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Artists in the Environmental Conflicts – Art Based Action Research

There have been many discussions about the intensive use of natural resources in Lapland. For example, several new mining projects have been planned and the exploration of minerals has increased. Consequently, critical voices have been raised and some activists and artists have pointed out the need for natural resource protection. At the same time, sustainable development, reduction of biodiversity, continuously growing energy consumption and pollution have been the subjects of eco-conscious artists for decades. The motive of my doctoral research, 'Artists in the Landscape of Berry Wars and Reindeer Husbandry', was to identify how contemporary artists can participate in environmental politics through art (Huhmarniemi 2016).

My Doctoral theses focused on the contemporary value debates and conflicts related to the use of land and natural resources in Finnish Lapland. The topics of the debates centre on the issues that are impacting the environment and communities in the northern region of Finland. I broached these topics with a collaborative and interdisciplinary orientation, working with experts from other fields, creating artistic productions and writing research articles. I also analysed the works of other artists and commentaries on those works, in order to assess the potential collaboration in the international art world between contemporary artists and representatives of different scientific disciplines.

I derived the theoretical background of the study from international studies of contemporary art, bioart and art&sci. Thus, I referred to the writings of art historians and theorists and artist-researchers,. Furthermore, I based the theoretical background on studies of northern art education, such as the writings of Timo Jokela (2007, 2008, 2013) and Mirja Hiltunen (2009). I also used some studies from the field of environmental aesthetics and politics.

My dissertation was part of the expanding field of contemporary art and art-based research. I used art-based action research (ABAR), which is a research approach developed in the Department of Art Education at the University of Lapland. Artist-teacher-researchers use ABAR to develop methods for community art, environmental art and applied visual arts. The cyclic research process includes making drafts and development plans, conducting literature reviews, creating artistic work and engaging in evaluation, conceptualization and reflection. In my study, the exhibitions included in the dissertation form a structure for the cycles. The exhibitions were shown in 2009, 2012 and 2014.

I aimed to develop artists' collaboration with other researchers, to increase the understanding of northern environmental conflicts and to evolve ABAR for artist-teacher-scholars. The research addressed the following question: How can a contemporary artist contribute to the environmental debate through art?

Dialogical Art and Multidisciplinary Environmental Research

Art has the potential to serve as a forum for discussion and as a mediator in the conflicts fuelled by the clash of interests—of local as well as international actors—with regard to the environment in the northern Finland and in the Arctic region in generally. Internationally, art projects have been brought to bear in seeking alternative solutions to environmental problems, in trying to open up lines of communication between entrenched parties or in communicating scientific content to wake the public

up to particular issues. Dialogical art refers to works in which the artists organize social and ecological interventions outside of art institutions that include discussions (Kester 2004).

Mirja Hiltunen (2009) has touched on the topic of using art to mediate conflicts among communities in Lapland. She also deals with the dialogue between science and art in the context of community-based education. Hiltunen (2009) notes that artistic activities can highlight the special characteristics and strengths of environments and communities. Timo Jokela (2007, 2008, 2013) has carried out a variety of art projects and installations and has written articles in which he considers and advances the role of environmental in art cultural identity and well-being in communities in Lapland. However, Hiltunen's focuses on community-based art and Jokela's productions focus on environmental art, whereas the scope I defined for my dissertation was contemporary art and collaboration between artists and researchers in other fields of disciplines.

Jokela (2013) states that contemporary art's dialogic, contextual and situational methods form a background for applied visual arts. While traditional fine art typically focuses on the artist's personal expression with the help of certain equipment and material management, applied visual arts are situated at the intersection of visual arts, design, visual culture and the society from which this art form draws its current themes, operating environment and network. Applied visual arts are based in communities and in socio-cultural environments, as well as the places that define this art form and its means of activity and expression. Artists resemble designers with their new expertise and ways of working; thus, to some extent, they are prepared to give up the notion of creating a work of art. The artist's goal is not so much to create a work of art, but to bring art into people's lives and into everyday life (Jokela 2013). My study was intertwined with the aims and theory of applied visual arts, although the artistic elements of the research were shown in the exhibition-focused art world.

The interest in integrating science and art education was a driving force behind my dissertation. Art integration is an approach to teaching that is grounded in the belief that learning is actively built, experiential, evolving, collaborative, problem-solving and reflective. It provides multiple ways for students to make their learning visible through art. The heart of arts integration is engagement in the creative process, which leads to the process of learning in and through the arts (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). Bioart, art&sci and other forms of interdisciplinary contemporary art stimulate the development of art integration within the field of environmental education.

There is a need for multidisciplinary environmental research. It consists of natural science disciplines and social and humanistic sciences that highlight the way environmental problems are bound to society and culture. Environmental research in the social sciences examines the social and communal causes and consequences of environmental problems and conflicts. In general, environmental researchers commit to the objectives of environmental protection. (Lummaa, Vuorisalo & Rönkkä 2012). Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary research projects have produced a variety of concepts that serve as science-policy interfaces. These concepts include sustainable development, biodiversity, life cycle, ecological footprint and ecosystem services (Jokinen 2012). The concept of ecosystem service provided a structure for the examination of environmental discussions in my study when considering the cultural significance of reindeer herding and landscape conservation. The concept of ecosystem service is applied in an effort to define the value of nature and to weigh the balance between the use of nature and its conservation. The term, ecosystem services, refers to the benefits that nature provides humans, which they should use in a sustainable manner, so that the ecosystems can continue to function normally.

Art-based research is one possible approach to environmental research. Art can be part of the research methods or it can be used to communicate the results. For example, Brandon Ballengée, who is a

bioartist, has written a dissertation in which he suggests that transdisciplinary art practices and participatory biology programs may successfully increase the public's understanding of an ecological phenomenon. His dissertation included the creation of participatory biology programs, such as Public Bio-Art Laboratories and Eco-Actions, in which non-specialists achieved an increased awareness of the challenges currently faced by ecosystems (Ballengée 2015). Andrea Polli is another artist-researcher who has fairly recently written a dissertation on art-based environmental research. Her work is an art practice-led investigation into the ways in which the production of ecomedia may open up alternative pathways to environmental knowing. The thesis advances greater public engagement with weather and climate science and greater public and private support for long-term collaborations between media art and climate science (Polli 2011).

Art-Based Action Research as a Method

My dissertation had parallel aims; I aimed to develop ways that artists can participate in environmental discussions and wanted to investigate this phenomenon. Artistic research (practice as research and practice-led research in art) and action research are research traditions in which the object of development and the research are carried out simultaneously. Artistic research and action research share many principles, such as the aim to develop practices (Borgdorff 2011). In addition, the cycles of research—planning, action, reflection and evaluation—are used in both.

The impact of artistic research and action research has generated two research orientations to art education: *a/r/tography* and art-based action research (ABAR). In the both orientations, the practices and literal research are parallel or cyclic and the research subjects are at the intersection of teaching, art and communities (Figure 2). *A/r/tography* was developed in Canada and theorized by scholars, such as Rita Irwin. It is influenced by feminist theories, contemporary art and relational aesthetics. In *a/r/tography*, the life experiences of artists-researcher-teacher are considered in the research process and the research results (Irwin & Springgay, 2008).

Artistic action research is a research approach that was developed in the Faculty of Art and Design at the University of Lapland through a variety of community and environmental art projects. It is influenced by contemporary art's situational, contextual and communal nature, and it has a close relationship with design research, which has the objective to design new action models or products. ABAR has been used in art projects in a northern environment (Jokela, Hiltunen & Härkönen, 2015). Art serves as a method to foster learning, create a sense of communality or improve the quality of environments. The artworks that are created in the process are used as research data, not as a presentation of the research result, as is done in art-based educational research.

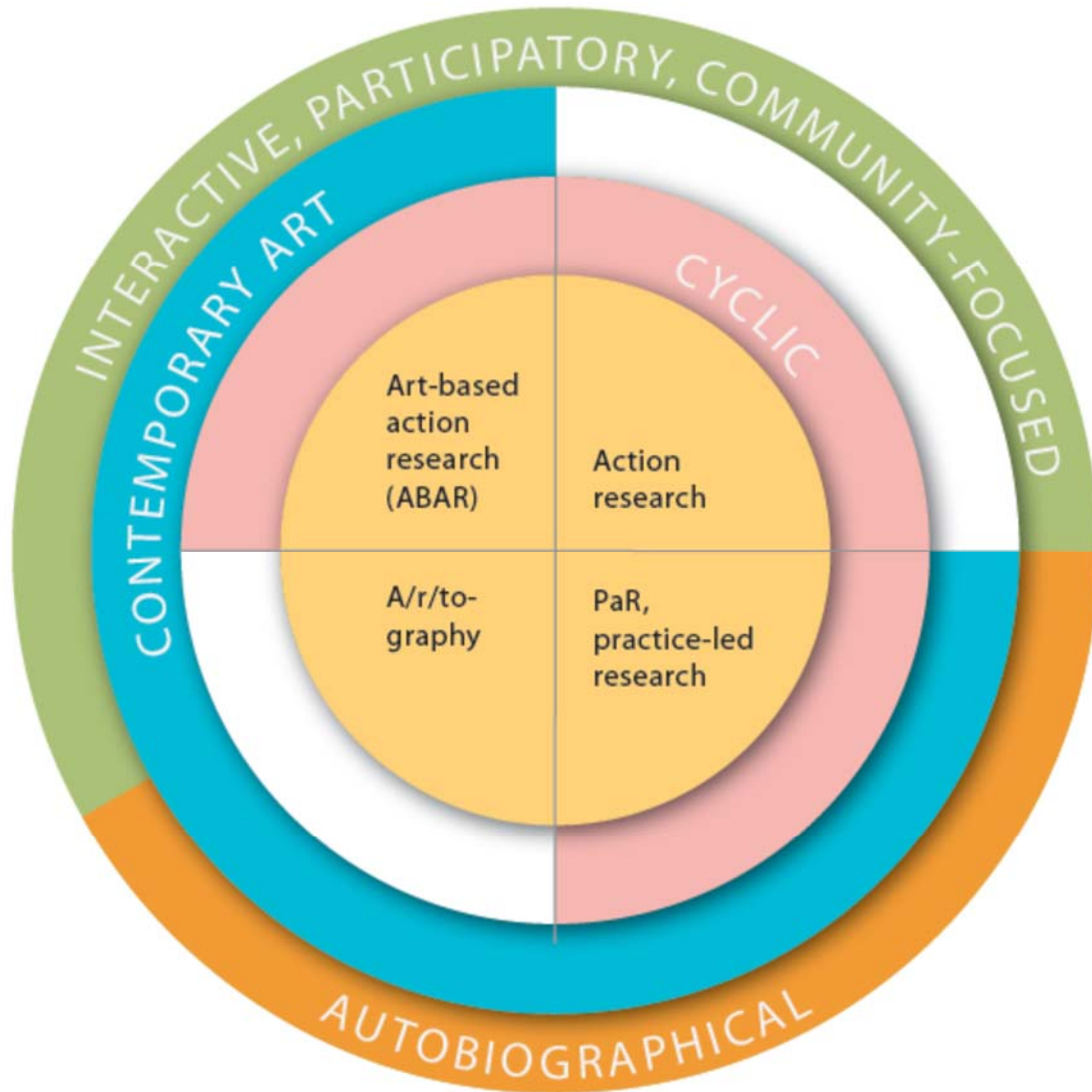


Figure 1: Common features of ABAR, a/r/tography, action research and practice-led research in arts (Huhmarniemi, 2016, p. 44)

In the process of art-based action research, I carried out artistic activities in environmental politics and analysed the processes and results, thereby increasing the variety of ways in which artists can contribute to environmental debates. The work here was cyclical in nature, as is typical of action research (Figure 2). It included three cycles of artistic work in the process. The artistic activities proceed, hand-in-hand, with the necessary exploration of theoretical background, reflective examination, analysis and theoretical conceptualization. All of the cycles in the research addressed the principal question, which was: How can the contemporary artist contribute to the environmental debate through art?

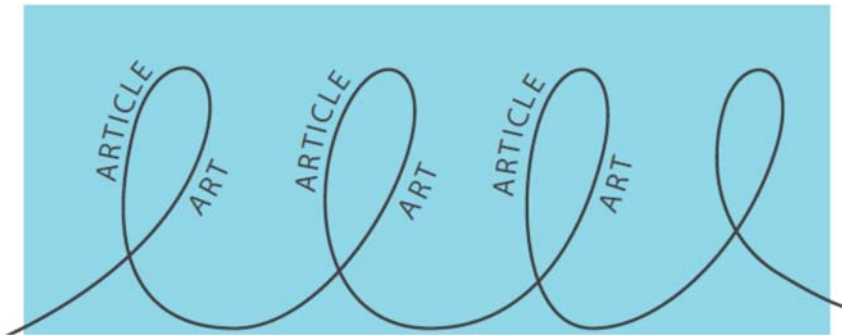


Figure 2: The cyclic nature of the art-based action research published as a collection of articles. (Huhmarniemi, 2016, p. 45)

I gathered research data from my artistic endeavours as part of the research process. It included texts I had written as concepts for the exhibitions, to apply exhibition spaces, to communicate the artwork to media and to present the results in blogs and on websites. I analysed this research data to reflect the processes and the results of the three exhibitions. I compiled additional research data from art books, articles and websites in which other contemporary artists, especially bio artists, described their work. I categorized that data according to the artists' intentions and the themes of their artwork.

The combination of exhibitions, research articles and an introduction

My dissertation included three artistic components, accounting for 5, 15, and 15 per cent of the entire work, respectively (Figure 3). The written component (65%) of this research consists of a series of published articles.

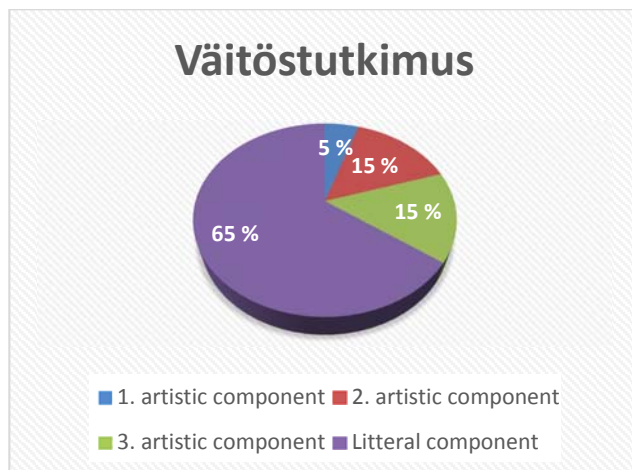


Figure 3. The artistic components of the thesis; 1) the installation 'Fragile' (2009), 5%; 2) the installation 'Berry-pickers' and the series of photographs 'Alien Hiker' (2011), 15%; and 3) an exhibition 'Reindeer Husbandry in the Arctic: A Landscape of Conflict' at the Aine Art Museum (2015), 15%. (Huhmarniemi, 2016, p. 52)

The following published articles comprised the written component of the dissertation:

- 'Eco-activism, Community Art, Bunnies and Doves. Bio Art, Art&Sci and Evaluation', published in Finnish in the art research journal *Synteesi*. (2011)
- 'Reindeer Art: Contemporary Art, Public Art and Lapland's Tourism Marketing', published in Finnish in art history magazine *Tahiti*. (2013)
- 'Blogs and Contemporary Art as Interventions' published in Finnish and English in the book

Field_Notes. (2013)

- ‘Berry Wars’, published in English in the *International Journal of Education through Art*. (2012)

Summaries of the Art Installations and the Articles

In the article ‘Eco-activism, Community Art, Bunnies and Doves. Bio Art, Art&Sci and Evaluation’, I analysed the artworks created by a large group of bioartist and other artists who work in collaboration with scientists. Artists have a variety of objectives when they engage with the scientific community and in scientific debates. Some apply research methods with a view to creating interesting art; others open up natural scientific practices and research results to the public or contribute their own research materials and innovations. Some of the projects featuring collaboration between art and science set out to promote research and its visibility. Many of the projects have an educational impact on participants, community members and audiences. (Huhmarniemi 2011)

The article ‘Reindeer Art: Contemporary Art, Public Art and Lapland's Tourism Marketing’, focused on reindeer and reindeer-related topics in contemporary art. In Lapland, reindeer herders find themselves in continual conflict with the forestry and mining industries, as commercial interests take over land traditionally used for grazing. The number of disputes has risen sharply in northern Lapland. Artists living in Lapland have dealt with the subject of reindeer so much that the critical concept of reindeer art has been raised with reference to reindeer themes and handicraft-like artworks. The concept has emerged in Rovaniemi, where the city has funded a number of reindeer-related public art works. In this article, I conclude that it is difficult, if not impossible, for artists to deal with reindeer-related themes without inevitably producing art that reflects and supports the brand of Lapland. (Huhmarniemi 2013a)

In the first artistic components of the dissertation, my aim was to initiate a dialogue with biologists during the planning phase of the exhibition. I conducted an interview with biologists Mikko Paajanen and Piia Juntunen. They told me the subject of the exhibition, which was the complex issues surrounding the protection of a critically endangered butterfly, *Capricornia boisduvaliana*, and the plans to build a hydroelectric power station in the village of Oikarainen on the Kemijoki River near Rovaniemi. In Finland, there are no sites where this butterfly can be found other than a meadow near Rovaniemi. The red clover meadow where the butterfly lives was formed in the course of grazing cattle, a livelihood now defunct in the area. Accordingly, if the butterfly habitat is to be preserved, the meadow must be managed. The Sierilä hydroelectric power station planned by Kemijoki Oy would increase the level of the river and inundate the meadow. At present, the habitat is protected and the company has not yet succeeded in introducing the species elsewhere, nor has it received permission to destroy the meadow.

In the exhibition ‘Fragile’, I described *Capricornia boisduvaliana* in the form of an installation, bringing to the fore the issue of whether the species was worth protecting (photo 1). My aim was to challenge the viewers to reflect on the preservation of nature’s diversity by asking themselves if an old coffee cup, a little country cabin, a traditional meadow and an endangered butterfly are worth preserving. The article relating to the work, ‘Blogs and Contemporary Art as Interventions’, then undertook to address discussions on biodiversity in contemporary art installations and blogs.



Photo 1: Maria Huhmarniemi, *Fragile* 2009, photo by Maria Huhmarniemi

For the next artistic project, I participated in a two-week artist-in-residency at *Silvretta Atelier* in August 2010. Ten artists were invited to work in *Bielerhöhe* and in the area surrounding *Silvretta Lake*. The symposium was founded by the local water power company. Artificial lakes and dams built by the company have a major impact on the landscape in *Bielerhöhe*. The place is often described as a meeting point for humans, nature, technology and ecological balance. Tourists, travellers, hikers, climbers and mountain bikers are attracted to the area surrounding the lake. The series of photos, titled 'Alien Hiker', was based on political and symbolic connotations involving the Alpine landscape and headscarves. While my dissertation focused on the environment in the Finnish Lapland, the 'Alien Hiker' provided a perspective on a culturally-loaded landscape. *Bielerhöhe*, where I stayed in the residency, offered the possibility for a comparison to environmental politics in Lapland.

In the next artistic component of the dissertation, my aim was to interact with the audience and to initiate dialogue. This aim was based on the experiences I garnered from the 'Fragile' installation, which did not raise any public discussion. On the other hand, literature, such as Grant Kester's (2004) 'Conversation Pieces' guided the project. The exhibition, 'Berry Tours', deals with the conflicts between foreigners who pick berries for commercial suppliers and the local people who pick berries for their own use. The conflict involves concern for the human rights of the berry-pickers from Thailand, who come to Lapland at their own risk with no employment contracts or social security.

I worked with researchers Laura Junka-Aikio, Jarno Valkonen and Pekka Rantanen. We built an exhibition in the Arktikum Science Centre, titled 'Berry Journey', in which we sought to generate dialogue between the Thai berry-pickers and the local berry-pickers. My contribution to the exhibition was the installation, 'Berry-pickers', in which I provided some context showing the reactions that people in Lapland who pick berries had to foreign berry-pickers and changes in the

berry business (photo 2). I presented the customs, values and meanings associated with berry-picking in Lapland. I also participated in other activities that were linked to the exhibition, including a political debate in Rovaniemi on berry-picking, an event for the general public, titled 'Cook up some politics', an interview on the television magazine programme and authorship of an article in cultural magazine in Northern Finland.



Photo 2: Maria Huhmarniemi, Detail from the Berry-pickers installation, 2011. Photo by Maria Huhmarniemi

In the article, 'Berry Wars', I described the Berry Tours project and discussed similar collaborative projects in the field of activist art, dialogical art and art and science collaborations. I also describe the experience of showing art in a science centre and I considered some of the possibilities of interdisciplinary collaboration in art education. The challenges I faced were related to questions of authorship, to the heterogeneity of the target group and the expectations of entertainment and interaction in the exhibition.

In the last exhibition 'Reindeer Husbandry in the Arctic', I presented spatial installations concerning the use of natural resources. There are several installations in the exhibition: 'Heavenly Earth', 'Reindeer Husbandry', posters representing reindeer postcards, a diamond-shaped installation representing mineral exploitation, and a wolf-sculpture. In the exhibition, 'Reindeer Husbandry in the Arctic', the main focus was not to provoke discussion. Rather, the aim was to present environmental research through contemporary art and to show contrary research in a one-exhibition space (photo 3).



Photo 3. Maria Huhmarniemi, Reindeer Husbandry in the Arctic exhibition, 2015. Photo by Maria Huhmarniemi

The installation, 'Heavenly Earth', referenced the mining industry with a black octahedral shaped structure, typical to diamonds and crustal forms of minerals (photo 4). The installation aimed to address the cultural sensitivities over mineral-rich soil and the battle between spirituality and profit. In the Arctic environment, the soil rich with minerals is sacred and a home for spirits. The same land is targeted by the mining industry. The installation included an audio interview with shamanism researcher Francis Joy. He noted that, in the old shamanic traditions, the mineral kingdom was inherited by ancestral spirits who have a role to play in the world, just as we do. Reindeer herders can be seen as holders of knowledge inherited from their ancestors.



Photo 4. Maria Huhmarniemi, Heavenly Earth, 2015. Photo by Maria Huhmarniemi

The series of posters, 'Greetings from Lapland', was based on information from reindeer researcher Mauri Nieminen and members of reindeer herding families. In the posters, I depict the challenges connected to reindeer herding, such as transporting the animals for slaughter, the quality and composition of reindeer meat and environmental impacts, such as the condition of pastureland. In the installation, 'Reindeer Husbandry', I presented a herd of reindeer running in the colours of rag rugs. The rag material I used in the textile sculptures underlines reindeer herding as part of the northern culture and the impact that humans have on nature.

Results of the Research and their Potential Benefits

Based on my dissertation, contemporary art can interpret environmental research and present it to the audience through the language of art. Perspectives that have been ignored in media discussion can be highlighted through art to support the argument for the protection of natural resources. Art projects can also promote dialogue about the conflicted situations. Contemporary art committed to environmental politics can move the viewers, function on multiple levels and have educational potential.

In the artistic components of my research, my ambition was for the works to evoke emotions and multisensory experiences in the people who engage with the works, prompting them to reflect on the value of nature and on environmental issues, and instilling in them a sense of personal responsibility. The works have the potential to influence the public by increasing their environmental awareness and broadening their perspectives when they discuss environmental conflicts.

Research and artistic work were interwoven in the artistic components. I used the research data and their classification, categorization and analysis to inform the artistic works and to aid in reflective thinking and conceptualization. For example, completion of the installation ‘Berry-pickers’ included interviews and an analysis of the photographs, which served as a basis for grouping the portraits of the berry-pickers, to create my contribution to the exhibition. The installation, ‘Fragile’, was created based on interviews with two biologists. These processes can be seen as art-based environmental research.

In the field of art education, the results of the dissertation inform and enrich the training of art education teachers and artists in the field of applied visual arts. One potential benefit is a readiness to add projects that bridge disciplinary boundaries. For artists and the art world at large, the research highlights new avenues for social impact. The experiences I gained in the course of the conducting this research served to enhance collaboration between artists and professionals in other fields.

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