

Uniting Art, Space and Citizens

When I was invited to co-curate the Art II Biennial, I was excited and honoured. Ii is one of the most progressive places in Europe, where climate change awareness is high at the municipality level, and culture, arts and education play essential roles in building awareness. The theme of the Biennial this year correlates with the emancipation of knowledge and the new materialist reading of the artistic practices. Correlation between art production, knowledge production and nature seemed relevant to the urgent questions we are all facing at the moment. I have also been working with ecofeminist artistic projects for many years and this has been a great opportunity to develop these ideas and contribute with some thoughts to the project.

Because of the coronavirus outbreak, we had to change the selection process strategy and concentrate on local artists in Finland. This shift has allowed us to provide working places for local artists, and to go deeper into the questions stated in the open call. Thirteen artists were selected to take part in the Biennial, and each of them developed their own interpretation of the suggested theme, *Knowledge of the Earth*.

As both a curator and an educator, I become aware of several essential questions. If we still face environmental challenges and the collapsing ecosystems, does it mean that the existing knowledge production systems are not functioning well enough? What have our generation learnt and what should we pass to the new generations? How does an educational system form from ourselves as citizens and how can we learn and teach sustainability? Can contemporary art practices offer room for thought and discussion about the role of nature in learning? These were some of the questions we had to consider when working on the Biennial.

The production of art in public space can have different functions, depending on the context. In Post-Soviet urban public spaces, many monuments of particular historical or political figures still dominate the main squares. According to A. Riegl, "a monument is a work of man erected for the specific purpose of keeping particular human deeds or destinies ... alive and present in the consciousness of future generations".¹ The Ii environmental art projects contrast with 'hard monuments' with their dominating, industrial materiality, their cold and alienating surfaces of stone or metal. Instead of praising powerful slave-traders or revolutionary leaders, the Biennial artists have created a collective monument to the Earth itself and the communities inhabiting the area. The context of Northern

Ostrobothnia provides us with alternative interpretations of what an art work in a public space could be. It can provide horizontal meeting places for the inhabitants of the place and possibilities for new learning, and establish dialogical relations between artists and their audience. Production processes can involve local citizens - such as customers of employment services, who were invited to construct new furniture and create art with the artist. It also involved local materials such as clay, wood, peat, and even eco-friendly materials used for creating sculpture.

The work of **Paula Suominen** presents the will to develop interactive processes with the community. Her work **Peculiar Flowers** is placed in a park next to the work rehabilitation centre in Ii. She started her relational project with participants of the centre before the Biennial, and in 2020 she developed a sculpture made of recycled ceramics which people working at the centre contributed. The whole area of the park which was used for the opening ceremony shows the results of the numerous workshops with customers, which demonstrates a human-centred, long-term approach to art production. Local citizens and visitors are invited to reflect on our common responsibility. Suominen formulates it in the following way:

Plants are in control of the land and share the right to share the values of nature. The vital conditions are re-shared on the planet. All species and creatures have equal responsibilities and rights to the land, water and air. No one can own them. The plants control and nurture the land and the planet.

The idea of invisibility is reflected in the sculpture **Invisible Insects** by **Pia Hentunen**. She has populated the parks of Ii with sculptures of insects, making these important contributors to sustainable ecosystem visible and presenting them to park visitors in an unexpected and refreshing way.

Artists invent multiple ways of learning from the earth. **Landshapes** by **Miia Kettunen** is an environmental art work where schoolchildren were co-creators in the design and reflection about soil, the Earth and its ecosystems. **Tiina Vehkaperä** gives a possibility to reconnect with the earth by reminding us that "alone we arrive and alone we will leave" and presents another way of learning from the earth. In her work **Mass Storage**, she gives the option for a bodily experience of the Earth and to dissolve in the surrounding landscape. **Alan Bulfin** and **Pii Anttila** have made a relational work playing with the private and the public, where visitors are invited to rediscover their closest resources - ones in their home - in an open laboratory. Inspired by Alain Badiou, the artists have created **Fidelity of Home**, an open, process-oriented lab in the Ii library. Video installations by **Marja**

Haapakangas and **Maria Laitila (Seusuo)** and **Johanna Ruotsalainen** and **Simi Susanna Ruotsalainen (I am a Living Being)** show two different approaches to the current discussion about ecological threats and the exploitation of the natural resources. In the latter, the earth becomes a protagonist and formulates her rights as stated in the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth presented at the First People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth in Cochabamba, Bolivia and carried forward to the United Nations. The work of **Anne Yoncha, Re-Peat III**, presents the results of an art-science collaboration about former peat extraction sites outside Oulu. The graphics show the complex structure of the peat and the artist's experiments with acrylic paint with peat ash and other natural materials. **Karoliina Niemelä** and **Pirjo Lempeä** also use the Earth's resources in creating the clay sculpture, **The Beginning**, which refers to the ancient myth of Kalevala and shows an ancient ceramics technique which turns into an interactive research process.

The Art II Biennial offers artistic readings of the possible sustainable futures where nature and the earth can be our teachers. The selection shows a variety of approaches to the theme, broad techniques and methods of communication with the audience. According to Bruno Latour, "belonging to a territory is the phenomenon most in need of rethinking and careful redescription; learning new ways to inhabit the Earth is our biggest challenge".² This Biennial has been an attempt to contribute to this new learning.

Although the virtual world allows us to exchange ideas and images quickly, communicate and make important decisions, the implementation of the work was key. I would like to thank the staff of KulttuuriKauppila Art Centre in Ii, Jetta Huttunen, Inka Hyvönen and Annika Ryhänen, who have managed to organise production processes in a great way even in these challenging and insecure times. I am thankful to my co-curator Maria Huhmarniemi for engaging and inspiring discussions, as always. Thanks go to all the wonderful artists who contributed with their ideas, reflections and art works.

References

¹ Riegl, A. (1903). *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin*.

² Latour, B. (2018). *Down to Earth. Politics in the New Climatic Regime*.



Ekaterina Sharova is an art historian, curator and educator. She graduated from an experimental Faculty of Humanities at Pomor State University in Arkhangelsk in 2004 and received a Master's Degree in Art History from the University of Oslo in 2012. Sharova has curated and co-curated projects for Arctic Art Forum, Arctic Arts Festival, Barents Spektakel and Arctic Arts Summit. She has written essays and given talks on Northern Russian art for Garage Triennial (2017) and NEMOSKVA (2018). She has taught at the Northern (Arctic) Federal University and has been a guest lecturer at the University of Lapland and Oslo National Academy of the Arts.

Sharova was an adviser for the Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada and has served as an expert for several national art competitions in Russia. Her curatorial projects focus on embodied knowledge, decentralisation of cultural capital and redesigning the invisible.