caught my attention since I used to play in the same team as a kid with Frans Tuohimaa and even though I

2 Tiuhonen 1999, 100; Matthews & Channon 2020, 374; Ojala 2021, 150

3 Perry, 2016, 17
4 Eng. Jocks represent all that is wrong with the Finnish manhood, says author Juhani Brander. Jock (noun) (North American English, sometimes disapproving) a man or boy who plays or enjoys sport a lot, especially one who does not have many other interests (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries)
5 Brander, 2020 (Eng. Death of a Man: Ponderings on Masculinity)
6 Eng. In the World of Jocks
7 Brander, 2020, 46
8 Eng. Frans Tuohimaa, a goaltender of HIFK says he doesn't recognize the description of a defying jock: "I have hard time understanding what the book is talking about

never made it to professional leagues I could say that I have been surrounded by similar culture by playing in the juniors until my 20s as he has. In the response Tuohimaa says that in his experience the locker room is a tolerant place: there is room for social democrats, leftists, rightists, everybody gets along with each other and all sorts of daily topics are being discussed, not only the so called ice hockey jargon. He had also tweeted⁹ that he, along others have cried in the locker room and they actually do read books too, in response to the claim made by Brander that ice hockey players are not allowed to show their feelings and reading books could even endanger your physical exemption. Tuohimaa also tells in the article that he gets provoked when all the ice hockey players are put in the same category. In the article Tuohimaa also adds that the he doesn't see ice hockey culture as a separate part of the society and that there are the same ups and downs as in the rest of the society.

Following the confrontation of these two articles there was a column on Helsingin Sanomat 01.03.2020 written by Tommi Nieminen and titled *Harva meistä on niin yksiniitinen, että tyhjentyisi lätkäjätöksiksi tai runopojaksi*¹⁰. Nieminen briefly introduces the reader to the arguments that Brander made in the first article about how the tight roles of men are most visible and alive in ice hockey culture as well as in army. Then Nieminen mentions the counter-claims given by Tuohimaa and backs up those claims by giving his own lived experience testimony of what it had been in a locker room, army as well as in the academia in early 1990s. Nieminen also argues that none of us is so one-sided that they could be regarded only as a jock or a poet. He also seems astonished by the claims that Brander made about how there are

violent and sexist tendencies embedded deep in these cultures, that are mostly created and ran by men and tend to have impact on our society as larger scale as well.

These statements raised interesting questions by differing considerably in their perception of how these different men told, about their experiences of sports culture. When Brader seems to point out that especially in his youth, in 1990s Turku, the jock acted as if they owned the world by disgracing others and taking the public space with the ever-present threat of violence, both Tuohimaa and Nieminen seem to be totally unable of recognizing that such behavior could have existed within their sociocultural contexts. Both Tuohimaa and Nieminen express their astonishment on such claims and how it does not fit in their image of what it has been or is in the men's team sports culture. Such difference in the experiences could probably be explained by the change of culture over the last 10-15 years that separates Tuohimaa from Brander and Nieminen, but the claim would be in conflict when Tuohimaa and Nieminen are of same opinion as mentioned above. What is the men's ice hockey culture like then? How does it feel like to be within that culture? What has it been like and what is it today? What is the role of sports culture with respect to other parts of society?

Process

The artworks created during this thesis can be seen as continuum to the photographic works I made during a course Personal Exploration (PEX) in Spring 2020. Although it was not clear from the very start this project at hand that the artworks created here would also be photographs, that seemed to be the way the process was taking me, in addition to being a suitable medium for such project in which my personal experiences will hold a central place. In the PEX -course, my focus was more broadly in studying masculinities and manhood by creating self-portrait photographs out of that process.

During the PEX -course project, titled *How do I unsubscribe from Patriarchy?*, I started to realize how great of an impact the cultures and environments I had been involved in during my life had had on me, especially the ice hockey culture in which I had spent more than half of my life. Going back to these lived memories and experiences made me curious to understand better the ways in which this culture had affected me and how those experiences and social environments had shaped my perception of what it would mean to be a man. I was also curious to understand if the experiences I had had were still relevant to what the men's ice hockey culture looks and feels like today.



Figure 3. Order from series *How do I unsubscribe from Patriarchy?*

⁹ Tuohimaa, 2020

¹⁰ Eng. Few of us are so stubborn that they would empty out as a jock or a poet

Although not solely on purposes related to this thesis about ice hockey culture and manhood, I joined a hobbyist ice hockey club about 2 years ago. This has given me a lot insights and recalled increasingly memories from the past and reminded me of what it was like when I still played competitively. It has also strengthened my position as an insider of the hockey culture while simultaneously being an outsider by not playing seriously or competitively anymore. This twofold position seems to repeat throughout the whole process: artist – researcher, insider – outsider, object – subject, ice hockey player – creative.

My aim was to gather more information about the theme by reading a variety of books that revolved around topics of masculinity, gender, manhood and ice hockey culture and to also look for references from fields of art & design. At the beginning of the project as I was trying to look ways of implementing the critical design approach in creating a project, by which I could have created culturally provocative artefacts that would have worked as starting points for discussion about the social issues and political themes around men's ice hockey culture.¹¹ One interesting example of such design work is Jonathan Ho's project *Spornosexual* (2017) which consists of fitness equipment looking artefacts but designed instead of bodybuilding to be used for different sexual positions. The objects from *Spornosexual* are part of a larger project called *Fetishising Masculinity* in which Ho challenges the gender binaries and questions the violence inherent to contemporary male identity.¹² Even though I ended up making a more personal, artistic photography project, I still feel that especially Ho's

work had an impact on how I approached making the images.



Figure 4. Jonathan Ho, *Spornosexual* 2017¹³

The fascination of Ho's project to me was that the artefacts seem to have taken the shape of a conventional gym equipment and at first sight they seem obvious, but after a moment at looking at them, they seem to take new shape and create instead these hypermasculine connotations, that come along seeing gym equipment into a whole new area of sexuality and gender spectrum. It suggests very different view on what the aim at this gym equipment is and how the hypermasculine male body is being interpreted. The way how male and female bodies have been represented in visual culture and art has been transforming over time, but the roots of the Western ways to look at these bodies dates back to the Greek's Classical period where the first nude sculptures of both man and woman were created¹⁴. In the article *Shame and Masculinity in Visual Culture* (2020), a cultural analyst, employed by the University of Leiden, Ernst van Alphen explains how these sculptures and the tradition following them guided the way

how to look at men and women – men being more stoic and their sexuality does not exist or plays a very minor role in these representations, even though homosexuality and beauty were both privileged and beauty seen as a male attribute at the time, whereas women were represented as sexual beings, being aware of their sexuality by covering their genitals as it has been done in the tradition of *Venus Pudica*. *Venus Pudica* refers to a classical figural pose in which the nude female covers their pubic area with a hand. The way these differently attributed bodies were represented guided the audience to look at the subject in a certain way – more neutrally and even admiringly the god-like appearance of masculine male body while the feminine, female body was seen through a voyeuristic gaze; the subject being modest about their appearance.¹⁵ The way that Ho's works move the reading of how to interpret this masculine body and what it represents, carries the viewer towards asking questions what kind of attributes do we associate with certain kind of bodies and how we expect them to behave.

Another example where manhood and masculinity are under scrutiny comes from the field of photography in Kari Soinio's works. Throughout his career Soinio has been exploring two large topics: being a man and human's relationship with nature and their environment. Soinio's approach to study what it means to be a man comes through self-portraiture photographic works which deal with themes such as corporality, sexuality and identity questions. He has been exploring these topics from various perspectives, often using himself as a nude model for the works, but in the end reaching more

general meanings by the aid of self-portraiture.¹⁶ Soinio has created multiple installments that revolve around a character titled *hero*. All of these installments of the *hero* project have been dealing with questions around masculinity, but the one that especially caught my attention was *Athletic Hero* (2012). In *Athletic Hero*, the character, *hero*, appears in various environments taking poses that are more commonly associated with female bodies, such as emphasizing the chest area, the roundness and softness of the body. In the *Hero* series Soinio's aim is to play with these gendered representation traditions by fading the gendered gaze and therefore making the viewer to ponder around the gendered approach to view the *hero* in the photographs. Soinio also wants to address the sexualization of nude photography in more general, across all genders, but essentially how men have been represented when naked. The predominant way how men have been represented in nude photography comes from gay imagery in which men are often highly sexualized and heroized.¹⁷ The way *Athletic Hero* challenges these conventions of portraying different bodies, becomes apparent by how the *hero* seems more like an anti-hero, having insecurities about his nudity and body alongside seeking for validation from the outside and actually showing it. On his web page, Kari Soinio ends the description of *Athletic Hero* project with words: *The hero is enjoying the sun on warm rocks, and is thinking about the image he makes and his predecessors. He faces the rising sun and watches the changing light. Standing in the evening sun, he feels sadness.*¹⁸ These words reflect well what the performance of masculinity is so often about: to set unachievable, even noxious goals for oneself of being some sort of ideal man whose fulfillment is actually emptiness.

11 Malpass, 2017, 9-10

12 <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/01/02/six-young-writers-design-academy-eindhoven-trends-dutch-design-week/>

13 Ibid.

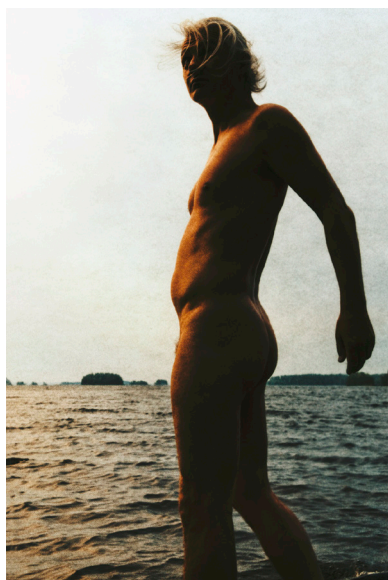
14 Van Alphen, 2020, 35

15 van Alphen, 2020, 39-40

16 Rossi & Soinio, 2011, 168

17 Ibid., 162

18 <https://www.karisoinio.com/index#/athletic/>



Figures 4. – 8. From Kari Soino's *Athletic Hero* (2012)
<https://www.karisoinio.com/index#/athletic/>

Research Framework

This thesis situates in the tradition of artistic research. Artistic research as a term lacks an unambiguous definition, and depending on the field, institution and the geographical location, the term artistic research has been used interchangeably with terms such as practice-based, art-led or practice-led. The term practice-led is mostly used in universities in UK as well as in the field of design, whereas the term artistic research is used more extensively in the field of fine arts and in other European countries.¹⁹ Even though the artistic research may lack a clear definition, some features, goals or purposes can be drawn out that connect them into each other: the artwork being the focal point of the research, artistic experientiality being in the core of the research, the research being self-reflective, self-critical and outwardly-directed communicated, the research producing information that serves the practice, increasing understanding of the link between art and its social context and interpreting art works as cultural, political and pedagogical products.²⁰ In Finnish context, practice-led research has been used mostly to highlight the active role of professional practice in the process of research.²¹ However, in his book *Taiteen Tehtävä: Esseitä* (2017), Teemu Mäki describes five (or six²²) different ways of how art and research can be combined. From those the one titled *Art + written theory = artistic research* seems to be the most in line how this thesis has been conducted. *Artistic research*, as a way of conducting artistic research, is described being the most straightforward way of conducting the artistic

¹⁹ Mäkelä et al., 2011, 3

²⁰ Hannula, Suoranta and Vadén, 2005, 21

²¹ Mäkelä et al., 2011, 4

²² Teemu Mäki's subtitle for the chapter

²³ Mäki, 2017, 402

research. In this approach, the artist-researcher produces art works and along them writes a thesis that is connected to those works of art.²³ Mäki adds that both the works of art and the written thesis operate as research results and that the quality of the works of art is their most important feature. Sometimes, the works of art can even be totally independent from the thesis but the thesis on the other hand cannot be understood without the art works.

Finding the Medium

After a few detours along the way, making art – self-portraiture photographs in this case – was how I decided to approach the topic. One of my methods to explore the possible directions for how to create these photographs was to gather all sorts of artefacts that I had got in my hands during my time in ice hockey culture. This act supported both: as data collection alongside writing the autoethnographic texts, and as an inspiration to investigate the possibilities of the physical artefacts from the culture of hockey and different meanings embedded in them. Such artifacts were for example: ice hockey gear, both recent and from the past, medals, trophies, photographs, jerseys and pennants of different ice hockey clubs. In autoethnographic research, the artefacts can refer to any physical representations of one's life. They can fundamentally be anything from souvenirs to family album photographs, but due to my research purposes I chose artefacts, that were connected to ice hockey culture and in one way or another represented the production of the men's ice hockey

culture.²⁴ I had also got in to study Photography as a minor, which supported my decision of taking more artistic approach to the project and making photographs. I have been practicing photography for about a decade in different ways, often mostly just exploring the world through the lens – taking snapshots. The works I have done and the overall attitude towards photography had been rather limited – I saw it as more functional and the so called serious photographs I had taken were mostly product photos for my own design projects or for friends projects. I can also sense, how getting this formal education about art photography gave me more self-confidence, sort of a license or a permission to make photographs that I would have courage to call art and treat them as such.

In the beginning it was not easy to relate to the ice hockey gear in other ways than how I had been accustomed to relate to them – as functional objects that were designed to serve a certain purpose when playing ice hockey. But after spending time playing with and looking at the gear and other objects and placing myself in front of the camera with the artefacts they started to get meanings beyond their obvious purpose. It was not only the objects solely but when combining them with my body in different ways, there became new layers of interpretation to play with. I had some intuitive ideas and inspiration from recalling the past memories, by engaging with artworks loosely around the themes alongside reading literature, but the actual events of shooting and looking at the images created was where I started to realize the paths I wanted to take with the project. The aforesaid describes how new knowledge is being generated in practice-led research and how the

knowledge is being embodied in the process and created artefacts as Maarit Mäkelä (2007) explains in her article *Knowing Through Making: The Role of the Artefact in Practice-led Research*. In an approach like this the creation of artworks, the process in itself alongside the created artefacts function as a means of realizing a thing which needs to be perceived, understood or addressed.²⁵ In the article Mäkelä also refers to Michael Biggs, who has been one of the early developers in field of practice-led research, how the works of art serve as bearers of knowledge. In this way, the artefacts, in this case photographs, created during the research process are seen as attempts to present arguments towards the research questions posed. Even though the artefacts are seen as bearers of knowledge they alone don't embody knowledge. The artefacts need to be interpreted in certain context in order to gain this knowledge and that the context affects the way the artefact in interpreted.

The experience of using myself as a model for the images had given me a glimpse of how through self-portraits it would be possible not only to explore my own identity but also to make the works represent something more, something that could be described as *photography of me is also a photography of every man* and to realize how the body in the image is essentially mine but at the same time an *other*. Albeit being fairly inexperienced in making self-portraits I have been able to identify with when Susan Bright, a curator and writer, wrote in her book *Auto Focus The Self-Portrait in Contemporary Photography* (2010) that: *In many ways the author of a self-portrait is always presenting an impossible image, as he or she can never mimetically represent the physical reality that other people see. The “self” therefore is always*

in some respects also an “other”. Technically this means that a photographic image is flipped or is always a mirror image, but psychoanalytically or philosophically it has come to mean something quite different. Such paradoxes have indefatigable contemporary continuums as artists continue to grapple with locating the “self”.²⁶ Through the production of the photographs I had sensed the possibilities of performing for the camera – the different ways that the act of performing shapes and shakes the experience of self and identity and how the performance makes me more aware of cultural conventions of representation and how my own identity is in relation to those.²⁷ This was one of my aims with the project: to explore my identity through making the photographic series *Dear Hockey*, to challenge the representations of what a male ice hockey player can look like, how they can express themselves and through writing the essays to explore on more theoretical level how the ice hockey culture affects the production of one's identity.

In the following chapters I will present three essays 1: *Anatomy of a Hockey Player*, 2: *Bring the Violence* and 3: *Because it's the Cup*. *Anatomy of a Hockey player* will investigate how within sports the relationship to body can get skewed in different ways that can affect the person's health until the rest of their lives with thoughts from Sociology and Gender scholar Michael A. Messner. The essay also discusses how the male body has been interpreted mostly through its actions and the body ends up not being listened to – resulting in neglecting the need for taking care of it. In the second essay, *Bring the Violence*, the topic is pondered on through Teemu Mäki's writings on violence as well as through my experiences of violence in the context

of ice hockey. The last essay, *Because it's the Cup* delves into the world of succession that surrounds the manly culture, and therefore society in more general, and causes people a lot of distress when not reaching the standards that the society imposes on us.

24 Chang, 2008, 109
25 Mäkelä, 2007

26 Bright, 2010, 8
27 Mäkelä, 2008, 191

1: Anatomy of a Hockey Player

In this essay I will discuss ice hockey player’s relationship to their body, mainly through research and thoughts from Michael A. Messner, a Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies in University of Southern California. He has studied subjects around gender and sports over four decades, and discusses masculinity and violence more precisely in his essay *When Bodies are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport* in a book *Out of Play* (2007). I will explore the ways I have learnt to use and relate to my body. Ice hockey as sociocultural environment reinforces a certain way of looking and moving bodies through a heteronormative lens that promotes a mutually accepted ways of being a man within the given context. I will also discuss how the process of making the self-portrait photographs affected the way I am looking at my own body – the sensations and experiences during the photoshoots alongside the editing process, when I sometimes stared at my half-naked body from the computer screen for hours – after I finally got over the shame and was able to actually open the files and look at them.²⁸

My Body, Image

We live in a visual world. Visual communication has become increasingly important in contemporary society, with the rise of visual media such as television, film, social media, and digital

technology. Visual images are used to convey information, tell stories, and shape our perceptions of the world around us. Especially the social media has a reputation of fostering our tendencies of comparing ourselves with others which also has been the argument made by researchers who have studied and defined how, especially the photo-based platforms, such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, relate more consistently to dysfunctional body image.²⁹ It is also to be noted how in the article *Social media and body image: Recent trends and future directions*³⁰ the way of using social media affects the effects of the use – whether one spends more or less time on social media or if they are passive scrollers or post images on social media themselves. The effects also appear to be similar across genders even though in the public sphere the conversation often seems to address the effects of distorted body image towards girls and young women. However, during the past decade also discussions about men’s and boy’s pressures on their body image and outlooks have been entering the public discourse. There are at least a few reasons for that, the discussion and research are today also more focused on men’s and boy’s body image and pressures: traditional gender roles are breaking, the changes in societal norms allow men more widely to pay attention on their looks and therefore to be aware of their insecurities and other issues what comes to their looks and body image. Also more research about men and pressures towards their looks is being carried out which helps to draw attention to these issues.

If I were to describe my relationship with my own body I would call it ambivalent. On one hand I

feel that as a result of paying extremely pedantic attention to my bodily movements, from ice hockey practice drills to skateboarding maneuvers, I have gained a fairly vivid sense what my body can do and can therefore enjoy that sensation. Also due to sometimes even quite extreme practicing, especially that I am looking back now, I can say I have been fit back when I was playing ice hockey competitively. On the other hand, even back then I remember looking at my own belly and having the same feeling as I do today: I should lose a few kilos from here and there. Also the dissatisfaction towards my own looks has been around since childhood – way before there was any social media around. It is of course a commonplace and rather a feature of our society than an ice hockey specific issue to not be satisfied with your own looks, but what I am interested in here is how in the context of ice hockey there is a certain ideal of what the body should look like and why it is that way and how that affects one’s body image.

When making the photographs for the series *Dear Hockey* one of my goals was to challenge the conventions of how male body has been represented. Bringing in the play the hockey gear and other artefacts made it even more controversial in a way because they seem to represent very hypermasculine world. From these blocks I started to explore how the images would work, if I wore some of the gear that seemed to create sensual, even erotic connotations. Photos that most obviously would go under this description are *Sun’s out Bun’s out*, *Trophy Husband #1 and #2 and Dear...* In *Sun’s out Bun’s out* I felt that the so called hockey butt has to be in the scene in some form – especially when personally getting a bunch of comments about my thighs and butt

along the way. One friend of mine, at the first time we met, commented my thighs *jumalauta mitkä hevosenreidet*³¹ which was a bit strange, but I took it also an compliment and after we got to know better, I can understand his straightforwardness better. I also felt that there is not enough laughter at oneself in hockey culture – it seems suspiciously serious and I don’t know why. I feel there is a bit of laughter at myself in the photographs, but at the same time, I am being serious. It is not laughing at myself, it is laughing at the tradition of taking oneself seriously in a way that prevents one from critically looking at themselves – as if the self, or manliness would be on the line here. In *Trophy Husband* photos I wanted to wear the hockey pants with the suspenders. I love suspenders and these suspenders that I am wearing and actually using now while playing the hobbyist hockey are not hockey suspenders but just a regular suspenders for pants. Also the neck protector is a very controversial thing in hockey sphere. Most professionals don’t wear one and even in juniors, where it is mandatory, the players often use one that is enough not to get penalized by the referee but does not actually protect anything. I guess it is one of those manly things – when the health is on the line, you feel more alive. I instead feel more alive when I am alive. But I understand, sometimes a little bit of risk needs to be out there to enrich the feeling of living – but the neck protection seems to be just one of those traditions, aesthetic things that seems unnecessary not to wear.

Athletes Burden

One of the ways that athletes often learn to view

28 After the first photo sessions it took a couple of weeks that I was able to overcome the shame I felt towards both the works I had done as well as just looking at myself

29 Vandenbosch et al., 2022, 1-2

30 Ibid.

31 Oh my god, what horse thighs

their body can be described as *body as machine or a weapon*³², as Michael A. Messner puts it in his essay *When Bodies Are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport*. As Messner elaborates this view in the essay, he describes how among athletes, especially in aggressive and violent combat sports, the relationship with the body appears as alienated: “The instrumental rationality that teaches athletes to view their own bodies as machines and weapons with which to annihilate an objectified opponent ultimately comes back upon the athlete as an alien force: the body-as-weapon ultimately results in violence against one’s own body.”³³. The instrumentality and violence towards one’s own body that Messner describes could be interpreted so that the body works as commodity – something that can be used, needs maintenance every now and then and even could be replaced or at least fixed when broken – if one has access to certain medical care. One of the most significant periods during my years of playing started at around age of 13 when I first started to have issues with my back. At first the pain was coming and going and I could not see any direct reason other than that I was going through my puberty and growing height at accelerating pace. At around the same time we had started as a team to have physical exercises that included lifting weights and other exercises that were preparing us to face the upcoming years in hockey which would allow us to make body checks in the game. In Finland, in boy’s leagues, the body checks are allowed in the games at around the age of 13. In contrast, in girl’s and women’s leagues body checks are not allowed at all. The rule that prohibited body checks in women’s games saw daylight in 1990 and it was

32 Messner, 2007, 102
33 Ibid.
34 Leinonen, 2015, 187

backed up by arguments such as that women are more fragile and therefore should not be allowed to make body checks.³⁴ There is also a rule that does not allow women to wear similar visor as men wear – the one, that sort of protects the eyes and the forehead, but instead in women’s games one has to wear either full face visor or a cage. Whereas in boy’s hockey one has to start to wear a visor when they enter the U20 leagues which usually happens at the age of 18. I am not saying that one set of rules is better than the other one but this underlines aptly how the gender differences are being produced in ice hockey context: women seen as more fragile, something that should be protected and men as gladiators that can take care of themselves in these aggressive battles on the ice. Of course the separation of genders is something that underlines pretty much the whole sports culture in general: there is almost always different teams and leagues for boys and girls and men and women. This is not to say that it would be needed to have mixed teams or leagues, but more as something that is good to be aware of – something that affects the ways one perceives the world around them when they attend to a sport in which teams consist basically only of men. I am not either a right person to say whether the rules of women’s games should be changed – it should be up to the players themselves, and as Nathaniel Oliver writes in an article on thehockeywriters.com, in which he had asked the question from the women hockey players, whether body checks should or should not be allowed in women’s games the answers were divided, but mostly addressed the fact that the game is already fairly physical and that only more clarity where the line of taking

the body goes would be most importantly needed. Also a comment made by Venla Hovi, a three-time Olympian for Team Finland, popped up and caught my attention: *I think hitting in the women’s game is unnecessary. The game is getting faster and faster, and the number of head injuries – in both women’s and men’s hockey – is alarming. Women’s hockey is a physical game based on skill and tactics, and I think men’s hockey will eventually have to adjust and make changes.*³⁵

The comment made by Venla Hovi looks to be as on point as it can be. I don’t know when would it happen or if on the men’s ice hockey side there would be enough courage to say it out loud that *actually the we need to change our game closer to women’s hockey*. But I would argue this being inevitable before long. Probably starting from the gear, from the full-face cage or visor to become a standard for the young players – same, that happened with helmets in the 1980s, before that, it was a commonplace to play ice hockey, on a professional level, without helmet! When I joined a hobbyist hockey club again after years without playing hockey, one of the first moves for me was to get a cage – it just felt so unnecessary to expose myself to the possible accident of getting a puck or stick to a face. Not that it would have ever been a rational, or even the most functional choice not to wear one while still playing competitively, it just wasn’t even allowed unless one had already a face injury that they had to cover. It also seemed to me that this, wearing a cage was looked a bit down, even in the hobbyist circles – not to mention how people would comment on internet when a professional has to wear one. I even felt that myself at first, it really felt that I was doing something *against the*

35 Oliver, 2020
36 Sweat suit is not a real term in English for this piece of clothing, but in Finnish we call this piece of clothing one puts under the hockey gear as *hikipuku* which translates into sweat suit

code or something. It was really intriguing that such a thing could cause such feelings – but I decided to wear it with pride. It also helped, that somehow the experience is much easier to face, when on the other hand I was fairly good still as a hockey player and somehow that gives bit more immunity to other people’s judgements.

In *Dear Hockey*, I have several images where I am wearing this *cage helmet*. I felt it was an important piece of the gear to be involved. It really goes there in around the question what is considered being manly or what is not. It exposes a glimpse of why this whole wearing or not wearing a full-face-cover is an issue in the first place. In photos *Male Ice Hockey Player #1* and *#2* the cage helmet really plays a central role. In the photo *#1* I wanted to use the close-up portrait, a bit from an angle, tight look into the eyes of viewer, through the cage. Does this really define my manliness? In the second photo from that moment I wanted to bring a bit more of my body in the play. I was wearing this set of underwear, or a *sweatsuit*³⁶ as we call it in Finland, and this especially was on from far away from past, one of those cotton one’s that everybody had when they were still kids, time before technical underwear. I felt it would make the photo connected to me as being a boy, while all of us were still wearing a cage along the *sweatsuit*, but exposing my mildly hairy chest it would show that I was not a kid anymore. It seemed intriguing to have this play between a boy and a man, how everything changes while in the end nothing really changes. Often, in the ice hockey imagery, there seems to be this urge to try to make the players look as tough as possible – which is beautifully in

line what how the culture operates. Instigating fear is an integral part of the game, as long as you stay within the rulebook – or the code³⁷.

The instrumentality towards one’s body within hockey context comes beautifully or horrifyingly evident in the comment from Men at Play *The player’s body, like a fine-tuned engine, is driven to exhaustion; once the body expires the player becomes superfluous*³⁸. Like mentioned before, that alienating process makes to body seem a commodity, that, when expired, could be tossed away. But in life the body just does not go away. It can be fixed to some extent, but one has to stick with the body they have until the end of days. Interestingly, in the Messner’s essay *When Bodies are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport* he describes how it is not only the former professional athletes, but that nearly every former athlete he had interviewed had *at least one story of an injury that disabled him, at least for a time*.³⁹ He adds, that many had also injuries that had permanent impact of their health and that *Despite the fact that most wore these injuries with pride, like badges of masculine status, there is also a grudging acknowledgment that one’s healthy body was a heavy price to pay for glory*.⁴⁰ I have personally gone through a 4 month rehabilitation after suffering a repetitive strain injury in my lumbar vertebra⁴¹ and that experience has had its better and worse aspects. The good I have got out of that is that has made a bit more respectful towards my body, when being forbidden of doing what you love to do at the age of 15 for 4 months it really leaves a permanent mark but still I do occasionally mistreat my body. It is not

the repetitive strain injury anymore, but the back can be still my Achilles heel, if I do not take good enough care of my body i.e. do not give it enough rest or exercise too intensively, the similar feeling in the lower back will come and remind: you are not a machine – and I will try to listen to that.

37 See chapter *Bring the Violence* for more about the code
38 Robidoux, 2001, 190
39 Messner, 2007, 102
40 Ibid.
41 Located in the lower back

2: Bring the Violence

*As a result, what it means to be a hockey player is generally indistinguishable from being a man.*⁴²

Ice hockey has a reputation as a conservative sport, often described with attributes such as physicality, toughness and even violence. The forementioned characteristics have also been traditionally associated to masculinity and therefore to men. When I was first approaching the broad topic of violence and other relatively questionable sides of ice hockey my first impressions were judgmental – it seemed like a total no brainer that would not require any further reasoning or examination why there should be room for any of it. Then, after I had been recalling memories from the past during my active years of playing ice hockey and read artist, writer, director and researcher Teemu Mäki’s essay *Olemme murhaajia*⁴³ I started to understand the complexity of even defining violence let alone the discussion of acceptable and reprehensible violence.⁴⁴

What is violence, anyway?⁴⁵

In his essay Teemu Mäki defines violence by doing three dichotomies within it. The first being *visible* and *masked* violence, in which the visible represents

42 Robidoux, 2001, 189
43 Mäki, 2005/2009, 16 – 68 (Eng. We are murderers). Part of Teemu Mäki’s doctoral thesis.
44 Mäki, 2005/2009, 17
45 Ihlberg, 2022
46 A view that sees values as one-sided, prone to error, bound to time and culture and dependent on the individual.
Salonen, 2008, tieteen termipankki.fi, accessed 31.03.2023
47 Mäki, 2005/2009, 18

the bloodshed and other forms of physical violence that are commonly recognized as violence and the latter the ones that are usually called as psychological, indirect and structural violence. In the second dichotomy Mäki divides violence into *instrumental* and *self-serving violence*. When instrumental violence is being used, violence works like a tool, it is being an indispensable part to achieve the actual goals that could be for example gaining power and wealth by exploiting labor, property or even a life of a person. Self-serving violence on the other hand represents violence in which the perpetrator of the violence enjoys the violence in itself. This category embodies violence that has motives such as revenge, sadism, excitement or other longings for intense experiences. The third and last of Mäki’s dichotomies is *good* and *bad* violence. Might be necessary to point out that as Teemu Mäki writes, he is being a moral relativist⁴⁶ and does not want to divide violence into notions such as good / evil or right / wrong due to the absolutism of these notion pairs and the way they obscure the perspective-dependency of value statements.⁴⁷ Good and bad could at first seem to be just another absolute way of seeing violence, but as Mäki elaborates his perspective, he describes that violence is often part of unsatisfactory life – numb, uninspiring and against the common good, but sometimes, in some shapes, violence can be part of the good life: meaningful, voluptuous, lively and enriching the common good. He also adds that depending on the perspective and on the definition

of a *good life*, different forms of violence can be good or bad – *just like a hammer can be well or poorly manufactured, and for some purposes useful while for other purposes totally useless*.⁴⁸

The reason why Mäki’s division and vast definition of violence seems important in the context of ice hockey is that often the discussion seems to be end up being unnecessarily black and white – violence and aggressiveness is either seen as an intrinsic attribute to ice hockey that without which it would not even be ice hockey and for the others that is a reason to why the whole game should not even exist in the first place. In this essay I am trying to tackle these moralist⁴⁹ views towards ice hockey by implementing Mäki’s views on violence in ice hockey context. Mäki highlights the equal ability of all forms of violence in producing suffering. He also argues that the seriousness, or the degree of damage created is not dependent on the intentionality of the act nor is it dependent on the fact whether the victim acknowledges their victimization. He sees a possibility of a fruitful violence in some forms of self-serving violence and argues that the most devastating form of violence for the common good can be found in instrumental use of violence, especially in structural violence that can become so indistinguishable that neither the perpetrator of violence nor the victim recognizes it as violence.⁵⁰ Personally, today, I see the violence and aggressiveness of the game as something artificial, something that is not inherent nor necessary, at least in the shape and form we see it happening today, but as a subject of agreement. After all, the

game of ice hockey has been transforming over time – due to change of rules, attitudes and with the new generations becoming part of the scene. It is also to be noted that ice hockey has different brands, in the most simple way put - the North American and the European versions of it. The North American representing the more, at least visibly violent, where you can witness fighting pretty much on daily basis and it is commonly agreed as part of the game⁵¹, whereas in European leagues one would get sent out of game if they fight in a game, in some cases getting even game misconduct and therefore missing more games afterwards. Of course ice hockey is played around the globe, so to say, but in this essay I will focus mainly on these two branches of hockey with an extension of Australian ice hockey because those are the ones I have personal experience of, and the NHL being the largest professional league of North America and the globe and having major influence on the sport around the world.

I have *dropped the gloves*⁵² twice when I was still playing competitive ice hockey. Both of these fights took place when I participated playing in Australian International Ice Hockey Cup, an annual tournament -style mini league to which players across the Europe and North America come to play ice hockey and visit Australia. I can’t say that it was my decision to fight either time – the opponent players, both Canadian, got mad at me during the game and challenged me in a fight and I felt I had no other option than to accept the challenge. I was frightened because I knew that fighting for

them was most likely something they had done many times before and they were both also much older than I was.⁵³ Luckily, neither of the fights resulted anything more than some hurt knuckles and adrenaline rushing in veins and to be honest, it was mostly just survival from my side, trying to protect myself from getting beaten up badly.

When I am looking back at these incidents it raises contradictory feelings. On one hand I can kind of understand how, especially coming from the North American leagues, one can see fighting as an organic part of the game but on the other, especially in this context of playing for a summer league in Australia, it feels like a total overkill to end up having to fight – which can in worst case scenario lead to serious injuries. Of course this possibility of serious injuries is present in the game all the time, but a fist fight, attacking someone – it really is something I don’t want to be part of. Why did not I just walk away from the situation then? I cannot recall what was I thinking it the exact moment back then but I would say that the code⁵⁴ told me not to back up from the situation. I could also argue that there was at least a little bit of this masculine pride involved not to say no for a fight – fight like a man. It could also be noted that almost half of the players were coming from North American leagues and Australian ice hockey tends to bend more towards to this version of ice hockey, rather than the European one, so it could be also argued as Michael A. Robidoux, a professor and director of the School of Human Kinetics in

Faculty of Health Sciences in University of Ottawa points out in his book *Men at Play* (2001) how the European players tend to seek acceptance and praise for giving up on their so-called weaker style of play and adopt the more violent version when coming to play in North America.⁵⁵ Even though the book *Men at Play* is about an ethnographic study of a professional hockey team’s players it also reflects on the interviewee’s junior years which can be seen as preparation for the possible⁵⁶ years in professional hockey. Even though the book *Men at Play* is situated on a single professional ice hockey team in North America, the experiences and situations described were something I was really able to relate to.

When I was still playing I never thought that hockey would be a violent game. It seemed mostly just *part of the game* as it has being often argued nowadays when someone defends the violence in hockey. It has been interesting to observe the feelings that the violence in the rink raises me today that I have a good years of distance to the sport. Not that I would have ever been very enthusiast about the fighting in hockey, definitely not from the side of being involved in one, but neither as a spectator. Max Rynänen, a Senior University Lecturer in Theory of Visual Culture and writer, writes in his brilliant book *Roskamaali: Jääkiekon estetiikkaa ja kulttuurifilosofiaa*⁵⁷ (2012) about hockey fights how one probably has to born Canadian to be able to understand how the fights can be called beautiful.⁵⁸ He draws a perceptive

48 Mäki, 2005/2009, 18

49 After spending years away from ice hockey I started to have these moralist thoughts on hockey myself too

50 Mäki, 2005/2009, 18

51 Robidoux, 2001, 146

52 A synonym for fighting in ice hockey

53 In 2010 I was 19 years old and they were around 25 which at the time was still significant difference

54 A set of un-written rules and regulations that are “part of the game” such as “don’t hurt the veteran players”

55 Robidoux, 2001, 147

56 In reality only a handful of each age group end up being professional ice hockey players

57 Translation for the name of the book: Gargabe goal: The aesthetics and cultural philosophy of ice hockey

58 Rynänen, 2012, 111

picture how the different branches of hockey; the European and the North American differ from each other in the sense of fighting, but also shows how this more North American version has been tried to bring into European rinks. It’s a huge conflict to me, I love the North American hockey, the NHL, but the fights, especially today, only raise disgust or ridiculousness in me. In photos *Do You Want to Dance? and Dancer #1 & #2* I was trying to deal with the fighting in hockey. What is the fighting about in the end? Is it just to entertain the crowd? Or is it some manly or masculine urge to *let some steam out* in a place where it is allowed? Maybe it is all of them. Messner (2007) suggests that among boys and men, in sports, where the rules allow such things as fighting to occur, they legitimize the actions as long as they are within the rulebook.⁵⁹ This puts the argument, that Ryynänen noted in this chapter made about fighting in media, in a suspicious light that the *goons* are there to protect and keep order on the ice⁶⁰, when the actual dictating force is the rulebook and judge should be referee, not the street patrol.

Humans are social animals and tend to seek for acceptance from their peers in whatever sociocultural environment they are in. This becomes highly emphasized especially in male ice hockey environment as Robidoux explains in *Men at Play* when he describes the pressures the players feel when entering the ice hockey culture, an environment that the players from teenage years until, if, becoming professionals spend a great share of their time in.⁶¹ Robidoux argues that as

59 Messner, 2007, 98
60 Ryynänen, 108
61 We used to have about 7-8 practices and games during a week at the age of 17 so time spent with teammates was enormous
62 Robidoux, 2001, 188-189

the team sports philosophy demands unity and uniformity for the sake of team success, the effects of that cause the homogenizing forces that shape the players’ identity both as hockey players and as men. This leads into a situation where the players status depends upon their assimilation into the group.⁶² In the photos I am wearing the cage helmet and gloves, that both are in conflict with what should happen if one is about to fight. I wanted also present my no-to-athletic-anymore body to bring this humor lurking in the background. In the photos where the *dance* is actually happening I thought that they work best together – I think the most demanding fight in the end is the fight against oneself, when seeing the people or peers around as opponents the whole world becomes a battlefield. That seems to be often the case with men, threat here and threat there, then one indeed becomes a threat for others and for themselves.

3: Because it’s the Cup⁶³

Competition surrounds us anywhere we go since our childhood. Sometimes the evaluation is based on numerical facts; who threw the javelin furthest in the physical education class in preliminary school or who got the best number in mathematics test, and sometimes it happens through other factors, that are rather qualitative than quantitative, such as the number given for one’s behavior or who gets their drawing to be in the school’s magazine cover. In sports the competitiveness is particularly present – it would be hard to imagine any major sport without a competition of some kind. And what comes to ice hockey or other team sports, the competition takes place on at least on a few levels: competition between the teams, between the players in the team and also between individual players across the league or even worldwide, because nowadays all the statistics of each player, including their points, height, weight and other factors are often available on internet to anyone interested.⁶⁴ Competitiveness is also often associated to men and boys, as if it was something *natural* to them, something that could be traced back to one being a man. In reality, it is the social and cultural expectations that condition boys in having competitive attitude towards world^{65,66} – and what comes to sports, it has mainly been constructed and built by men for boys and other men⁶⁷ which continues the production of gender in a way that naturalizes the competitiveness

63 A phrase used in a commercial by NHL marketing starting in 2012 Playoffs
64 Ojala, 2021, 99-100
65 Valkonen, 2019, 58
66 Butler, 1990, 9
67 Messner, 2007, 93
68 He was also an aspiring athlete and after some years after this moment he won gold on national level
69 And many years after that - almost until these days, as of 2023

associated to boys and men. Coming from ice hockey culture, the competitive mindset has had enormous effects on how I have perceived the world. There was a moment in junior high school where a classmate of mine⁶⁸ described my behavior and asked if I had this mindset of *trying to be the best in everything I do* and referred to then⁶⁹ at the top of the world ice hockey player, Alexander Ovechkin’s words, in which he had said his goal was trying to the best at everything he does. Somehow that moment has stuck in my head quite vividly and I remember at first feeling a bit confused, as if it had been bit of critique towards me, but at the same time I felt it came from admiration or pure curiosity, from which I felt proud about myself. Of course, at the time, I was still playing competitively and the dream of becoming a professional one day was still alive, but at the same time that scene reveals a lot of how I saw the world at during my teenage years and I can still feel the influence of the attitudes and values of that environment after two decades later.

The Manly Urge to Compete

In the book *The Descent of Man* (2016), an artist and writer Grayson Perry (b. 1960) discusses contemporary masculinity and critiques traditional notions of manhood. Some of the central arguments in the book are that traditional masculinity

is burdened by harmful stereotypes and rigid expectations, that pressures men to conform to societal norms that include behavior such as being dominant, competitive, emotionally restrained and detached. The book aims to challenge these traditional notions of masculinity and offers Perry’s personal anecdotes, cultural observations and interviews through which he tries to spark conversation about gender equality, empathy and the importance of embracing a more diverse and healthy conception of what it means, or could mean to be a man in contemporary society. Perry also challenges these traditional notions of what a man can be through his art as well as via his person by using his alter-ego *Claire* when he dresses in stereotypically considered as women’s clothing such as a dresses. His artistic contributions are best known from his ceramic works which are often pottery, that form-wise represent classical shapes, whereas the illustrations on the vases contain bright-colored content that often revolves around sexuality, juxtaposing objects such as flowers, weapons and war.

In *Descent of Man* Perry introduces the reader to a concept called *Default Man*, which refers to a societal archetype of power and privilege that is commonly associated with white, heterosexual middle-aged men. The Default Man is the norm of society, to which all *others* are being measured, and his experiences, perspectives and values are thought of as universal and objective. Another concept that the reader is being introduced is called *Department of Masculinity*, which refers to the voice that operates inside each of our heads who have been marked as a boy at birth and raised as

one. The Department of Masculinity is the inner voice, the individual being aware of it or not, that consistently keeps eye on us that we don’t step out of line from the orders that the Department of Masculinity gives to us. It refers to the societal systems, expectations, and pressures that shape and enforce traditional masculine norms and behaviors. The Default Man and Department of Masculinity can be a useful tools to help to reflect the tendencies that lurk within ourselves even though we might not carry them out as straightforwardly as in some examples in the book, but the concepts give us the opportunity, with the help of humor, to take a step back from oneself and see the ridiculousness of some traits that we, men, often carry with us.⁷⁰

Competition and Cultural Practices in Hockey

The seeds of the manly urge to compete have been planted in my psyche before I can even remember. Especially when I joined hockey school at the of 5, the conditioning for the mindset to compete got more intense. It was around at the age of 10 that the teams were first time formed based on the level of the players – at the time, our family moved from another part of the city of Vantaa closer to Tikkurila, the Eastern center of Vantaa, in which ice hockey organization Kiekko-Vantaa held their practices and I got to join their team of my age group. I can’t remember how many different teams there were, but quite quickly I realized that I was playing in the top team and some of the people I had made

friends did not get to play there and our paths started to go in different directions friends-wise. It was something that I only afterwards realized, but these changes in teams and the intensifying competition, not only between other teams, but also with other players within the organization, started to affect me in a way that in my mind the better the player, the more value they had in my mind. Of course it was not the only attribute that was affecting my perception of people around me, but it really was a significant factor. This way of judging people based on their efforts and talent on ice seemed to be one of those unspoken cultural qualities of ice hockey, that in worst scenarios lead to situations that even though the person could be an arrogant turd, they would get coaches and other players acceptance only because they were able to help the team to win games or show off their skills on the ice.

I think I was at my peak arrogance⁷¹ when got to taste success when I was asked to join, with a few teammates from Kiekko-Vantaa, to one of the then most successful teams in Finland, Jokerit. Obviously the change of organization changes the people around, which also affects the relationships with friends from previous team, due to time spent with the people one plays with, but I can also recall being a bit proud of playing for an organization which has had some of the most meritorious players coming from Finland, such as Jari Kurri, Kari Lehtonen and Teemu Selänne. At the same time when I had a bit of this looking down on players who played in *inferior* teams, inside Jokerit I felt like an outsider and that I was looked down.

I think the reasons were at least that I was coming from *countryside*, from Vantaa and not Helsinki and that I was just a new face in the team. It is always hard to enter a new team, and especially in ice hockey environment, as Juha Oinonen wrote his opinion piece on jatkoaika.com, an internet journal and discussion forum for ice hockey related topics. Oinonen wrote how in ice hockey, cultural practices are often not argued at all, but only justified by pleading to practice, *this is how things have been done before, and that is why they are done the same way now*.⁷² Oinonen writes in the article about an incident, that a then rookie⁷³ Erik Haula faced when he was on his first year in the NHL. The team was arriving by airplane and when they had landed Haula had to rush to toilet due to having his stomach upset. After that the then captain of the team, Mikko Koivu, had strongly criticized Haula’s actions and said that the next time, even if you have to shit your pants, it is the rookie’s job to take the luggage to bus first. Oinonen also adds that now, when Haula was telling that story on a podcast, about ten years later, he was still giving his understanding for Mikko Koivu on how he was acting. Rightfully so, Oinonen asks: *In what other profession would such rigid and detached thinking be shared with the public?* Of course here we are talking about professionals, which I am not sure if it makes the situation worse or better, but I have experienced similar moments of hazing, on both sides, hazed and been the hazer. Most of the times those have been more like cutting the hair of the younger rookie players entering the team – in a way that does not flatter them, a sort of humiliation that too, but the stories I have heard or read tell that those hazing rituals

70 It is also to be noted that some of the traits are not just ridiculous but rather dangerous to people around as well as for the men themselves, such as the potential of using violence when the person has absorbed the patriarchal mindset as bell hooks points out in her book *The Will to Change. Men, Masculinity and Love* (2004)

71 I haven’t been told being arrogant, but looking back I can see how this year and a half playing for one of the largest and most successful teams in Finland started to change my perception of my value as a person

72 Oinonen, 2023

73 Rookie is called a player who plays their first year in the league they play

or initiation rites can get really bad and even end players career and destroy their mental health or physical health. And all this is done in the name of team cohesion and team spirit. In his ethnographic book about men’s professional ice hockey, *Men at Play* (2001) Michael Robidoux explains how the rituals facilitate transformation (to become one of the team) and symbolically enact the fundamental aspects of a group, serving as an expression of power: *Ritual facilitates this transformation through a legitimization of experience. The ritual enacts symbolically what is fundamental to the group and, by its execution, becomes accepted by those wishing to access the community; it serves, then, as an expression of power. ... Without undergoing these practices, they do not become part of the desired community. ... Ritual, then, does not magically transform the young hockey players into something other than what they once were; it does, however, shape identities through actions learned through their performance.*⁷⁴ In the end of the chapter Robidoux writes how the will to become a professional hockey player makes the players vulnerable to these pressures that are imposed on them, how there in a way are not alternatives, if one wants to pursue their career.⁷⁵ He also notes, how *The rituals can strip players of their individuality and immerse them in a collective whole with a belief system, world view, and values that are often counterproductive to personal development.*⁷⁶

Competition does take place in the world of art and design too. Matti Tainio has explored the similarities and differences between art and sports in his doctoral dissertation *Parallel Worlds: Art and Sport in Contemporary Culture* (2015). Tainio

describes how *The role and the experiences of the active participants in art and sport are similar in many of their aspects – but there are also significant differences.*⁷⁷ He describes how in both worlds, most of the work is done hidden from audience and that mostly the motivation comes through internal, self-driven reasons. The quest for excellence is one of the main motivators that can even manifest as an obsession in the sense of quality of the results. He also adds, that *However, part of the motivation in art and sport comes from external pressure, such as an upcoming exhibition or competition, but the need to exhibit or compete also comes from the individual artist or athlete herself.*⁷⁸ I see that the competition in art world is more in line what competition would be in solo sports, but what comes to team sports, it has a bit different qualities – the wins or losses can be less personal in a way. But still, even when talking about team sports, the individual are being put in the spotlight – mainly because *we need heroes* to look up to. Personally, I have never won anything big – but still, the trophies and medals were placed on the wall and even had a showcase shelf for trophies in my childhood room. The trophies in sports are highly mystified, at least in ice hockey. There is a witchcraft attached to the legendary Stanley Cup, that if a player touches it before actually winning it, they will be cursed and never win it themselves. Would be interesting to know if anyone has even tried to challenge this in real life. I do not know if I would have dared when I still had the dream of becoming an NHL player one day. I even once visited the Hockey Hall of Fame in Toronto, Canada, where the Stanley Cup is for the

audience to see – but being all over the place and too enthusiast about all the things around I never even saw the Cup. So I guess I still have a chance.

When I was gathering the artefacts for the photography sessions the medals and trophies raised mostly memories – a bit of pride too. It was amusing to go through them, mostly, they brought up memories from different competitions that I had attended to. I am forever grateful how through this sport I have got to see world at fairly young age – thanks to my parents for supporting me in chasing the dream. The trophies also raised controversial feelings which I have been inspecting in the photos *Chosen One*, *Forever 2nd* and *Prize on Eyez*. Even though winning, on average, is more satisfying than losing, it seems to be overrated. I think part of why I did not want to be part of hockey anymore when quitting at the of 21 was that I knew, that I would not win anything significant anymore. I have also heard people telling that they do not practice this or that anymore, because they cannot reach the level at where they used to be. To me, it looks like there is a connection that when one cannot reach the level that they used be at something, they lose interest into the thing. I do not feel that I had strongly this feeling about ice hockey, but now that I have been playing again in the hobby team and on the outdoor I have found enormous amount of joy in just cruising around and getting a successful move here and there. Not that the competitiveness would have disappeared – when I after years got to play NHL videogames online, against real other people I got real pissed off when losing. I even ended up fighting (online) after a few challenges and overcoming the feeling of that this would not be right. It still felt strange to fight, even in digital world, it just did not seem to fit or have much to do with the actual game and

if I want to fight and violence, in the visible sense, then I will choose to play Call of Duty. In the end, when looking at the abovementioned photographs, I feel that the seriousness within the masculine culture combined into the order of being successful in life by unhealthy standards, is something that makes a lot of people feel they are not enough and that is something we should question.

74 Robidoux, 2001, 118-119

75 Ibid., 126

76 Ibid., 126

77 Tainio, 2015, 128

78 Ibid.

Summary

In this written thesis I have discussed several aspects of how masculinity is being constructed in the realm of ice hockey, the artistic and scholarly takes on topics of manhood and masculinity, and the process of making the photographic series Dear Hockey. My objective was to explore what is the idea of a man within ice hockey culture, how that image and certain notions attached to men are impacting the men and boys who participate in the sport, and to delve deeper into my personal experience of this process through writing about my experiences inside the culture of hockey along making self-portraiture photographs.

The methodology used for this artistic research was carried out through literature review and autoethnographic writings alongside collecting the artefacts that were used as props for making the photographs. Through literature review I established a contextual framework that works as a background against which the photographs are mirrored: gender and identity seen as a continuous performative acts that are in continuous flux. The photographs and the production of them followed the tradition of artists making self-portraits – most of them done in studio setting with remote trigger but also in home environment.

The process of making Dear Hockey photographic series found its form through experimentation. The first sessions of shooting included play with the artefacts I chose to use, some more planned others more intuitive, and also experimenting how through different postures the feeling of both myself when making the photographs but also how the end-product would feel. Throughout the whole series the juxtaposition of hockey gear, other

hockey- and manhood related artefacts with not-so-masculine-associated postures, compositions and colors, were chosen to express the incoherence of how masculinity and manhood are being perceived within ice hockey culture. I also chose to make photos, that would formally and compositionally remind of imagery used in ice hockey culture such as the official headshot portraits used for the player photographs for each season or tournament.

The research process was everything but straightforward. The whole concept of artistic research needs still time to be internalized as well as the artistic identity to mature. It sometimes amazes me, how conditioned I seem to be for finding unambiguous answers for questions. Also the objective of combining gender theory, art making, sports world and personal experiences was an ambitious task to overcome, without an actual education on these fields other than arts. It is also to be noted that the personal experiences and stories cannot be over universalized but still they can give insight and perspectives for other people. However, through the completion of this thesis process I feel I have found more courage to explore myself and my identity through making art and have a stronger sense of my artist identity. I can also see how multiple identities can co-exist even if they seem like total opposites to one another. The whole *self* seems to be in flux, and even if some parts of the self can be isolated for a moment they are not to be set in stone.

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Figures

Figure 1. Author's home album photograph

Figure 2. Photograph by Vertti Virasjoki

Figure 3. Photograph by Vertti Virasjoki

Figure 4. Photograph of Jonathan Ho's work on Dezeen's article <https://www.dezeen.com/2018/01/02/six-young-writers-design-academy-eindhoven-trends-dutch-design-week/> (Accessed 09.12.2022)

Figures 5. – 8. Kari Soinio's works from series Athletic Hero, 2012 <https://www.karisoinio.com/index#/athletic/> (Accessed 20.01.2023)