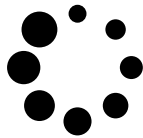


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Immersive
Encounters:

A Journey through
the Helsinki Biennial 2023

by Silvia Lavanco Livreri

- Environmental art
- Artistic mediation
- Environmental justice
- Immersive experience
- Ecological narrative

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Immersive Encounters: A Journey Through the Helsinki Biennial 2023



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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the Helsinki Biennial 2023, focusing on its thematic exploration of contemporary environmental issues, artistic mediation, and the intersection of art with ecological and social concerns. Drawing from a range of artworks exhibited at the biennial, including installations, sculptures, and video presentations, the analysis explores themes of contamination, regeneration, and agency within the context of contemporary environmental discourse. The article highlights the immersive nature of the biennial, both in its physical setting on Vallisaari Island and in its conceptual framework, which encourages visitors to engage deeply with the environment and the artworks. Through a nuanced examination of selected artworks, the article elucidates how artists employ various media and methodologies to convey complex narratives about the interplay between human-nature relationships, environmental justice, and the urgent need for collective action in the face of global environmental challenges.

Keywords

[Environmental art](#)

[Artistic mediation](#)

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Introduction

Donna Haraway, in her essay *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*,¹ draws attention to what she terms “string figures,” compositions emerging from string games: the interlacing of a simple and continuous element, akin to a thread, taking form through the concerted effort and collaboration of two or more subjects engaged in play. String figures, when reconsidered in their origin and outcome, serve as a potent metaphor in our planet’s present historical moment. Although arriving late to Europe, string figures already featured in other cultures, such as the Navajo, where they assumed the guise of continuous weaving, a practice for narrating the tales of the Diné people’s genesis.² The cogitation and execution invested in the delineation of such games become significant when juxtaposed with reflections on the representation of contemporary environmental issues.

The precarious current environmental crisis and the imperative for a paradigm shift in the world’s socio-economic model are widely acknowledged, albeit not universally embraced or perceived with equal urgency. Often foregrounded in discussions concerning the new planetary epoch – what was used to be called “Anthropocene”³ – is the hegemonic narrative, for example based on the idea that technological progress itself will solve the crisis, maintaining a status quo. This narrative, by its very nature, operates on multiple levels. It is crafted by the Western world for a Western audience and frequently espouses unyielding

1 D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

2 Ibid.: 14.

3 It is important to note that in March 2024 the President and Secretary General of the IUGS and the International Commission on Stratigraphy approved the proposal of the Commission on Quaternary Stratigraphy to reject the proposal of the recognition of an “anthropocentric epoch” as a unit of the Geologic Time Scale (<http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/working-groups/anthropocene/>). Beyond this decision it should nevertheless be acknowledged that we have been using, for some twenty years, a term with conceptual implications that have gone far beyond the boundaries of geology.

faith in conventional scientific progress, conjuring optimistic imaginaries of sustainability through the advancement of present-day technologies, fostering hope in humanity's capacity to rectify this crisis. However, climatology and other fields continue to acknowledge the profound shortcomings of present efforts, prompting widespread skepticism of their credibility. This has been scrutinized by Amitav Ghosh, who presents an alternative viewpoint: while positivist sentiments may appear trite in the context of the Enlightenment era, the pivot toward catastrophism veers towards realism, particularly when confronting phenomena like climate change, marked by gradual emergence and long-term ramifications.

This has led to the contemporary milieu seeking novelty, which encompasses not only the exploration of new subjects or plots but also the investigation of new media and methodologies. The notion of "newness" here does not entail creation *ex nihilo* but rather the repurposing of existing elements, recontextualizing them within the broader tapestry of significance and content communication. This notion of recontextualization and resignification advocates for the inversion of established norms,⁴ regarding the "old" as a reservoir of knowledge and resources to navigate the environmental crisis and forge a sustainable future.

This process necessitates a shift in our modes of imagining, which inevitably intersects with a crisis of representation itself. Indeed, representation may be construed as a mediated – and performative – appearance of a subject or object: if our representation of the world's history can no longer be confined solely to human history, what narratives can we construct? It is not merely the content of a story that matters but rather the manner in which it is narrated. This shift in perspective, from content to

4 J. Singh, *Unthinking the Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018): 2.

method, constitutes the crux of this discourse. The artists under consideration within the context of the Biennial can be situated within a novel conception of “artmaking” that intertwines artistic practice with themes emerging from the latest developments in visual culture within the ecological and ecocritical sphere, all while incorporating practical innovations stemming from the peculiarities of the context itself.

Diving into Immersion: A First Glimpse of the Exhibition

The Helsinki Biennial 2023: *New Directions May Emerge* was co-hosted between the city of Helsinki and Vallisaari Island between June 12 and September 17. Curated by Joasia Krysa, this edition, as hinted by its title, draws inspiration from Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s philosophy, urging us to observe our surroundings rather than fixating solely on the future.⁵ Encouraging a shift in perspective towards our environment, Tsing prompts reflection on the stance we adopt: one that must inevitably be receptive to and immersed within the environment.

In this vein, the Biennial offers an immersive experience both within the confines of the HAM (Helsinki Art Museum) and on Vallisaari Island, just a short twenty-minute ferry ride from each other. At the HAM, each artwork is situated within a unique, evocative, and fully immersive environment. Some installations, such as *Ciguetera* by D. Policarpo, invite visitors to traverse through them, while others, like *Kratt* by B. Razavi, necessitate visitor interaction with the artwork itself. Additionally, certain displays,

⁵ A.L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015): 28.

such as video installations, aim to envelop the viewer in an all-encompassing experience.

On Vallisaari island, the immersive experience intensifies as visitors encounter the potent force of the non-human elements. The island's ecosystem is both unique and precious, simultaneously fragile and resilient. Serving as a habitat for numerous bat and butterfly species, as well as endemic plants, the island's history is marked by periods of contamination and subsequent decontamination efforts. Initially utilized by seafarers for drinking water, Vallisaari gradually transformed into a military supply site, with the fortifications seen today dating to the early 19th century Russian-Swedish conflict with Russia. Despite Finnish independence in 1917, Vallisaari remained a repository for armaments and explosives until recent decades, when a project was initiated to open the island to visitors.⁶

Vallisaari's history of contamination and decontamination becomes very fitting when considering the theme for the Biennial. Through traversing the island's landscapes – replete with trees, fortresses, and ponds – visitors are invited to engage with the integration of art and environment. The artworks themselves serve as narratives within a larger story, facilitating an experiential journey through climate and environmental change, fostering immersion in diverse perspectives and outlooks.

Background of This Inquiry: Methodological Insights

In discussing a shift in our way to think about the environment and the relationship within it, we primarily refer to the paradigm shift in media studies that links media inquiry to the ecological domain, a notion referred as

⁶ “History of Vallisaari,” Nationalparks.fi, <https://www.nationalparks.fi/vallisaari/history>, accessed December 6, 2023.

ecomedia. Within this article, the concepts explored in the whole Helsinki exhibition and some of its artworks could be contextualized within the scope of the new ecological turn, intertwining with it both conceptually and formally, although these levels are not distinctly polarized. This can be explained by the growing interest in understanding how media operate inside an environment and shape interactions between its components, while also considering the presence of materials essential to the creation of our devices.⁷ Addressing these issues by linking them to the artistic sphere proves fruitful, especially when attending an exhibition that seems to advocate for certain elements characterizing the broadening of perspective in recent years and presents what it exhibits both as a work in the environment, and a work about the environment. The manifesto of the exhibition, in my opinion, lends itself to such a reading already by presenting “conceptual threads” that also guided the selection of artists: regeneration, contamination and agency.

The story of Vallisaari Island already appears connected to the concept of adaptation as an interdisciplinary concept crucial in environmental studies. The thought behind the Helsinki Biennial extended this concept through of the theme of contamination; one of the three intersectional vectors, as explicitly named by the curatorship,⁸ intended to illustrate the ways in which artistic and political research practices connect rather than fixating on certain static positions. The Biennial catalogue explicitly acknowledges this, linking the idea of contamination to the elevated pollution levels of the Baltic Sea, which bathes the Finnish coast, as a result of discarded war materials, urban waste, and agricultural chemical pollutants. Pollution from the sea

7 A. Lopez, A. Ivakhiv, *When Do Media Become Ecomedia?*, in A. Lopez et al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Ecomedia Studies* (London-New York: Routledge, 2024): 19-34.

8 J. Krysa, “New Directions May Emerge,” in P. Grönroos, J. Krysa, eds., *Helsinki Biennial 2023* (Helsinki: Livonia Print, 2023): 15-27.

permeates bodies, affecting subjectivity, and necessitating the discovery of new strategies for self-regeneration and environmental restoration.⁹

Regeneration is the second conceptual thread emphasized by the intelligence behind the Biennial. The significance of contamination and regeneration becomes apparent when considering them in conjunction with one of the most prevalent concepts in art concerning the future of the planet: extinction. El Baroni and Costantin from ViCCA @ Aalto Arts, one of the curatorial collaborators, explicitly highlight that extinction is not merely a word but an open field, a phenomenon both known and elusive.¹⁰ It has transitioned from being the subject of historical narratives to becoming central to contemporary environmental discourse, stirring uncertainty about the future and shaping today's artistic practices. By starting with contamination and regeneration emphasis is placed on two processes that inherently involve multiple actors, who do not necessarily polarize into active and passive positions, but rather operate within Haraway's sympoietic system,¹¹ collectively producing solutions beyond mere technological adjustments. These are also the less mainstream narratives that the Biennial's intelligence has chosen to highlight.

Finally, the concept underscored by the curatorial manifesto is agency. A nuanced examination of the manifesto reveals that agency operates across multiple levels. Firstly, it is inherent within the artworks themselves, which unfold their narratives before the attentive gazes of visitors. Secondly, agency is inherent within the spaces where the artworks and visitors converge, facilitating dynamic interplays and interpretations. Finally, a supra-agency is

9 Ibid.: 17.

10 B. El Baroni, P. Costantin, "New Direction May Emerge: Extinction and the Open Future," in P. Grönroos, J. Krysa, eds., *Helsinki Biennial 2023: New Directions May Emerge* (Helsinki: Livonia Print, 2023): 45.

11 D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*: 58.

discernible, arising from the intra- and inter- species interactions among the various participants of the Biennial. As articulated by the curatorial team, the emphasis on agency is intended “to explore how human life, the environment, and technologies can evolve together to produce new and unforeseen results.”¹² Notably, the inclusion of artificial intelligence as an integral component of the exhibition underscores the multifaceted nature of agency in contemporary artistic practice.¹³

Materiality of Mediation

The strategies implemented from the conception of the exhibition, including the selection of artworks, are also linked to recent studies in ecomedia – as mentioned before – both conceptually and formally. There is, in my opinion, a problematization of the concept of the medium on at least two fronts. Firstly, we reflect upon the unconventional use of certain materials or those which delved deeply into the concept of media itself. Secondly, perhaps the most significant manifestation of such problematization in the ecological realm was the mediation provided by the environment in which the Biennial was situated.

In accordance with one of the curatorial collaborators, Jussi Parikka’s¹⁴ seminal work, *The Anthropocene*, the modern discourse on media, also in visual culture field, has progressively relegated the significance of the terrestrial realm, which paradoxically stands as the quintessential medium. Nevertheless, the arts persistently recall its role as

12 J. Krysa, “New Directions May Emerge:” 21.

13 It is about AI Entity: Artist Yehwan Song and the Digital Visual Studies project at the University of Zurich have created a website that combines the collection of HAM Helsinki Art Museum and multimodal machine learning technology, as you can read on the page <https://helsinkiennaali.fi/en/collaborators/>, accessed December 5, 2023. For further information: “Newly Formed City. AI Curation @ Helsinki Biennial,” *Digital Visual Studies*, Max Planck Society, University of Zurich, <https://dvstudies.net/2023/06/13/newly-formed-city-ai-curation-helsinki-biennial/>, accessed December 5, 2023.

14 He is among the curatorial collaborators of May Ee Wong and Paolo Patelli, with whom he leads the *Critical Environmental Project* at Aarhus University.

a medium, reinstating terrestrial elements into figuration.¹⁵ Elizabeth Grosz has previously underscored the intersection of art and land within the domain of the organic, a notion that garnered acclaim within the frameworks of Deleuze, Guattari, and Irigaray's theories. Grosz endeavors to elucidate how the impetus of terrestrial forces, in conjunction with vitalistic impulses, could catalyze an artistic outburst. Echoing Deleuze, Grosz posits that the aim of art lies in engendering intensity, thereby impacting our nervous system and fostering deeper sensations.¹⁶

The emphasis on the affective aspect of art, rather than its representational facets, is tethered to a territorial instinct that continually molds our rapport with the Earth.¹⁷ Thus, the soil may assume the dual role of concept and medium, giving rise to novel narrative paradigms that illuminate our connection to the land. A poignant example can be found in the inaugural artwork encountered upon reaching Helsinki's quaint harbor, Kauppatori, the departure points for the island of Vallisaari. Positioned facing the sea, just behind the prominent "Helsinki Biennial" signage, stands a towering monolith of earth, a featured piece at the Biennial. Nearby, adjacent to the Helsinki Biennial information hub, lies *I Re-member Mama* (2023), an installation crafted by Dineo Seshee Bopape.

15 J. Parikka, *The Anthroboscene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

16 E. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008): 3.

17 *Ibid.*: 10; J. Parikka, *The Anthroboscene*: 13.

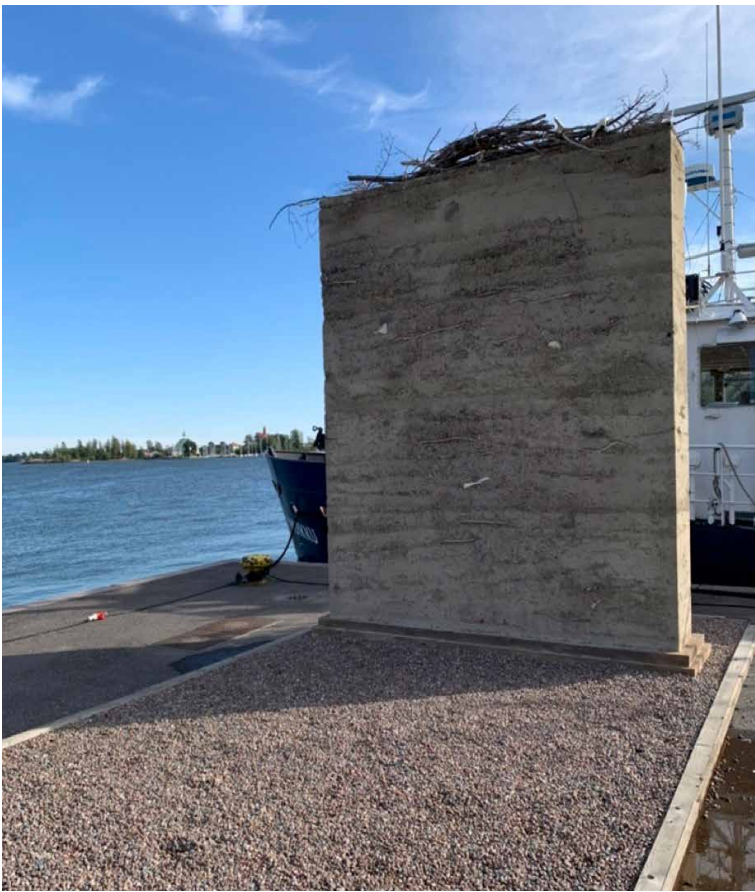


Fig. 1: D.S. Bopape, *I Re-member Mama*, 2023, installation view at “Helsinki Biennial,” Helsinki, 2023, photograph by the author.

Comprising a substantial mound of soil intermingled with organic matter and assorted rocks (Fig. 1), the installation endeavors to commemorate and reconstruct the nexus between land and ancestral narratives. It amalgamates personal and collective dimensions, human and non-human entities, past and future chronicles, converging within the imperative – still within our grasp – to uphold the spatial and temporal integrity of our surroundings. This exemplifies Parikka’s contention in his quasi-anti-McLuhanian scrutiny of technology, positing it as an “aggregate composed of the same raw material that constitutes the earth.”¹⁸

The primordial matrix lies deep within the soil, while the inner realm serves as the conduit in artworks seeking to articulate this shared essence, or, if one prefers, this rhizomatic structure, remaining in close proximity to the philosophical underpinnings of Deleuze and Guattari.

18 J. Parikka, *The Anthropocene*: 14; R. Smithson, “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,” in J. Flam, ed., *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (1968) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 101.

This underscores the relevance, within this context, of their rhizomatic ideology, a notion that scholars have lauded for its ecological resonance. This accentuates the dimension of rootedness, while remaining mindful of the disparity between a root and a rhizome: the former imposes order and fixity, while the latter is characterized by multiplicity, stemming from its origins, connections, and the relationships between its constituent parts.¹⁹

The discourse surrounding materiality has become intricately entwined with the ongoing dialogue that connects ecology to the study of media, particularly within the realm of art. While the previous case underscored the centrality of matter in artistic composition, serving as a catalyst for broader contemplation, the subsequent work presents a converse trajectory. Displayed at the Museum of Modern Art in Helsinki (HAM), Tabita Rezaire's artwork *Deep Down Tidal* (2017) serves as a reflective exploration of the interplay between materiality and immateriality of media, plunging viewers – both figuratively and, to a certain extent, literally – into the complexities of global interconnectedness.

Figure 2 illustrates the immersive nature of the video installation, which envelops viewers almost entirely, with moving elements seeming to breach the boundaries of the screen at times. Positioned before this screen, visitors are encouraged to recline on comfortable lounge seating, facing a large display. The expansive size of the installation not only enhances visibility but also aligns with the thematic content of the video, which seeks to illuminate how contemporary communication systems serve as conduits for electronic colonialism. As conveyed by the narrative voice within the artwork, cyberspace has emerged as a *locus* for a new form of Western colonization, wherein search engines and social networks – far from being neutral – are rife with

19 G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980) (London-New York-Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

racist, homophobic, and fatphobic practices. Collectively, they reflect an inhospitable environment, mirroring the colonialist underpinnings of industrial society, which is justified in the name of Western progress while simultaneously marginalizing the “other.”

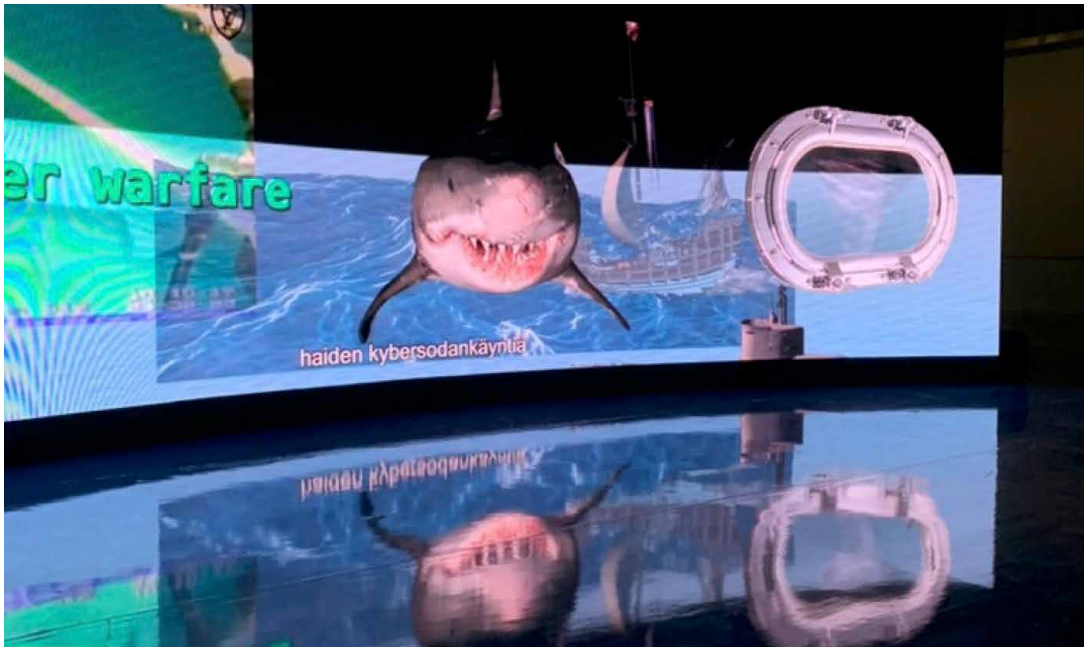


Fig. 2: T. Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal*, 2017, view of the exhibition at “Helsinki Biennial,” Helsinki, 2023, photograph by the author.

Amidst the darkness, viewers observe as a map gradually materializes on the screen, illustrating the overlap between historical slave trades of the 15th century and the modern-day electric cable infrastructure that traverses the ocean depths, facilitating global information dissemination. This juxtaposition disrupts prevailing narratives, revealing that the internet – and in turn “the cloud” – is, in reality, submerged beneath the sea. As the accompanying voiceover elucidates, this submerged network represents a genocidal root, or “genocidal routers,” positioning viewers to confront the reality of their own complicity, whether passive or active, in perpetuating hate and injustice within online spaces.

The juxtaposition of narrative, political, and spiritual motifs, culminates in a poignant finale, wherein a female voice emerges amidst the display, woven together with a melodic refrain underscores the urgent need to acknowledge and heal

the trauma inflicted upon the waters. Through this multi-layered presentation, Rezaire's artwork prompts viewers to confront uncomfortable truths, urging them to reckon with the consequences of their digital actions and consider alternative narratives that prioritize empathy and collective healing.

This artwork, both in its conceptual framework and structural design, resonates with what Val Plumwood referred to as "intentional recognition,"²⁰ a concept that invites us to reconsider the non-human element not merely as an object, but also as a potential communication partner:²¹ "Being able to conceive others in intentional terms is important to being open to them as possible communicative, narrative and ethical subjects."²² Plumwood emphasizes the significance of conceiving of others in intentional terms, highlighting its importance in fostering openness towards them as potential communicative, narrative, and ethical subjects. This notion aligns with the immersive nature of Rezaire's installation, which prompts viewers to engage with the materiality of the environment and acknowledge its agency in shaping global interconnectedness. By embracing the concept of intentional recognition, viewers are encouraged to transcend anthropocentric perspectives and recognize the inherent value and agency of the non-human world, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of our interconnectedness and shared responsibility towards environmental stewardship.

Encountering Multiple Agencies

The attitude of receptivity and recognition of agency was similarly exemplified in the exploration of the island environment. It constituted an immersive encounter wherein visitors were encouraged to delve deeply,

20 V. Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London-New York: Routledge Taylor&Francis, 2002): 177.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

observing not only the overt manifestations but also the details of the surroundings. From the vibrant hues of untamed mushrooms to the discreet bat nests nestled within tree bark crevices – revealed only upon attentive scrutiny – each detail invited exploration. One of the Biennial’s featured artists, Adrián Villar Rojas, presented a participatory element that initially appeared as a playful challenge: to locate fifteen sculptures concealed among the trees and foliage, perfectly integrated with their natural surroundings to the point of near invisibility without deliberate scrutiny. From the series *The End of Imagination* (2023), the sculptures by the Argentinian artist engage in a dialogue with the island environment and its inhabitants (Fig. 3). Rooted in his larger project, *Brick Farm*, inspired by the Hornero, an Argentinian bird known for its adaptive nest-building practices within human environments, Villar Rojas’s Helsinki installation represents a departure towards a more artificial materiality while maintaining its intrinsic connection to the more-than-human realm.²³ Employing a bespoke software suite dubbed the “time engine,” the artist simulated diverse worlds with varying environmental, social, and economic conditions, embedding sculptures within them. Observing the morphological transformations of these sculptures in response to simulated events and catastrophes, Villar Rojas remarked, “the artist created the world and the world created the sculptures,”²⁴ thus delineating a cause-and-effect dynamic that illustrates the effects of climatic and social upheaval, as well as the nuanced interactions between human and non-human, organic and inorganic, and human-made and natural materials. This dialectical synthesis of only seemingly dichotomous elements finds expression in material artworks fully integrated within their environmental context.

23 D. Negueruela del Castillo *et al.*, “Adrián Villar Rojas: From the series *The End of Imagination*,” in P. Grönroos, J. Krysa, eds., *Helsinki Biennial 2023*.

24 *Ibid.*



Fig. 3: One of the seventeen sculptures, hanging on a tree. A. Villar Rojas, From the series *The End of the Imagination*, 2023, at “Helsinki Biennial,” Helsinki, 2023, photograph by the author.

Although Villar Rojas’s artwork is a fruitful example of this thematic narrative, he is by no means the only bearer of such message. As I continued my immersive exploration of the environment, trying to keep a vigilant gaze upon my surroundings to avoid stumbling, my attention was captivated by the treetops, where sculpture and other unexpected elements could hide. Pausing from time to time to admire the panoramic view of the sea and surrounding islands, I finally encountered *Coadapted with* (2023), an artwork by Alma Heikkilä, situated amidst the verdant environs of Vallisaari Island. It stands as a sculptural piece encircled by four canvases, creating an immersive enclave within the forest. Within this installation, the concepts of contamination and coexistence manifest across multiple layers of interaction. The initial layer manifests when rainfall permeates the canvases, subsequently wetting the sculpture imbued with botanical dyes sourced from the island and its vicinity, thus causing it to undergo

chromatic transformations. Subsequently, a deeper stratum of contamination and coexistence emerges within the canvas layer itself (Fig. 4), where imperceptible microbes and bacteria reside, engendering phenomena that transcend human comprehension. Within this framework, the notion of co-adaptation is evident in the artwork's generative and compositional processes, conceived by the artist as a "collaboration with materials and other phenomena."²⁵



Fig. 4: A. Heikkilä, *Coadapted with*, 2023, detail of the canvas, "Helsinki Biennial," Helsinki, 2023, photograph by the author.

Coadapted with serves as an exemplary manifestation of artistic mediation: it encompasses a series of agencies within a spatial configuration that aims to establish a symbiotic relationship between the materiality of the artwork and its meaning. Returning to the discourse on materiality introduced earlier, Heikkilä's creation epitomizes

25 A. Heikkilä, "A. Heikkilä: *Coadapted with*," in P. Grönroos, J. Krysa, eds., *Helsinki Biennial 2023*: 70.

a process of artistic mediation expressed through various actions. The primary mediation occurs through the sculpture itself, crafted by the artist, and subsequently through the installation, which reconfigures the surrounding space and creates a novel environment within the confines of the canvases. Furthermore, the natural environment itself becomes a participant, with atmospheric agents such as rainfall perpetually reshaping the artwork. These processes of artistic mediation unfold within a specific spatial domain delineated by the canvases, where multiple agencies converge, culminating not only in the formation of the installation but also in establishing a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding environment. Ultimately, this interplay renders visible the artist's intended message: that of co-adaptation.

Besides the theme of co-adaptation, there is also something more in the work discussed above: the concept of agency. Despite the Biennial, in its text, presents the artworks to us by dividing them among the three conceptual cores we saw at the beginning, it is evident that while certain artworks may exemplify one aspect more prominently, each then collectively embodies these core conceptual threads. Agency, particularly that which extends beyond the human sphere, permeates all the artworks showcased, as well as the outdoor setting of the Biennial itself.

For example, the relationship between humans and artificial intelligence, as exemplified in Rojas's artwork genesis, is further accentuated in *Pond Brain*, by Jenna Sutela. Hailing from Berlin, Sutela challenges anthropocentric hierarchies in favor of new forms of intelligence and organization. Her artwork, *Pond Brain*, features a bronze bowl filled with rainwater that emits melodic sounds upon tactile stimulation, courtesy of an AI system responsive to haptic stimuli. As the artist herself explains:

Sounds from the pond resonate with an artificial neural network trained to respond to environmental

and interplanetary sounds. The network tunes into sonic frequencies from the bowl and plays back an array of alien resonations. As sound flows around in homeostatic loops through the air and through different machine learning models, which exude an air of alternative dimensions, it is constantly transforming and thus exhibiting a life cycle of its own.²⁶

Conclusions: From the Soil to New Directions

The last segment of this analysis delves into two artworks wherein the environment is regarded not only as the subject of the artwork itself. Instead, within these works, the environment can be assumed as the starting point for a broader reflection on environmental justice and the global connections and contradictions that the artistic medium has the capacity to stage.

The first exemplar is the installation *Songs to Earth, Songs to Seeds* (2023) by Sepideh Rahaa, situated in a repurposed warehouse on Vallisaari Island. It comprises a video installation and a handcrafted ceramic pot containing rice plants cultivated within. The narrative unfolds the story of rice production in Mazandaran, located in the northern region of Iran. Through its visual storytelling, the installation unveils a typically unseen narrative involving women, rice fields, hands, and local songs. These elements serve as essential components of the narrative, intertwining with the imagery and interrupting the linear history of rice production by introducing other anecdotal narratives passed down through generations, in the form of songs, from mothers to daughters, and sung by their voices during the harvest. Within the confined space of the artwork's setting – an old ammunition depot – the melody resonates,

26 J. Sutela, "Pond Brain," in P. Grönroos, J. Krysa, eds., *Helsinki Biennial 2023*: 114.

enveloping and captivating viewers. The resultant effect is a multi-narrative mirroring the multi-spatiality of rice cultivation, the world's second-largest staple food, linking the lives of Iranian farmers to rice consumers worldwide, and ultimately to our own. Next to the video presentation, in the far end of the room, lies the ceramic pot, illuminated to underscore the importance of traditional cultivation and conservation practices, which represent truly sustainable processes and, above all, reconnect us to the materiality of the process, transforming it from a mere sequence of images on a screen into tangible reality.



Fig. 5: S. Rahaa, *Songs to Earth, Songs to Seeds*, 2023, installation view of the ceramic pot with rice plants, "Helsinki Biennial," Helsinki, 2023, photograph by the author.

The deliberate choice to render visible a typically invisible process and to elevate typically marginalized protagonists to the forefront is not merely an artistic gesture but a political one as well. It underscores the notion of the "partition of the sensible" articulated by Rancière, which is

based on a division of spaces, times, and activities that determines what is visible and what is invisible, as well as the degree of participation each can afford in the common realm. The threshold between visibility and invisibility resonates with Deleuze's conception of art as a generator of visibility. By manipulating light and shadow, the artwork challenges the prevailing system of representation, positioning figurative art as the quintessential medium for catalyzing a new way of thinking. Artists seize the opportunity to dismantle dominant paradigms and advocate for environmental causes, beginning with the exhibition environment itself. The core idea underpinning the installations of the Biennial, along with their presentation and arrangement in relation to each other within the island context, appears to embody this aesthetic revolution. Firstly, the anonymous subject assumes the role of the art object, effecting a shift in the partition of the sensible from invisibility to visibility. Secondly, pivotal to this transformation is the acknowledgment of the common regime of meaning from which both poetic and historical realities emerge. Consequently, past occurrences and potential future scenarios become intertwined, both rooted in the shared imaginative possibilities entangled with the present moment.

Also beginning with the soil as its starting point, another noteworthy installation situated on Vallisaari Island is *PHOSfate* (2023), a collaborative effort between Mohamed Sleiman Labat and Pekka Niskanen. The installation, named after the collaboration, is founded upon a reflection regarding interaction and regeneration. By appropriating sand-growing techniques utilized in the Saharawi refugee camp in Algeria, the work aligns with the broader project's aim of connecting the repercussions of phosphorous mining in the desert, which has also contributed to the cessation of nomadic life in the region, to its impact on the Baltic Sea, afflicted by eutrophication, alongside numerous other

marine areas globally. The sandoponic gardens on Vallisaari Island symbolize the Saharawi's endeavor to reconceptualize and reformulate their relationship with sand, now recognized as a viable "medium for growing food."²⁷ In delving into this narrative, we confront a segment of the world's populace typically unseen, bearing the most extreme consequences of what, since the early 2000s, we have called "the Anthropocene Epoch," to emphasize *our* impact on the Planet. So, while the term "Anthropocene" underscores the anthropogenic origins of environmental disruptions, it is imperative to acknowledge that "Anthropos" encompasses a diverse spectrum of humanity, as emphasized by Steve Mentz's call to "pluralize the Anthropocene."²⁸ The notion of a unified humanity is inherently flawed and unjust.

The collaboration between Labat and Niskanen, alongside numerous other works showcased during the Biennial, catalyzes a broader discourse centered on the so-called Anthropocene – and even just on the choice of such a name. This demands democratization, shifting from specialized discourse to one focused on the potential of planetary connections.²⁹ Art provides a platform for this discourse, as exemplified by the Helsinki Biennial, which highlights the pivotal role of performance art as a medium. Art has the capacity, as articulated by Carolyn Merchant, to challenge the conventional narrative of human dominance over nature,³⁰ thus propelling artistic activism geared towards cultivating a new visuality wherein the emphasis lies not solely on representation but on the entire visual experience.³¹ This notion aligns with the contemporary

27 M.S. Labat, P. Niskanen, "PHOSfate," in P. Grönroos, J. Krysa, eds., *Helsinki Biennial 2023*: 92.

28 S. Mentz, *Break Up the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

29 T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today* (London: Sternberg Press, 2017).

30 C. Merchant, *The Anthropocene and the Humanities: From Climate Change to a New Age of Sustainability* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020).

31 I had the opportunity to explore the link between this exhibition and visual activism practices at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, with a paper entitled *The Visuality of the Environmental Crisis*, now undergoing publication.

imperative outlined by Demos, who notes that “numerous artistic-activist practices are already providing proposals that insist on embedding experimental visual culture within social engagements and collaborative social movements.”³²

In contemplating alternative modes of storytelling through artistic practices, we endeavor to subvert what Nicolas Mirzoeff terms the “aesthetic of the Anthropocene,” as the integration of “the theory and practice of the conquest of nature,”³³ reflecting an imperialist impulse inherent in Western modernity, which of course had repercussions on the visuality and visualization of the contemporaneity.

Demos underscores the necessity for art to transcend what Haraway calls the deadly discontinuities introduced by the logic of the Anthropocene,³⁴ fostering creative life, multi-species compositions, and practices intrinsically linked to environmental justice. The immersive and enveloping exhibition presented at the Helsinki Biennial 2023 exemplifies significant strides towards this goal.

32 T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*: 98.

33 N. Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene,” *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014): 219.

34 T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*: 98; D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*: 137.

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