

Interpreting nature: Reflections on the AIB 2020

The Art II Biennial 2020 stood out above all else simply because it took place. That is to say, opening during the global Covid-19 pandemic and while lockdown measures were in place in much of the world, it served as a rare symbol of continuity in the cultural field. Further to this, with its title and theme 'The Knowledge of the Earth' implying a reflection on both our planet and its lowliest constituent material — i.e. 'earth' or soil itself — it gave an opportunity to appreciate our dependence on and origin in nature itself. This could not have been more timely, given the cause for reflection that the Covid-10 lockdown had already given.

Often we do not fully appreciate the functioning of a given object or system until it breaks. Take the example of a prolonged power cut, causing widespread disruption to lighting, food storage, public transportation, essential supplies and medical services. Given time, the individual, family or business facing life without electricity is led to reflect on the source of the energy they usually take for granted. Ultimately, they will find its source is nature itself, via hydroelectric, wind, solar, gas, coal or nuclear means. Without the complex systems that send us energy from these sources, we are again left reliant on our planet and its basic products: plants, minerals, water, the earth. The ten works of the biennial, involving five single artists and four artist duos — curated by **Ekaterina Sharova** (RUS) and **Maria Huhmarniemi** (FIN) — and one earlier-commissioned public art work, each questioned our relationship to the earth in their own specific way at a time when the basic functioning of our global society had been thrown into question.

Because of the coronavirus lockdown, the curators were restricted to choosing Finnish-based artists, although as **Maria Huhmarniemi** explained during a curator's talk, this was seen as ultimately beneficial, helping to reduce the negative impact of excessive travel, so often associated with biennials. The selected artists, who each had a personal relationship with the local earth, responded with works that point to the interconnectedness of nature with humanity and humans with one another. Several of these works remain in situ alongside others that from prior biennials and initiatives.

Johanna Ruotsalainen and **Simi Susanna Ruotsalainen's** video installation **I Am a Living Being**, installed in the KultuuriKauppila Gallery, approached these themes via a consideration of non-human

agency. The work featured an area of the gallery turned into a bed of earth with a moulded face-like protrusion upon which was projected a talking head. The human-like feature mouthed an adaptation of the words of the Ecuadorian constitution Universal Declaration of Rights of Mother Earth drafted at the World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in Bolivia in 2010. In humanising the planet Earth, the installation acknowledged the need to recognise the rights of nature and its independent beings and objects. The work also highlighted a contradiction in human efforts to understand nature: namely, that the anthropomorphisation of nature will always ultimately risk the imposition of the human will onto non-human phenomena and actors. The great task of policy-makers and law-makers is ultimately a philosophical one: how do we maintain our human agency while stepping outside ourselves so we can recognise those of the beings we share the Earth with?

Art-making is one way to try and tread this difficult middle ground, not least as the act of artistic production involves a moulding of and compromise with the properties of natural and recycled materials. The large outdoor work **Peculiar Flowers** by **Paula Suominen** consists of three sculptures of varying proportions (one of greater than human scale and two of more or less human proportions). The pieces, entitled **Kaihonkukka** (Omphalodes), **Kuukunen** (Calvatia) and **Kultatyräkki** (Euphorbia epithymoides) were made in collaboration with the people of Ii and consist of mosaic pieces collected from their homes in 2018, when the artist also worked with residents of the nearby rehabilitation centre. The work as a whole appears, like many art works, as the fruit of human labour upon nature, with the traces of the latter showing through strongly in its plant-like forms.

The process of sculpting expresses, perhaps more than any other art form, the way in which art is a metaphor for humanity's constant 'push and pull' struggle with nature, whereby we try to supersede it via the creative process, only to be perpetually humbled by it. The artist **Tiina Vehkaperä's** work **Mass Storage** highlights this ongoing interaction between artist and nature, and its final inevitable end in death. The work consists of a shallow grave dug in coffin-like dimensions in the soil of Ii's environmental art park — home to works of past biennials — and was inaugurated by a performance by the artist who invited guests to lie in the 'grave'. This ritual gives the individual visitor an opportunity for reflection as they become closer to the earth that they will eventually become part of.

Along with the other art works of the biennial, the three above-mentioned works go some way to demonstrating our connection to nature, while attempting the perennially difficult task of giving voice

to it. The challenge posed by this task results as much from the fact that we are in any case part of nature as to the fact that we stand separately from it as beings acutely aware of our existence. This latter point is the source of our estrangement from both nature and one another. It is the motor of both much progress in the technological sense and regress in the sense of the environmental and human toll that coincides with that progress. The Art II Biennial 2020, which takes place in a municipality recognised internationally for its commitment to ecological issues and sustainability, points to the importance of sustained interaction with nature and art's role in illustrating it. It is tribute to the success of the biennial that these points have been clearly conveyed in a way that reflects the key questions of our time.



Mike Watson (PhD Goldsmiths College) is an Oulu-based theorist, critic and curator who is principally focused on the relationship between art, new media and politics. He has written for *Art Review*, *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *Hyperallergic* and *Radical Philosophy*, and has curated events at the Venice Biennale and Manifesta 12.

Watson is especially interested in how art can be accessible to everybody and how anyone can enter the art world and participate in cultural production equally. The questions of power and participation are at the core of his research and writing. When curating and producing art events, these values contribute to open and accessible happenings with artists co-operating with the audience.

He has recently published a second book for ZerO Books, entitled *Can the Left Learn to Meme?: Adorno, Video Gaming, and Stranger Things*.