

Archipelagos, Intra-action and Contemporaneity: The Curatorial as a Site for Transdisciplinary Research

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Abstract

This article explores the potential that the curatorial embodies as a site for transdisciplinary research and intervention into contemporaneity. The question of the exhibition—its role within an archipelago-like curatorial system, understandings and epistemological stakes—acts as the starting point for my investigation. I focused my research on Finland, where a variety of projects from the last decade—“Contemporary Art Archipelago” (2011), “Frontiers in Retreat” (2013–18), “Punos” (2021–ongoing)—and the work of Bioart Society and IHME Helsinki allowed me to engage with curatorial methodologies for research across the arts and sciences. Research has been carried out independently and also through conversations with curators Taru Elfving, Ki Nurmenniemi and Paula Toppila.

Édouard Glissant’s archipelagic thinking contributes to shaping my understanding of the curatorial.^[1] As an idea that performs a certain fluidity and favours a non-hierarchical figuration of entanglements, it is here deployed to explore how all curatorial agents act in relation. Glissant proposes the image of the archipelago to visualise a specific way of thinking about the world through diversity and plurality which opposes homogenising practices that characterise globalisation: “With continental thinking, the mind runs with audacity, but we then believe that we see the world as a block, or at large, or at once, as a kind of imposing synthesis, just as we can, by way of general aerial views, see the configurations of landscapes and mountainous areas as they pass by. With archipelagic thinking, we get to know the rocks in the rivers, assuredly the smallest rocks and rivers.”^[2] If we are to think about the curatorial as an archipelago, all agents of the curatorial constellation thus become involved in an evolving set (or sets) of relationships with the potential to inspire innovative ways of both seeing the world and address global challenges. Moreover, the propositions put forward by curatorial projects can be contextualised in relation to their site of articulation (its particularity) but are also entangled in world-wide relations as, for Glissant, knowledge is boundless.^[3]

In an attempt to give clarity to this interconnected multiplicity, Karen Barad’s idea of intra-action is used here to think about curatorial research as results of intra-acting agencies performing in an archipelago-like system. Intra-action presupposes a relationship in which responsibilities are distributed and the agents (human and non-

human) intra-act in a co-constitutive manner.^[4] By linking the idea of intra-action to archipelagic thinking, I expand on the tradition that does not polarise the exhibition away from other curatorial agents. Like Irit Rogoff, I see the curatorial as “an epistemic structure... an ongoing process that does not emphasize the end product... a public platform that allows people to take part in the processes.”^[5] Such an understanding of the curatorial politicises the curatorial constellation. It assumes that individual and collective narratives are not fixed and are able to intervene and promote change within the globalised contemporary. A conception of the curatorial as an archipelago with no fixed centre or fixed borders can thus be proposed as the forum in which meaning is constructed collectively, beyond disciplinary boundaries and static perceptions of the exhibition.

Glissant’s relational, archipelagic thinking together with Barad’s intra-action also allow me to reframe the curatorial potential for world-making beyond the human focus. Glissant’s philosophy “recognizes and enables a relation between different people and places, animate and inanimate objects, visible and invisible forces, the air, the water, the fire, the vegetation, animals and humans”^[6] a relationality that becomes manifest in “Contemporary Art Archipelago” (2011), for instance. This unsettles the fundamentals of individualism and, by extension, the figure of the author curator. It is in these ever-shifting entanglements that “relations are generated and forms of production are mobilised”, with the curatorial becoming a tool of the imagination with the potential to rethink hierarchies and redistribute power relations.^[7]

This politicised potential that the curatorial archipelago possesses lies in the combination of agents and methods from different disciplines that partake in relational processes of co-inquiry and knowledge creation.

Transdisciplinary, in the realm of cultural production, refers to a collective process of co-inquiry which offers the potential for exchange and to produce new perceptions and knowledge.^[8] All of the projects examined in this article are defined by co-inquiries carried out by agents belonging to different fields, sharing methods that challenge discipline-based approaches. These examples represent an attempt to integrate multiple lenses, resulting in the production of interstitial spaces that incubate ways of collaborating as well as several perspectives on knowledge engaging in a relational way. The idea of the curatorial archipelago is proposed here as a space for research between disciplines, where efforts are conducted through multiple approaches and practices employed, to embrace complexity, critically recontextualise and address common, specific yet multifaceted questions.

Interestingly, Simon Sheikh borrowed terminology and methods from the fields of journalism (*recherche*) and science (*Forschung*) to define the exhibition as research.^[9] His analysis of the exhibition as an environment in which research is carried out beyond mediation highlights the potential that it embodies to construct meaning beyond disciplinary boundaries and within real-world contexts. From analysing Finnish projects and organisations that are the focus of this,^[10] it emerges that all curatorial agents “support forms of research-based, dialogical practice in which the processual and the serendipitous overlap with speculative actions and open-ended forms of production.”^[11] In these examples, the curatorial also shows an ability to become “something closer to a public-facing laboratory, where the process of research, knowledge production and display are somewhat conflated and operate in public thus evoking, to some extent, the idea of transdisciplinary research in action.”^[12] The question of the exhibition is then framed within an archipelago-like system which accounts for multiple temporalities and intra-acting agents. Moreover, Paul O’Neill proposes to “open up the ‘exhibition’ itself as a potential mode of research in its own process of becoming” and it is exactly this spatio-temporal, discursive and dynamic curatorial methodology for research that is examined in this article.^[13]

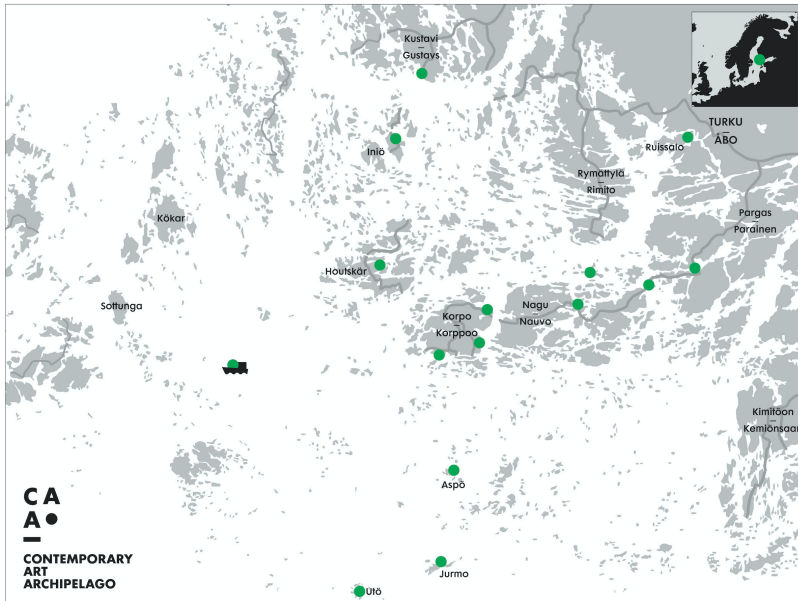
For Terry Smith “there is a spatial and phenomenological horizon for contemporaneity within the exhibition: it is a discursive, epistemological, and dramaturgical space in which various kinds of temporality may be produced or

shown to coexist.”^[14] Curatorial practice creates a relational space where an “intensified planetary interconnectedness of different times and experiences of time”^[15] can occur and where local, embodied and collective thinking “enacts a political imaginary that, while resolutely modest, has a planetary dimension: it is world-making aesthesis, without seeking to impose this as a global prescription.”^[16] This co-existence of multiple temporalities and local contexts in the space of the exhibition is framed within a perspective that encourages the formation of intra-acting relationships across the arts and sciences.

Mondialité “a global dialogue that, as opposed to globalization, starts from the local difference rather than erasing it”^[17] and contemporaneity a “present constituted by the bringing together of a multitude of different temporalities on different scales”^[18] are key concepts here. Globalisation has homogenised space and time, favouring the immediate present, compromising a politically understood future, or the idea of future in its entirety, as well as the agential potential of the local to intervene in global discourse. Claire Bishop shares concerns for the idea of presentism as synonym for contemporary: “our current moment as the horizon and destination of our thinking [...] underpinned by an inability to grasp our moment in its global entirety.”^[19] Rethinking the contemporary through ideas of contemporaneity and mondialité is thus a necessary approach to grasp what is perhaps the most common thread emerging from “Contemporary Art Archipelago”, Bioart Society, IHME Helsinki and the work of Ki Nurmenniemi (“Frontiers in Retreat” and “Punos”): the intention to critically explore planetary issues across diverse temporalities and contexts mediated through the local. It is in this particular act of negotiation between the local and the global, the arts and sciences (ecology and biology, for instance) that the curatorial as a political form of world-making can be intertwined with global discourses, such as the eco-crisis, defining contemporaneity. In this context, the curatorial can be political in the sense that it steps back from the production of exhibitions as marketable products, and rather produces a space for critical thinking by disrupting discipline-based knowledge as the “ultimate scavenger of disciplines”.^[20]

Thinking curatorially about mondialité enables us to imagine a model for artists and curators to think and act beyond cultural and disciplinary boundaries. Jean-Paul Martinon speaks about a world composed of fragments and how the curatorial is about “broken comprehension, ambivalent competence, unhinged knowledge”.^[21] This links to Glissant’s call for a globality that does not “homogenise culture but produces a difference from which new things can emerge.”^[22] A relational approach based on intra-acting and co-constitutive fragments has been pivotal in understanding how curatorial projects and their methodologies also in an expanded sense like in the case of IHME negotiate particularities within the global dialogue. Moreover, contemporaneity and mondialité share an attempt to make sense of our globalised world that goes beyond the limitations of a linear conception of history, hierarchies among all involved and human sovereignty on the environment themes that appear in the projects examined in different capacities. It is in this context that my exploration of the curatorial as a site of research and experimentation occurs.

The investigation begins with “Contemporary Art Archipelago” (CAA), an exhibition curated by Taru Elfving and Lotta Petronella in the Turku Archipelago during the summer of 2011.^[23] Described in the catalogue as more than an exhibition, CAA was a three-year-long research project involving a variety of artistic practices, vernacular, occupational and scientific knowledges, discursive events and collaborations with local communities and students. The complexities of the Turku archipelago fostered an opportunity to relate planetary questions such as the impact of globalisation, ecological urgencies and the economic crisis to a particular landscape in Finland. CAA embodies many of the focus points of this essay: curatorial thinking and processes based on archipelagic thought, the dynamic tensions between site-specific and the global, a reconsideration of hierarchies within curatorial processes in which the specificity of the environment takes on the role of agent, and transdisciplinary approaches, here focused on exploring that particular region of the Baltic Sea.



Exhibition map "Contemporary Art Archipelago", 2011. Courtesy of "Contemporary Art Archipelago" and Taru Elfving

In CAA, the archipelago has a role within the curatorial process and archipelagic thought is embedded in the research. Elfving explains that archipelago logic emerged from the concrete form of the place itself and was then contextualised in relation to Felix Guattari's "The Three Ecologies" (1989). For Elfving, Guattari's eco-philosophy gave theoretical articulation to thinking derived from on-site research and fieldwork and was crucial in understanding how environmental concerns, social registers and the subjective are connected to place.^[24] An important aspect that emerged was the process of practising theory curatorially by allowing the place to "be part of the conversation and challenge assumptions and ideas together with the locals and the artists."^[25]

Although Glissant's writings were not part of the theoretical framework of CAA, there are perhaps two elements that emerged during my conversation with Elfving that can be linked to Glissant's understanding of the archipelago. The first is the artworks' relationship to the place itself, the second is the articulation of the relationship between the site and concerns at a global scale. Both elements find their roots in practices of dialogue between all agents involved and are here useful to consider for the major role they played in the project's processes of knowledge production. Elfving explained that the commissioned artworks^[26] situated themselves within the exhibition narrative more in relation to the environment than to one another.^[27] This resonates with the idea of the archipelago not having a centre, with the exhibition becoming a site for transdisciplinary research and practices:

an incubator for chance encounters and collaborations between various fields of expertise, all drawn together by curiosity and an investment in the urgent matters that impact on these islands. In the exhibition the myriad points of view presented an archipelago within the archipelago, a spectrum along which to see the island landscape in unprecedented complexity.^[28]

The Turku archipelago is here to be understood as an agent within the curatorial process, one that interferes with Elfving and Petronella's choices and reconfigures the hierarchies involved. One anecdote that emerged from my conversation with Elfving is how the island resisted the curators' plan to install Alfredo Jaar's *Dear Marcus* (2011) on the shore. A negotiation with the physical environment had to take place, as the bird-nesting season made it impossible to install the work as it had been intended. This is a particular approach to curating

that presupposes a true understanding of the sites and related complexities.^[29] Here is where transdisciplinary dialogues and negotiations show their pivotal role within CAA. All agents involved had to break out of their disciplinary bubble in a curatorial process where the place itself the archipelago, its inhabitants and its ecosystem became the mediator between languages and perspectives based on embodied and embedded experiences. Artists worked with scientists, experts and locals, tapping into traditions belonging to a variety of disciplines as a way to manifest connections through their artistic practices.

These dynamic relationships unfolded on a variety of levels. Of relevance here is the role of the locals within the project. Elfving and Petronella developed a public programme that engaged with local artistic and vernacular knowledge. Moreover, throughout the entire process, the archipelago's inhabitants and local artists became the mediators between international artists and the archipelago itself, acting as translator. Through the commissions, exhibitions and discursive events, different modes of knowledge embodied, vernacular, scientific and artistic articulated themselves relationally through the focus and methods of the curatorial process. For instance, the marine environment of the Baltic Sea with its particular salinity was central to Raqs Media Collective's *More Salt in Your Tears* (2011), a site-specific sculpture installed in the Baltic Sea. This work is a good example of how art and scientific research can tap into transdisciplinary discourse involving ecological thought to explore the kind of impact the eco crisis is having on the Baltic's fragile ecosystem and the three interconnected ecological registers.

More Salt in Your Tears was born out of curiosity why are there no waves?^[30] and was then developed through conversations with a marine biologist.

The Baltic Sea is an inland water body with a narrow channel that links it to the open oceans, and is home to a very unique ecosystem that depends on its unique marine ambivalence. [...] The fish know the water's secret there is more salt in our tears than there is in the Baltic Sea. [...] our lachrymose moments are a scale with which it is possible to think about the destiny of a planet.^[31]

Elfving recalls that the discussion centred on the rise of global sea levels and how that will affect the ecosystem and the biodiversity of the archipelago, which is very much dependent on a specific level of salinity. The aim of the artists was to spread a positive message of hope for a future in which our tears are saltier than the sea. However, a decade later, we know that the water's salinity levels continue to decrease, which in turn affects oxygen levels and has a negative impact on the sea surrounding the archipelago.

CAA created a platform for different kinds of knowledge, dialogue, and the development of enquiries based on archipelagic thought a way of working that is de-centralised, fostering what Elfving defines as "discourse diversity".^[32] As mentioned above, the importance of dialogue as method among all agents was crucial to the curatorial process as it allowed CAA to develop an ever-evolving artistic language that was able to mediate different sets of expertise, practices and knowledge in order to research planetary preoccupations on a local scale. Ten years later, CAA has evolved into a collective^[33] exploring global ecological concerns linked to specific islands in the Turku archipelago.^[34] Elfving notes that the collective's work is now focused on critically and thoroughly rethinking practices as curators, artists, researchers and nurturing conversations and reflections through an intersectional prism.^[35]

Some of the questions that originated in CAA (2011) are also key ideas in the work of Ki Nurmenniemi. Nurmenniemi is an independent curator and doctoral researcher based in Helsinki.^[36] Our conversation touched

upon the problematic relationships between art and science, the importance of dialogue and reflection in transdisciplinary and diverse curatorial projects, the place of the local within the global dialogue and an intra-active approach to curatorial practice. Nurmenniemi's work is relevant as ecological thought is embedded in the methodology rather than merely approached thematically. Concepts of interconnectedness and intra-action also appear in relation to processes of knowledge production, where the exhibition is never considered a finished product, but rather is a porous organism in relation.

Nurmenniemi has reflected extensively on the problematic approaches to curating projects at the intersection of art and science. Their frustration lies in the ways in which the scientific enters the realm of contemporary art, where artist and curators commonly illustrate ideas rather than using such topics to activate the full research potential of the exhibition.^[37] They are now developing an intersectional approach, a methodology based on the foundation of ecological knowledge and worldview.^[38] Nurmenniemi is learning from the Intersectional Environmentalism movement launched by US-based writer and activist Leah Thomas, an approach that identifies how injustices towards the earth and marginalised communities are interconnected.^[39] The transdisciplinary focus is a constant in Nurmenniemi's practice. Their background in sociological and gender studies and an approach centred on commissioning have influenced processes of knowledge production and ways of working which are discursive and based on dialogue with artists.

Nurmenniemi sees a continuum between the projects they have been involved in, a continuum that can be thought as intra-active. They propose a need to rethink the current art production infrastructure as it does not encourage reflection, which is problematic when working within approaches that favour collaborations and discursivity over hierarchical modes of production. If reflection can be considered an instrument for research, how can we stop and evaluate in order to move forward? "One has to attune to transdisciplinary approaches and in order for these to spark change, you need to add a method to evaluate your work having time to do so is a luxury as the production cycle is so intense."^[40] How can proposals at the crossover between art, science and technology be made to address planetary issues for instance, the eco crisis and its repercussion on all layers of society? How can we, as curators, develop slow methodologies to foster change beyond disciplinary boundaries? And how can we mediate those complex enquiries to the public?

The question of site-specificity also seems to be a constant in all projects considered in this essay. For Nurmenniemi, exhibitions have porous layers shifting over time, which offer access to different layers of public. Such an understanding allows us to make a link to curatorial methods based on intra-action, where relationships are not static and change over time. The plurality of publics makes the traditionally understood role of the audience within the archipelago-like curatorial system more complex. At the same time, it allows for the development of a constructive dialogue between the local and the global, one that relates to the values found in ideas of mondialité.

Both "Frontiers in Retreat" and "Punos" are projects that address transdisciplinary global ecological questions through a variety of curatorial methods and localities. "Frontiers in Retreat" (2013-18) was a collaborative project that explored the crossroads between art and ecology through a series of remote residencies, exhibitions and other discursive events.^[41] The relationship between specific ecological concerns and those of planetary scale also emerges here.^[42] In line with archipelagic thought, the notion of frontier was challenged and rethought in relation to a variety of contexts: a globalised 24/7 economy, neo-imperialist practices that aim at colonising natural resources in order to provide materials of geological scales to support technological needs, and human civilisation's ability to adapt to changes caused by global warming. Nurmenniemi defines these residencies at seven remote peripheries of Europe as instances of hyper-localities that allowed "Frontiers in Retreat" to explore

the ecological changes that these communities are experiencing over a long period of time, with the aim of forming specific knowledge and understanding of how the ecological crisis is affecting bio-diversity as well as other ecological, economic and socio-political registers.^[43] The exhibitions that developed from these residencies acted as spaces for research and as intra-acting agents of the curatorial archipelago.

The exhibition “Dissolving Frontiers” (2014), co-curated by Nurmenniemi and Jussi Koitela, questioned the idea of progress as a tool “to rationally solve complex social, political, and economic problems, and to correct the miscalculations of earlier generations” within the coordinates of Western societies and the idea of the Westphalian state.^[44] In “Excavations” (2015) the “macro metabolism of earth” was explored through various artistic excavations.^[45] “Composition” (2015) investigated reconstruction and coexistence through an action-based approach aimed at proposing solutions for a post-fossil society, in which our relation to nature has been rethought: ‘Technologies relying on fossil fuels have upturned us in regard to nature but could technology also offer a road towards our material-spiritual basis?’^[46] Again, the local residencies and the site-specificity of these exhibitions established an infrastructure through which ecological concerns and scientific questions of a planetary scale were explored through discursive and dialogic intra-active agents of the curatorial. The local acted as a tool to ensure the inclusion of diversity within the global dialogue on the eco-crisis, fitting within the framework of mondialité and archipelagic logic.

The conceptual framework of “Edge Effects” (2017), the exhibition series that was part of “Frontiers in Retreat”, was developed by Nurmenniemi in dialogue with Taru Elfving.^[47] As the conclusion for the series, Nurmenniemi curated the exhibition “Edge Effects: Active Earth” at Art Sonje Center, Seoul. Through a close collaboration with local Gallery Factory collective, they organised the Edge Effects Learning Programme, consisting of academic lectures, readings, artist discussions, performances, concerts and culinary art.^[48] The other “Edge Effects” exhibitions, such as the one organized by SSW in Scotland, also had robust programming happening at various venues not usually intended for art.

“Punos” (2021-ongoing) is a recent research project that addresses, among other things, the need for diverse voices to build inclusive eco-social and sustainable approaches.^[49] One of Nurmenniemi’s curatorial objectives is to be able to communicate how the ecological is a cultural and social-question. This is one of the focuses of the first “Punos” commission, *Indigenous Climate Justice*, part of the larger “Whose Climate, Whose Futures?” project. Led by indigenous Sámi “artist” and duo-jars Jenni Laiti, Merethe Kuhmunen and Sunna Nousuniemi,^[50] together with members of different Sámi communities, this commission engages “in intergenerational dialogues on decolonization by combining traditional and contemporary practices of duodji with indigenous queer perspectives.”^[51]

Indigenous Climate Justice explores different ways to understand, connect and live with nature. One of the challenges has been to develop a method that is not hierarchical and sees the role of the curator as being one agent among many.^[52] The scope is to create space for others, in this case Sámi people, whose vernacular knowledge and culture have been dismissed by the states of Finland, Norway, Sweden and Russia.^[53] Nurmenniemi points out that Sámi communities have a particular relationship with the land that is different from the majority of the Finnish population. For this reason, the project is politically framed as it makes an argument for including diversity in ecological discourse, continuing the approach based on discourse diversity also found in CAA.

Common threads that have emerged from CAA, “Frontiers on Retreat” and “Punos” namely, archipelagic thought, complex embodied dialogues and an approach to research based on relationality also emerge when exploring

the work of Bioart Society.^[54] As an artist association, it promotes and produces transdisciplinary projects and collaborations, and is at the forefront of the art and science scene in Finland. As the name emphasises, the focus of Bioart Society is the exploration of how art, biology, ecology and life sciences can combine to address current issues. The prominence of the landscape, a dialogical approach based on fieldwork and a practice based on reflection and collaboration among various agents, are all elements of Bioart Society's approach. Each project is in fact a multi-stranded research enquiry, activated through a variety of discursive events exhibitions, residencies, talks, workshops, performances, etc. that addresses various localities and layers of the public.



Noora Sandgren. Untitled, 2019, Ars Bioartica residency. Courtesy the artist and Bioart Society

SOLU, an exhibition space in Katajanokka, Helsinki, and Ars Bioartica,^[55] a residency programme in Kilpisjärvi, Lapland, are among the agents forming Bioart Society's constellation of activities.^[56] The former does so as a laboratory for art, science and society, the latter as a residency which aims to cultivate innovative collaborations between artists and scientists to question as well as propose a new understanding of the problematic and paradoxical relationship between humans and nature. Both, located at Finland's extreme polarities, contribute to a de-centred and diverse approach to research. The significance of fieldwork in this context is key as it mediates between the research topic and the environment:

Fieldwork is typically thought of as connected to science practices, but a very similar type of practice is inherent in the arts. This is specifically apparent with art forms that aim at creating awareness, mobilising the public, and working locally with people in their environment. In these kinds of practices, the artistic research, production and implementation are happening in the field, close to the subjects and to the public the artist wants to reach.^[57]

The question that I would like to ask here is: how can we curatorially deal with mediating artistic practices that are based on dialogue, fieldwork and research, and are often not aimed at the production of finished artworks? A possible answer once again lies in the potential that the curatorial embodies in developing forms of dialogue and collaboration centred on research and that open up local enquiries to broader contexts.

To do so, a practice based on collaboration and on mondialité as ethos is therefore necessary to pursue, in order to avoid divisions between the curatorial and artistic activities. "Time and River Are Alike" (2019–20) is an

exhibition that emphasises this way of working. Four artists, Oula A. Valkeapää, Tarja Tella, Nicolas Perret and Silvia Ploner, and a curator, Alice Smits, participated in the exhibition with contributions developed at individual residencies.^[58] Through the works, the local knowledge and embodied everyday experiences of Sámi people, playful yet critical observations into how the sub-arctic landscape has been manipulated by human beings, and a sound translation of an aurora borealis emerged together with a portrait documented by the curator who captured the intensive field-work week in Kilpisjärvi. The inclusion of Smits's documentative practice blurs boundaries between approaches and emphasises the conversational, non-hierarchical and collaborative ethos that defines Ars Bioartica and Bioart Society's work.



Maija Annikki Savolainen, “d a t a c e n t r e”, details of installation. Photo: Laura Kaker, courtesy the artist and Bioart Society

Maija Annikki Savolainen's “/ datacentre”, a more recent exhibition at SOLU (2021) also displayed the synergy between artistic and scientific research and fieldwork.^[59] It was curated as a collaboration between the artist and Yvonne Billimore. In “/ datacentre”, the format of a residency merged with that of an exhibition, resulting in a discursive event in flux. The exhibition proposes an exploration of the materials that allow digital culture to function: it “presents stone circles as ancient data centres: sites for the gathering, processing and distributing knowledge” through a poetic and alchemic approach built around the belief that crushed quarts were able to connect people to celestial bodies in Neolithic times. Savolainen continued to work on the exhibition throughout its duration, intertwining local and embodied knowledge coming from Tomnaverie, a neolithic stone Circle in Aberdeenshire, with speculative enquiries around the idea of digital fossil. The exhibition was not presented as a finished product, but rather proposed itself as a space for research and experimentation. A series of reading circles was also organised as online events with guests from a variety of fields to foster the production of knowledge and make further inquiries into the themes of “/ datacentre”.

There is also a lot to look forward to as Bioart Society recently announced upcoming international collaborations. The two that most resonate with the transdisciplinary focus of this essay are “ART4MED” and “m/other becomings”. “ART4MED” is a project that invites artistic enquiries into biomedical research and ethics, speculation on advances in biomedicine and post-human survival.^[60] The curatorial statement of “m/other becomings” outlines the project as a

durational collaborations between experimental cultural institutions, artists, and thinkers [which aim to]

cultivate intergenerational and multispecies methodologies, make space for the investigation of domestic resistance practices, and probe technologies of reproduction, resilience, and recuperation.^[61]

Relevant to mention here, due to its trans-institutional but also due to its philosophical approach, is the State of the Art Network, which also links to the work of IHME in this context. This Nordic-Baltic network situates the enquiry into the role and responsibilities of art infrastructure in the Anthropocene as complex, articulates the intricacies and connections between global warming, the rise of populism, racism and xenophobia, and aims to foster innovative thinking and proposals to promote positive change and sustainable actions to tackle the eco crisis.^[62]

A similar approach focused on creating dialogue between site-specific questions and broader frameworks also appears in the work of IHME Helsinki, an arts organisation that incorporates an ecological focus not only as a subject of their commissions but also as a methodology. More specifically, IHME is at the forefront of developing sustainable ways of working as an art institution. Curator Paula Toppila, artistic director of IHME, identifies the year 2018, when they commissioned Henrik Håkansson's film *THE BEETLE*, as the moment in which IHME made the conscious decision that it was not enough to raise awareness of the eco crisis^[63] which in *THE BEETLE* is explored through the point of view of the endangered *Hylochares cruentatus*, a species living in the Vantaa area and threatened by biodiversity loss and that it was necessary for IHME to develop an ecologically sustainable art institutional practice. One of the questions that emerges is how to develop a programme at the intersection of art and science that supports the exploration of biodiversity loss and climate crises while also rethinking IHME's inner workings by means of ecological thought and sustainable actions?



Henrik Håkansson. *THE BEETLE*, 2018 (still). Courtesy the artist and IHME Helsinki

The year 2020 was a crucial one for IHME. Toppila explains that the organisation was forced to recontextualise itself within a global pandemic while exploring alternatives that will make it possible for IHME to establish a carbon-free institutional practice.

This means not relying on ecological compensations only but re-considering and re-organising both artistic and institutional practices. [...] art, science and climate work are present in everything we do and

we aim to make all these aspects visible, share them in order for other institutions to learn from what we have done.^[64]

Eco-coordinator Saara Korpela's blog makes public IHME's holistic approach to sustainably producing art and events.^[65]

Last year's commission, *Listen Through the Dead Zones*, a sound installation by Jana Winderen, has been postponed until August 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The second upcoming commission by IHME in 2021 is *To Burn, Forest, Fire* by Scottish artist Katie Paterson. This work offers a glimpse at how art and scientific research can embody ecological thought at artistic as well as institutional levels. The performative work will be the result of transdisciplinary collaborations to create the scents of the very first forest 380 million years ago and the last forest of the age of climate crises on Earth. This ritualistic and poetic work repositions humanity's role in deep time coordinates and politics of extinctions. Toppila worked with Patterson to produce a work in line with IHME's ethos. The artwork consists of two incense sticks made of organic materials that will be burned in collective rituals in different public locations in Helsinki.^[66] Thus, the project is very conscious about its environmental impact being materially minimal.^[67] Also, the project's collaborators the incense maker, for instance have been carefully selected according to IHME's values and are willing to learn more about carbon-free future.^[68] All research in Finland, Scotland, Japan, the United States and Brazil has been conducted remotely to minimise travel.^[69]



Katie Paterson. *To Burn, Forest, Fire* (upcoming). Courtesy the artist and IHME Helsinki

IHME's commissions are not presented in a traditional exhibitionary context. This aspect shapes the dynamics in place, as the agents involved and the public take on a variety of roles. Toppila emphasises the importance of dialogue with the artists at all stages of the work and with all other agents diverse audiences and, due to the nature of IHME's work, actors from different fields and varied nature to ensure that IHME's ethos is met.^[70] IHME's work in this respect can be described as context-responsive curating within the public sphere and the eco, socio-political and mind registers, to return to Guattari.^[71] Toppila highlights the potential of the unknown within curatorial research and defines it as a "process of continuous learning, flexibility and openness to take any direction during the process of defining what the project will be like in the end, tolerance for continuous

challenge.”^[72] This assumes an approach to working that includes multiple voices, is built on distributed responsibilities and equity, and stems out of ecological thinking.^[73]

This ethos of embracing the unknown fits within an understanding of the curatorial as an archipelago of intra-acting agents whose relationships fluctuate and shift over time and in which nothing is pre-determined. In this context, the exhibition goes beyond the act of making things public and, within the framework of the curatorial archipelago, creates space for transdisciplinary research. One of the threads that has emerged from my investigation is an understanding of curatorial research as a political act of world-making. The curatorial, and the exhibition within, in its embodied real-world context recontextualises fragments in global dialogue through a methodology based on relational and archipelagic thinking; one that is decentred and fosters intra-active relationships between fragments across disciplines, temporalities and species.

Meaning is constructed collectively through various curatorial agents. As the archipelago-like curatorial system has no clear centre, the weight of the exhibition in the research process fluctuates, depending on the intra-acting entanglements involved in that particular project. The curatorial can thus become a context-responsive space for research, a laboratory that allows us to embrace uncertainty and is unsure about what, if anything, will be produced. Context-responsive curating takes into consideration site-specificity and develops an adapting methodology that is collective and relational.^[74] Like mondialité and intra-action, it challenges hierarchies within the arts infrastructure, is not static and values dialogue and reflection. Both the curatorial and the exhibition within are conceptualised as a platform for research, which embeds mondialité as value, therefore encouraging a diversity of perspectives to contribute to contemporaneity. The porosity and fluidity of this intra-acting system provides entry points for a variety of different publics and participants, encouraged to think critically about complex planetary issues.

While researching the role of the curatorial and the exhibition as a site for research and experimentation across the arts and sciences, ecological thinking emerges as the common thread embedded into CAA, IHME Helsinki, Bioart Society and the work of Nurmenniemi. In different capacities, the scientific being the ecological in a Guattarian sense, an active engagement to the eco crisis and an inquiry into the biological, life sciences and post-humanity is key in the subject matter of the work and the curatorial methodologies developed to address such themes. Projects embedding this sort of curatorial thinking can help us develop a better understanding of contemporaneity and a more articulated vision of the various past, present and future temporalities embedded within while intervening in global dialogue. Their durational, spatio-temporal and discursive nature demonstrates that an archipelago-like curatorial system one that espouses uncertainty, differences, localities, and fosters dialogue among intra-acting agents creates opportunities for conducting transdisciplinary research across the arts and sciences.

Footnotes

1. Archipelagic thinking appears in Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* (1990) in connection to the idea of creolisation in the Caribbean. It was developed further in later works such as *Traité du Tout-Monde* (1997) and *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendu* (2009).
2. Glissant, Édouard. *Philosophie de la Relation: Poésie en étendu*. Paris: Gallimard. 2009. p. 45.

3. Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press. 1997. p. 169.
4. When exploring the curatorial as a site for research, the question of the exhibition—the exhibition being the most concrete form of the curatorial—and its relationships with other curatorial agents always emerges. Much has been written about differences between curating, exhibition-making, the curatorial and the para-curatorial, but it is not my intention to revive this debate here. See, for instance, Rogoff, Iris. “Turning”. *e-flux Journal*. # 00, November 2008. Available at <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/00/68470/turning/> (accessed 2019-12-13); Von Bismarck, Beatrice, Schaffaff, Jörn and Weski, Thomas (eds.). *Cultures of the Curatorial*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2012; O'Neill, Paul. “The Curatorial Constellation and the Paracuratorial Paradox”. *The Exhibitionist*. No. 6. 2012. pp. 55-60; Lind, Maria (ed.). *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2012; Martinon, Jean-Paul (ed.), *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating*. London: Bloomsbury. 2013.
5. Rogoff, Iris. “Curating/Curatorial: A conversation between Irit Rogoff and Beatrice von Bismarck”. In *Cultures of the Curatorial*. p. 23.
6. Diawara, Manthia. *Édouard Glissant's Worldmentality: An Introduction to One World in Relation*. 2017. Available at https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/34_edouard_glissant_s_worldmentality_an_introduction_to_one_world_in_relation (accessed 2021-01-21).
7. Buchmann, Sabeth. “Curating with/in the System”. *OnCurating*. Issue 26. October 2015. pp. 34-41. Available at <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-26-reader/curating-within-the-system.html#.YEuF03czY3Q> (accessed 2021-12-18).
8. Triscott, Nicola. “Art and Intervention in the Stewardship of the Planetary Commons: Towards a Curatorial Model of Co-inquiry”. PhD thesis. London: University of Westminster. 2017.
9. Sheikh, Simon. “Towards the Exhibition as Research”. In *Curating Research*. Edited by Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson. London: Open Editions. 2015. pp. 32-46.
10. The projects and art organisations examined here have been chosen to give an overview of curatorial research across the arts and sciences. It was impossible for me to include all relevant organisations working in this context. However, I want to mention The Mustarinda Association and the upcoming Helsinki Biennale, both incorporating ecological thinking in their methodologies. For more information see <https://mustarinda.fi/> and <https://helsinkibiennaali.fi/> (accessed 2021-07-27).
11. O'Neill, Paul. “Epilogue: Exhibitions as Curatorial Readymade Forms of Escape”. In *Curating after the Global: Roadmaps for the Present*. Edited by Paul O'Neill, Simon Sheikh, Lucy Steeds and Mick Wilson. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2019. p. 501.
12. Joasia Krysa here refers to Exhibition Research Lab (Liverpool School of Art and Design). However, her point also opens up relevant parallels with the work of Bioart Society and the role of exhibition within their curatorial projects. Krysa, Joasia. “Exhibitionary Practices at the Intersection of Academic Research and Public Display”. In *Institution as Praxis: New Curatorial Directions for Collaborative Research*. Edited by Carolina Rito and Bill Balaskas. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2020. p. 66.
13. O'Neill, “Epilogue”, p. 499.
14. Smith, Terry. *Thinking Contemporary Curating*. New York, NY: Independent Curators International. 2012. p. 30.
15. Lund, Jacob, Gfader, Verina, Kølbæk Iversen, Anne, Cox, Geoff. “The Contemporary Condition: Key Concepts”. *Stages #6: The Biennial Condition*. Edited by Joasia Krysa. 2017. Available at <https://www.biennial.com/journal/issue-6/the-contemporary-condition-key-concepts> (accessed 2021-01-23).

16. Wilson, Mick. "Introduction: Political Imaginaries after the Global". In *Curating after the Global*. p. 42.
17. Obrist, Hans Ulrich and Raza, Asad (eds.). *Mondialite*, or, the Archipelagos of Édouard Glissant. Paris: Skira. 2017. p. 12.
18. Cox, Geoff and Lund, Jacob. *The Contemporary Condition: Introductory Thoughts on Contemporaneity and Contemporary Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2016. p. 9.
19. Bishop, Claire. *Radical Museology*. London: Koenig Books. 2013. p. 6.
20. Martinon, Jean-Paul. "Edging Disciplines". *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. Vol. 6. No. 2. 2017. pp. 221-229. https://doi-org.libproxy.aalto.fi/10.1386/jcs.6.2.221_1 (accessed 2021-07-27).
21. *Ibid.*
22. Obrist and Raza, *Mondialite*, p. 12.
23. The exhibition was part of Turku 2011—European Capital of Culture.
24. Curator Taru Elfving in interview with the author on 17 February 2021.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Works were commissioned to create a dialogue with the place itself. Artists who worked site-specifically and had similar research interests to Elfving and Petronella were invited. An overview of "Contemporary Art Archipelago", its narrative, list of artworks and artists' contributions can be accessed in the catalogue and on the exhibition website, available at https://issuu.com/contemporaryartarchipelagocaa/docs/caa_a5_10_single (accessed 2021-07-27); and <http://www.contemporaryartarchipelago.fi/> (accessed 2021-07-27).
27. Elfving, interview.
28. Björk, Helena, Elfving, Taru and Petronella, Lotta (eds.). *Contemporary Art Archipelago*. 2016. Available at https://issuu.com/contemporaryartarchipelagocaa/docs/caa_a5_10_single (accessed 2020-12-30).
29. Elfving expanded on the practical and legal matters of realising a curatorial project in the archipelago: "There were legal issues regarding siting artworks in the environment and a series of permissions to negotiate with the private owners of land and waters. For instance, avoiding disruption of the shipping lanes while wanting to be close enough for people on boats to see Raqs Media Collective's work. The ecological questions came from the locals and the scientists. In the national park areas, but also on some private lands, the owners were careful to point out where birds were nesting, as it is forbidden to disturb the nests." Elfving, interview.
30. Björk, Elfving and Petronella, *Contemporary Art Archipelago*.
31. *Ibid.*
32. It is here important to note that CAA's innovative, discursive and transdisciplinary approach was able to exist as CAA was not (and still isn't) associated with any established art institution. Elfving noted that this project could only happen on the periphery as this allowed for a high degree of freedom that nurtured a grassroots approach. Moreover, the artists also felt less pressure and had more freedom to experiment in what was developed as a spontaneous and organic curatorial project that escaped the pressures of the centre.
33. See <https://contemporaryartarchipelago.org/> (accessed 2021-07-27).
34. See, for instance, *Spectres in Change* (2020), a project on the island of Seili, aimed at uncovering the connections between global ecological concerns and the mental health hospital, the island itself and its bio-political history. Available at <https://contemporaryartarchipelago.org/event/spectres-in-change/> (accessed 2021-07-27).
35. Elfving, interview.
36. Their PhD research is funded by Kone Foundation and revolves around the "Punos" project, which Nurmenniemi developed in collaboration with Anna-Kaisa Koski, Creative Climate Leader, curator and doctoral researcher (University of Jyväskylä). Nurmenniemi is doing their PhD at DENVI, University of

- Helsinki. See <https://www.punos.org/> (accessed 2021-07-27).
37. Ki Nurmenniemi, interview with the author on 3 February 2021.
 38. *Ibid.*
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. *Ibid.*
 41. HIAP ran the project in partnership with the following organisations: Cultural Front—GRAD, Serbia; Skaftfell—Center for Visual Art, Iceland; Scottish Sculpture Workshop—SSW, Scotland; Interdisciplinary Art Group SERDE, Latvia; Centre d'Art i Natura de Farrera, Catalonia; Mustarinda, Finland, and Jutempus, Lithuania. See <http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/> (accessed 2021-07-27).
 42. "Frontiers in Retreat" was developed by Taru Elfving for HIAP in 2012, Helsinki, in conversation with Ki Nurmenniemi, Irmeli Kokko and Jaakko Rustanius. Nurmenniemi took charge of the project curation in 2013, with Elfving contributing to it, in dialogue with Jenni Nurmenniemi, Irmeli Kokko and Jaakko Rustanius as an advisor.
 43. Nurmenniemi, interview.
 44. HIAP, 2014. See http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/activities/exhibition_dissolving_frontiers (accessed 2021-01-27).
 45. HIAP, 2015. See http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/activities/exhibition_excavations (accessed 2021-01-27).
 46. The "Composition" exhibition (2015), curated by the Mustarinda collective, was one of the numerous exhibitions that took place at the Frontiers residency sites and at Art Sonje Museum in Seoul in 2014-2017. See http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/activities/exhibition_composition (accessed 2021-01-27).
 47. See <http://www.frontiersinretreat.org/edge-effects/exhibitions/> (accessed 2021-07-27).
 48. Nurmenniemi, interview.
 49. Nurmenniemi and Koski define "Punos" as "cultural sustainability research, artistic commissions, and education programmes involving artists, curators, researchers, and educators committed to active change-making through transdisciplinary dialogues." See <https://www.punos.org/> (accessed on 2021-01-25).
 50. A *duojar* is the name for a Sámi person who is skilled in *duodji*, a community-based, regenerative and transformative practice that merges art and crafts.
 51. Nurmenniemi and Koski, "Punos".
 52. Nurmenniemi, interview.
 53. During our conversation, Nurmenniemi explained that, to this date, Finland has still not ratified the ILO-169 agreement, which aims to ensure the human rights of the Sámi as an indigenous people.
 54. Bioart Society was established in 2008 and now counts 127 members from both Finland and abroad.
 55. See <https://bioartsociety.fi/projects/ars-bioarctica> (accessed 2021-07-27).
 56. In the context of this essay, it is not possible nor productive to give an overview of each project that Bioart Society has developed in the past 13 years. Other relevant projects like "Field_Notes" (2011-219), "Hybrid MATTERS" (2016), Making_Life (2014-15), as well as relevant publications, can be accessed on Bioart Society's website at <https://bioartsociety.fi/> (accessed 2021-07-27).
 57. Beloff, Laura, Berger, Erich, Haapoja, Terike (eds.). *Field_Notes. From Landscape to Laboratory*. Painopaikka: Printon Printinghouse Ltd Estonia. 2013. p. 8. Available at <https://bioartsociety.fi/activities/field-notes-publication> (accessed 2021-01-20).
 58. Alice Smits' work was developed at "Field_Notes" (2018). Nicolas Perret and Silvia Ploner's work and Tarja Tella's work were developed at their individual Ars Bioarctica residencies. The Valkeapää are mentors of the residency and live in Kilpisjärvi.
 59. is a project that invites artistic enquiries into biomedical research and ethics, speculation on advances in

biomedicine and post-human survival.

60. "ART4MED" is a collaborative process between Makery (FR), De Waag (NL), Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology (DK), Bioart Society (FI), and Kersnikova (SI). It is co-funded by the Creative Europe Programme of the European Union. See <https://bioartsociety.fi/posts/new-collaboration-projects-starting-in-2021> (accessed 2021-07-27).
61. The project is a collaboration between Laboratory for Aesthetics and Ecology (DK), The Association for Arts and Mental Health (DK), Kultivator (SE), Art Lab Gnesta (SE), and Bioart Society (FI). It is supported by Bikuben Fonden, The Nordic Culture Fund and A.P. Møller Fonden.
62. Bioart Society. "State of the Art Network". October 2020. Available at <https://bioartsociety.fi/projects/state-of-the-art-network> (accessed 2021-01-22).
63. Paula Toppila, Curator, interview with the author on 7 February 2021.
64. *Ibid.*
65. Korpela, Saara. IHME Helsinki. "Carbon footprint of art production at IHME". June 2020. <https://www.ihmehelsinki.fi/en/blog/carbon-footprint-of-art-production-at-ihme/> (accessed 2021-02-05).
66. Toppila, interview.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*
69. An online talk with artist Katie Paterson, Emeritus Professor of Palaeobiology Jan Zalasiewicz (University of Leicester) and Lecturer in Paleoclimatology J. Sakari Salonen (University of Helsinki), moderated by curator Paula Toppila, addressed the development and the conceptual framework of the forthcoming *To Burn, Forest, Fire*. <https://youtu.be/edHoF317X7o>
70. In the interview, Toppila listed a variety of organisations that IHME is working with like HKL/HSL, shopping centres, cultural history museums, parks, streets, city district associations and more.
71. Krishnamurthy, Prem and Smith, Emily. "'A Three-Hour Tour'. Toward a Methodology for Responsive Curating". In *Curating after the Global*. pp. 469-487.
72. Toppila, interview.
73. IHME Helsinki statement on equity can be found here: <https://www.ihmehelsinki.fi/en/2020/11/equality-and-anti-racism-at-ihme-helsinki/>; and the equality strategy can be accessed here: <https://www.ihmehelsinki.fi/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/IHME-Helsinki-Equality-Strategy-24112020.pdf> (both accessed 2021-07-27).
74. Krishnamurthy and Smith, "'A Three-Hour Tour'", p. 480.