

## **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.



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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.