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*Published in:*

Arts-Based Interventions and Social Change in Europe

*DOI:*

[10.4324/9781003376927-15](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003376927-15)

Published: 01.01.2023

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Huhmarniemi, M., Miettinen, S., & Sarantou, M. (2023). SoftPowerArt: Tackling Environmental and Societal Conflicts. In A. Kárpáti (Ed.), *Arts-Based Interventions and Social Change in Europe* (pp. 105-111). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003376927-15>

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# 11 SoftPowerArt

## Tackling environmental and societal conflicts

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and Melanie Sarantou*

### Description of theme

As part of the research project *Acting on the margins: Arts as social sculpture*, the *SoftPowerArt* experiment included eight sub-projects executed by nine artists: Amir Abdi, Maria Huhmarniemi, Satu Miettinen, Taina Kontio, Raisa Raekallio, Misha del Val, Melanie Sarantou, Mari Mäkiranta and Heidi Pietarinen. Addressing the role of the arts in expressing societal, political and environmental viewpoints in Finland's most northerly region, the experiment was conducted between December 2020 and December 2021 to investigate rising levels of eco-anxiety in remote regions of Finnish Lapland, where communities live in close proximity to their natural environment.

To explore the role of the arts in enhancing well-being and human-nature relationships, the nine artists (predominantly from Finland's Lapland region) sought to understand how artists can mitigate the further marginalisation of people and communities in the shadow of local and global social and environmental conflicts by reconstructing policy-making and negotiation of values in a visual form. Global and local environmental crises and conflicts highlight the need to develop a less human-centric union with other-than-human nature. Visual imagery representing human-nature relationships in the Arctic has typically stressed colonisation and the historical past (Wood-Donnelly 2018), and imagery related to policy construction has been male-dominated and characterised by exploration and mystery (Mifflin 2011). Drawing on post-humanistic theory, *SoftPowerArt* sought to develop dialogical post-humanistic art practices, in communication with other-than-human nature, with imagery representing female spaces in the North. To that end, the participating artists created a series of political and environmental artworks reflecting the diverse societal and environmental challenges faced by Finnish Lapland.

### Sub-projects and themes

- *Reflections in water* (Taina Kontio, Satu Miettinen) explored the role of agency and temporality in performance and the environment and how bridges can emerge between our bodies and their surroundings (Sarantou and Miettinen 2022).
- *Forest talks to us* (curated by Maria Huhmarniemi) was a group exhibition exploring perspectives on forest disputes caused by the pressing challenges of climate crises, lack of biodiversity and the activities of the forestry industry (Huhmarniemi 2021b).
- *Battle and sense of forest conflict in Lapland* (Maria Huhmarniemi) explored emotional relations to the forest and strong opinions about the current state of the forestry industry (Huhmarniemi 2021a, 2021b).
- *Co-creation with nature* (Amir Abdi) studied human-nature relations and co-creation.

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- *Mindfulness and drawing in Ilulissat* (Misha del Val) used artistic means (drawing, songwriting, poetry, body movement) to explore and express visual content created during an active meditation and reflection sessions focused on the environment and youngsters' well-being during the global COVID-19 pandemic.
- *Kittilä youngsters* (Raisa Raekallio) employed a range of art and meditation exercises to identify new ways of viewing the environment and to gain a new understanding of youngsters' habitual surroundings.
- *Five salmon and two fish* (Satu Miettinen, Taina Kontio, Mari Mäkiranta, Melanie Sarantou) related to the activist movement for conserving the free flow of rivers and indigenous salmon in northern Finland (Miettinen and Sarantou 2021).
- *Naked narratives* (Satu Miettinen, Heidi Pietarinen, Melanie Sarantou) used performance, photography and video documentation in a traditional wood-heated sauna to address the social anxieties associated with climate change, especially in the frail environment of the Arctic and Finnish Lapland (Miettinen and Sarantou 2021; Sarantou et al. 2021).

### Target population

The SoftPowerArt experiments targeted various groups of participants and audiences. *Mindfulness and drawing in Ilulissat* and *Kittilä youngsters* involved children and young people aged 13–21, while the other six experiments targeted communities and individuals as well as artists, policy-makers and society at large in Finland's northern region and beyond. Invitation to participation was open at different phases of processes, even at the presentation of documents of sub-projects. For example, participants of community art wrote guidelines for further participation and these were printed on sharable cards given away from exhibitions (Figure 3.1).

Three exhibitions in Äkäslompolo and Rovaniemi targeted general art audiences in the North. Most of the sub-project outcomes were disseminated through the AMASS narrative platform and were shared extensively on Facebook and Instagram. The experiment was also circulated in two consortium exhibitions curated by Raphael Vella: *Documents of Socially Engaged Arts*, and *Active Witnesses*. Hosted at Spazju Kreattif in Malta and at Arktikum in Rovaniemi, these are also available as virtual exhibitions.

### Methodology and procedure

Art and activism offer new tools and methodologies for addressing environmental and cultural conflicts and impacting policy discussions through mediation, reconciliation and healing. The project's methods included (1) influencing views on the arts and cultural politics in the Arctic; (2) decolonising the arts by rejecting the Western dualist distinction between art and spirituality; (3) making sense of the interconnections between arts, crafts and ecoculture; (4) using the arts to explore contemporary gender constructs in policy and decision-making; (5) using the arts to promote discussion of environmental policies and (6) using the arts to empower artists and local communities to express their views about environmental policies.

Artistic production can help to revitalise local and regional ecocultural traditions and transform traditions for contemporary culture. Dialogical aesthetics and arts-based methods were used to release stress and to help artists and art educators facilitate transformative experiences for community sustainability (Sarantou and Tessmer 2021).



Figure 3.1 Maria Huhmarniemi and co-artists Francis Joy, Misha del Val, Hugo Peña, Amir Abdi, Tanja Koistinen, Raisa Raekallio and Smaranda Moldovan. *Encounter-a-tree*, 2021, Participatory installation (posters on the wall, sharable cards, Instagram @ encounteratree).

To that end, the SoftPowerArt experiment applied *artivism* and *craftivism* into community art. *Artivism* is a hybrid form of art and activism that drives change and social transformation (Aladro-Vico et al. 2018) through participatory experiences that dissolve distinctions such as artist and participant, creator and receiver or student and professor. In addition, the distinction of an artist and material was dissolved, for instance, in bioart (Figure 3.2). The parallel concept of *craftivism* views craft making as an artistic movement and uses embroidery, crochet, knitting and similar textile crafts to promote societal and cultural conversations (Huhmarniemi 2021a; Keune et al. 2021; Nordensam and Victorin 2021).

Some of the sub-experiments pursued outcomes such as art installations that integrated human relations and collaborations with the non-human natural environment (e.g. *Reflections in water*, *Forest talks to us*, *Co-creation with nature*, *Mindfulness and drawing workshop*). Inviting audiences to reflect on their connectedness with nature, the artworks encouraged bodily and spiritual encounters. Some of the sub-experiments introduced eco-feminist themes (e.g. *I hear you in the river*, *Sauna stories*), while others focused on activism or artivism and environmental awareness (e.g. *Kittilä youngsters—a little art experiment*, *Five salmon and two fish*). Some of these sub-experiments employed strong visual autoethnographic narratives and embodied action (Scarles 2011) to describe and recontextualise personal histories, experiences and connections with nature.



*Figure 3.2* Amir Abdi, *On the ropes: Bio-Art Yantra (Rope and Oyster mushroom)*, 2021, project Co-creation with nature. Photo: Maria Huhmarniemi.

These two experiments targeting younger people (*Mindfulness and drawing in Ilulissat* and *Kittilä youngsters*) used collective drawing exercises to raise awareness of emotional states and different ways of sensing one's social and environmental surroundings and to use less obvious resources beyond rational thinking to express those perceptions ([Figure 3.3](#)). By connecting with something deeper within human nature, this understanding constructs the foundations for a happier life rooted in a consciousness of core human values and purposes. The young participants engaged in mindfulness and sensorial drawing practices in remote locations at Kittilä, Finland, and Ilulissat, Greenland. The other artists created political and environmental artworks addressing the diverse societal and environmental challenges in Finnish Lapland that further marginalise people and communities. These works were thoroughly documented in the form of digital video and photographs, which were circulated widely through exhibitions and social media.

The project addressed the following research questions:

- How can multi-level and spiritual relationships with nature be enhanced through art to strengthen, revive and unite humans with more-than-humans?
- How can visual and performative methodologies be used to study the narratives, roles and identities associated with nature conservation and females' connection with nature?
- How can an art exhibition space be transformed to create a space of encounter for conflicted communities?



Figure 3.3 Youngsters drawing in Kittilä. Photo: Raisa Raekallio, 2021.

### Summary of assessment methods and outcomes

The assessment methodology was based on unstructured focus group discussions involving the nine lead artists. The first of these discussions (at the beginning of the experiment in January 2021) lasted 1 hour and 26 minutes. Six of the artists gathered in situ and online (using the Teams platform) to discuss the experiment's aims and anticipated impacts, as well as practical plans for their artistic activities. Three further group meetings discussing the progress and challenges of the sub-projects helped to support the project's continuity. The final unstructured focus group discussion in February 2022 (after the experiment concluded) lasted 44 minutes and was attended by seven artists on the Microsoft Teams platform. That discussion explored the artists' reflections on the impacts of the sub-projects. In addition, all of the participating artists submitted reports on their activities for the SoftPowerArt blog on the AMASS narrative platform.

Reflecting on the completed sub-projects, the artists shared their experiences and discussed the wider impact of their experiments. For example, one of the artists explained the impact of *Five salmon and two fish* (Figure 3.4) as she saw it.

The salmon case had a huge impact on me personally but also on the people living near the river (Kemi River). People who experienced the construction of these power plants and witnessed how their living environment changed saw the cultural trauma it actually caused. So I see this salmon case as more than what it seems—more deeply connected to people's way of life up here.



*Figure 3.4* Satu Miettinen, Taina Kontio, Melanie Sarantou and Mari Mäkiranta, *Five Salmon and Two Fish (viisi lohta ja kaksi kalaa)*.

### **Policy implications**

This series of open-ended experiments explored how art-driven narrative practice could facilitate discussion and influence policy-making. Intimate encounters and artistic imagery of this kind are not typically used as policy-making tools, and often fragile, hidden or unrecognised issues of gender equality and gender role are not consciously addressed. These experiments attempted to develop art-based practices to create dialogue with policy-makers and communities in northern and Arctic contexts.

### **Conclusion**

Artworks produced in the SoftPowerArt experiment employed reflection, interpretation and analysis of dialogical art and arts-based environmental conflict mediation, contributing to new visual, embodied and reflective approaches to policy discussion. Some of the experiments are featured in a volume of visual artworks, including the imagery produced and documented encounters, narratives and dialogues with the participating communities, capturing their perspectives on women's roles and bodies, which were central to the AMASS project.

In the two sub-experiments involving young people, collective drawing exercises helped to raise participants' awareness of emotional states, including ways of sensing one's social and environmental surroundings and using less obvious resources beyond rational thinking to express those perceptions. This facilitated a connection with something much deeper within human nature as the basis for a happier life rooted in a consciousness of core values, meaning and purpose.

The SoftPowerArt experiment encouraged participants to recognise and deepen their experience of communication with non-human nature and to enhance their understanding of natural elements as sentient beings. Engagement with the visual arts can help people to further develop their awareness, empathy, compassion and sense of empowerment.

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