

Working within the nexus of environment, art and well-being

This year's Biennial focused on the knowledge of the earth. The Finnish word *maa* means earth, but also country, dirt, ground, land soil and terrain. The word also refers to the world. The concept of the Art II Biennial 2020 encompasses all these aspects of the earth and specifically the knowledge they possess.

The sustainability of the Earth is afflicted by the actions of humans. The so-called Anthropocene – the geological time period in which we are living – is the period during which human activity has had a dominant influence on climate and the environment.

The production of the Biennial is guided by the visions and principles of the Municipality of Ii and KulttuuriKauppila Art Centre. Ii is known as one of the best bioeconomy cases in the Nordic region and is striving to become a zero emission and waste-free community in the future. Ii has been able to reduce 80 percent of carbon emissions by the year 2020, over 30 years faster than the EU climate target.

KulttuuriKauppila Art Centre's permanent principles include developing the environment through the means of art and art-based activities as well as enhancing communality and participation in art and culture. We are also striving towards strengthening the professional and international dimensions of art production and promoting the career development of artists in the global market.

Through our municipality's investments in sustainability and KulttuuriKauppila's professional art production, combined with opportunities for social inclusion and cultural well-being, we are aiming towards an ecologically, economically, socially and culturally sustainable future. But what is art in the context of environment and well-being?

According to various research results, dwelling in nature increases the well-being of humans and can, for example, help deal with depression. Research by the Finnish Natural Resources Institute indicates that that nature enhances peoples' mental, physical and social well-being and supports their learning.

The same well-being effect is detected in art: i.e., experiencing art relaxes you and provokes positive thoughts in you. According to a report by the World Health Organization (WHO) from 2019, the

evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being is overwhelming: the arts can potentially impact both mental and physical health.

As part of the Art II Biennial 2020 event, we celebrated the opening of the Lähde! park. Originally designed in co-operation with various user groups in Ii – for example, people with disabilities, and older adults - the park is an accessible area for citizens. The park hosts events, offers physical activities and invites people to participate. With the publication of a large mosaic sculpture **Peculiar Flowers** by artist **Paula Suominen**, the park has been updated to be an area dedicated to enjoying nature and art and improving one's well-being.

In the Lähde! park, the plants, trees and the magnificent Iijoki River and other living creatures of nature – including humans - intercommunicate with each other.

Contemporary anthropological research has highlighted the diversity of presence in societies and the need to communicate with the non-human world in order to be able to create a whole image of our reality (see for example, Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, 2013).

One of the curated art works of the Biennial was **Pii Anttila** and **Alan Bulfin's Fidelity of Home**. In their work, Anttila and Bulfin created a cupboard full of organic materials that could be used in households. The piece also had an interactive dimension: people could swap materials from the cupboard with something they had brought with them, for example a planted-up herb or a self-made vasta (birch branches to be used in the sauna).

At the opening, the artists served us home-made kombucha, thus introducing an organic / non-human element to the event. Furthermore, later the artists arranged a workshop, where they instructed the participants how to make objects out of dried scoby mushrooms. All the participants were also given their own scobys which they could grow and cultivate at home.

Essentially Anttila and Bulfin's work is bio art with a strong participatory element. The artists have gained knowledge of traditional ecological methods and uses of materials through extensive research. In their artistic process, they engage the audience with this knowledge. The outcome is a higher communal understanding and awareness of nature and the non-human.

If we want to learn from the earth and understand nature, communication and participation and the inclusion of the non-human in all the processes in society is essential. The well-being of the planet and the well-being of humans and non-humans are tightly linked together.

From the point of view of art production and curating, to start a dialogue with the environment and to involve everybody, we should encourage artistic practices that include the perspective of the non-human. When we engage a larger audience to participate in these practices, we open up and create a forum for sharing and learning. In the process, the artists can serve as guides to a more sustainable future.

The Art II Biennial 2020 would not have been possible without the input and aid of many people and organisations. First of all, I would like to thank the Municipality of Ii for the resources invested in art production and sustainable development. The Ii Institute provided us with much needed collegial help. I am thankful to our curators, **Ekaterina Sharova** and **Maria Huhmarniemi**, who did the impossible and created an ambitious and unique art event during exceptional times. The selected artists made this event alive by coming together – all of them came! – and filling Ii with their presence and art.

Our most important co-operation partner in creating the Lähde! park has been the Oulunkaari Municipality Consortium and the Lähde! project. We would also like to thank the community and employment services of Ii for their crucial contribution in making the park happen.



Jetta Huttunen (PhD) is a cultural producer and cultural scientist living in Oulu, Northern Finland. Huttunen is currently working as executive manager in KulttuuriKauppila Art Center in Ii. Ii is renowned for its ambitious climate actions and its professional international art production, e.g. the Art II Biennial.

Huttunen has recently concluded her PhD study on independent film production in Finland titled *Self-produced filmmaking as a form of cultural production and a mode of participation in media culture*. In her research, Huttunen addresses the aspects of participation within media culture focusing especially on the publication and distribution of independent film production.

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!

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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.

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.

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*.