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## **Environmental art project in Kurtakko**



1. The work provides people a natural touch with the past.

Photo: Liisa Kotila

This report handles our first environmental art project in autumn 2005 (from 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> of September). That was carried out in Kurtakko a community of Kolari in western Lapland. Kurtakko is a village near to Teuravuoma swamp where is the beginning of the causeway called Telatie. The causeway goes along an old route through which people could pass the swamp when going to the other villages. The place is traditional because there is still left some signs of original things like pasture barriers

and old summer stable for the cattle. Now this Telatie is reconditioned for tourism. Local people wished our project to handle village's old cattle farming tradition because it will be the theme of next summer's (2006) culture week happening. Otherwise we had free drive to do what we wanted.

### **Innovation**

Timo Jokela, the professor of art and education, says (1995, 20) "Art is one means by which people rearrange the environment. It clearly reflects its maker's, user's and the existing society's values and relationships to the environment." Environmental art has a specific role in changing the environment. Because of that we had it challenging and responsible making the project, the piece of environmental art in Kurtakko, a place having a meaning in cultural history. According to Jokela (1995, 21) "The motivation of a work of art belonging to the third category (defined by a place) rises completely from the environment. The form, material and even the birth process of the work takes the location into account." At the stage of making ideas for the project we only could consider the environment by means of advance information which made the job even more challenging.

The advance information was mostly based on website of the place. We also used Samuli Paulaharju's literary book for innovating the work. In the book Paulaharju portrays old northern Finnish folk traditions and lifestyle. We especially got excited about ancient mythical believes and spell traditions connected with dairy farming. In addition were we fascinated by the chance to make the old traditions visible using concrete objects. It was very inspiring to innovate the project and sometimes it was even hard to prune the ideas. We also had to make the ideas more realistic because we only had two days to carry out the plan.

Interdisciplinary field work includes besides orienting to the history of a place, the stories it tells, and the meanings given to it by its user's also empirical means of gaining information (see Jokela 1995, 21). At second stage of the field work after we had visited to Telatie, we really realized what we were doing. At first we planned works like "Horn" or "Gate" but those might have been time-consuming and difficult to carry out. That is why we finally did in groups these four cows. They were easier to make and a cow would be immediately connected with animal husbandry.



2. Four cows

Photo: Sanna Ahola

The most potential material we had was the willow tree. Besides it makes possible making large constructions in open terrain. The willow tree also suits well the esthetic structure of the place. The function of environmental art is to open viewer's eye to see the historical merit of the place and also the way it is used (see Jokela 1995). It was a big challenge to get cows look real so that they could be connected with animal husbandry. Because of the boggy swamp and the causeway it was a difficult job to carry the cows to the right places and find the best position. Placing our works would have to solve so that the cows would always look representative in spite of the fact that they are looked at from different directions and distances.



3. Carrying the cow  
Photo: Sanna Ahola

### **Making a willow cow**

We started making willow cows with collecting up so-called autumn willow. For material did both older and thicker willows and young, thinner and also shorter willows. As tools we used shears also when cutting thinner willows to quicken our work. Without stronger shears we couldn't have succeed in cutting the thicker willows in reasonable time at all. Good places to find good willows were non-wooked areas or at the edge of the forests.

We made pillars and horns for the cows from thick and long willows and thinner we used as fillings and finishing material. We measured pillars in such a way that those corresponded proportionately to real cow's measures of length. The final height of a complete willow cow was over 2 metres. The legs of a willow cow was profitable to

leave longer because the final location for our cows was squashy bog terrain.

To make the pillars we had to use hammer, nails and wire to fasten the willows to each other and shears to finish the measures. When the pillars were ready we moved to the filling materials. From thinner knots of willow we made so-called willow rope fastening those to long sticks. The willow ropes quickened our work a lot in giving shapes to the cows. In the finishing stage we however used single knots.



4. Building the framework of the cow  
Photo: Liisa Kotila



In spite of prejudices it was quite easy to make a willow cow and working on it was more creative than drawing up accurate designs.

## Finally

One thing that we have to make a notice of is how the Kurtakko inhabitants evaluate the work that we have created. Of course, a work of art is a sort crystallization of values, reflecting the thinking of its community (Jokela 1995). But do they see the connection between past and the present? Could our environmental art be seen as something that activates the local society? Maybe it would inspire them to create environmental art on their own. Answers to these questions may come to us in the future. However, we had an interesting opportunity to research the local history and ways of living. With our work we wanted to show how the cattle played a huge role in everyday life referring nowadays.

Our “willow cattle” and the surrounding swamp area together combined the idea of the holistic work of art. The surrounding space in itself acted an artistic element along with our cattle ( Jokela 1995). We could say

that the work prove to be very characteristic into its surroundings. Hopefully the winter winds and snow does not harm or destroy our work.

The whole process was good exercise for our class to work as a team and we had a good opportunity to sharpen our social skills. In one month period we have got to know the basis of environmental art like methods and theories.



5. The purpose of the work is to richen the environment.

Photo: Liisa Kotila

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