

Art for the community, with the community

Community art, socially engaged art and dialogical art are concepts that describe art as an encounter, a dialogue and a collaboration. Generally speaking, they refer to all processes that involve encouraging a group of people to engage in some creative activity together. The definition has an institutional approach. Talking and working together in a creative process is seen as a form of art when the process is facilitated in the context of contemporary art made by professional artists and presented in exhibitions and art catalogues, as in the Art II Biennial.

There are ongoing debates in arts research regarding how to involve community members equally in creating community art, how to listen to them in the planning process and how to empower them and create long-term relationships, empathy and trust through art (see, e.g., Hiltunen, 2010; Kantonen, 2005; Kester, 2004; Lacy, 1995). Research on the ethics of community art guided the curatorial process. For the participants, community art means social situations, sharing and joint experiences. It can serve as a channel for empowerment and the development of self-esteem and identity, and it can expand a participant's agency as an active member of society.

Community art has its roots in the art world of the 1960s, when the modernist style and the associated thinking emphasising the universality and originality of art faltered. In the 1960s and 1970s, art became more conscious and political. Community art today may still have political content: questioning, criticising, highlighting, provoking and enlivening by means of any artistic expression.

The design of community art requires that the artist has the skills to map and analyse the physical, narrative and socio-cultural dimensions of a place as well as the skills to interact with members of the community. These aspects were crucial when we were evaluating artists' proposals for the event. In community art, the artist is responsible for the design and implementation of a production's content; however, artists cooperate with the members of the community to complete these processes. The work can involve inspiration, guidance and the organisation of activities.

When community art is conducted at an international art symposium, artists have many potential strategies. Commonly, art is not seen as something that needs to be brought into communities by outsiders, but rather a way for artists to interact with the community, listen to them, learn from them and share something in return. In any case, artists can arrange art workshops in which they can teach

some specific methods for creating art, which can be implemented into expression. Art practice is often described as giving a voice to the community, which also refers to empowerment. Artistic processes can be led by artists who aim to facilitate creative involvement and co-production. In a more community-driven process, artists and community members can make art together, as a team, by sharing ideas throughout the whole process.

Since the 1960s, racism and women's rights have been among the topics tackled in community art. Recent tendencies in community art have followed this tradition and link them to intersectional feminism. This means promoting the idea that inequality can be identified and resolved. Intersectional feminism comprises gender and skin colour in addition to social categories such as social class and sexuality. At the Art II Biennial, the approach to increase justice was expanded from people to include non-human nature. This became very evident in the video art installation by **Simi Susanna Ruotsalainen** and **Johanna Ruotsalainen**. **I Am a Living Being** was their video installation consisting of animated, human-like facial features illustrating the imagined portrait of the earth. The speech given by the earth was modified from the Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth.

As the curators of the event, Ekaterina Sharova and I wanted to facilitate interaction between local communities and artists, but we needed to rethink how we could enable fruitful dialogue between all the participants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Would artists interact with locals online or through letters and postboxes, as one artist proposed? We concluded that online discussions and video conferences would hardly match the bodily presence of an artist in a socially engaged art project, but we were still able to target possible strategies for collaboration and communication at the Art II Biennial. **Miia Kettunen** collaborated with school pupils through distance learning strategies, and **Pii Anttila** and **Alan Bulfin** created a cupboard installation, **Fidelity of Home**, that called for community participation.

Post-humanistic thinking has shifted the focus of community arts towards greater collaboration with nature and to the idea of serving nature in arts. This paradigm shift is in line with other contemporary artists who have elevated nature as a co-artist and partner, along with machines and other objects. This kind of approach was developed by many of the artists at the Art II Biennial. For example, **Karoliina Niemelä** and **Pirjo Lempeä** used clay as a material and fired a statue in situ as a collaboration with nature. The same can be said about the installation by **Miia Kettunen**, which includes collaboration with plants.

Post-humanism focuses on non-human agency and the rights of nature (where the term 'non-human' is used to indicate that humanity is also part of nature). Simultaneously, it expands the circle of empathy from encompassing human neighbours to including neighbourhoods with animals, plants and rocks. The art also reflects artists' relationships with nature; they can see and represent nature romantically, spiritually, analytically and as an active agent and holder of rights with a voice.

Thanks to the peat, soil, earth, grass, clay, artists, community members, co-curator and producers of the stunning event!

References

Hiltunen, M. (2010). Slow Activism: Art in progress in the North. In A. Linjakumpu & S. Wallenius-Korkalo (Eds.), *Progress or Perish. Northern Perspectives on Social Change* (pp. 119–138). Ashgate.

Kantonen, L. (2005). *Telтта, Kohtaamisia nuorten työpajoissa*. [Meetings in workshops for young people]. LIKE.

Kester, G. (2004). *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. University of California Press.

Lacy, S. (1995). Debated territory: Towards a critical language for public art. In S. Lacy (Ed.), *Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art* (pp. 171–185). Bay Press.



Dr. Maria Huhmarniemi is an artist and a teacher at the University of Lapland, Faculty of Art and Design. In her work as a visual artist, she engages with questions concerning the North and environmental issues such as the relationship between people and nature and environmental responsibility. In her artistic practice she is focused on socially and environmentally engaged art. As a researcher, she is interested in political contemporary art and education for sustainability through art. In her Doctoral thesis (2016) she developed a transdisciplinary collaboration of artists and researchers. The motive was to find out how contemporary artists can participate in local discussions on environmental politics through art. Huhmarniemi has also curated international exhibitions and published multiple research articles.