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## Willow cows

A report on environmental art workshop in village of Kurtakko, region of Kolari, from 13th to 16th of September 2005.

Before going to Kurtakko we read articles about the village of Kurtakko and its history. Getting to know the history of any place is important when making environmental art, especially art defined by a place. It is important to understand the stories it tells and the meanings it gives to us. (Jokela in Mantere ed. 1995, 21.) In general, the theme of the articles was cattle rising, which has been an important issue in this particular area.

After reading the articles we began to create different ideas for our artwork. The ideas had to be considered carefully because our material was going to be willow. The idea of the artwork had to be simple and easy to make, but still aesthetic. We had several ideas for our artwork for example the horns, udders or the bell of a cow. Finally we decided to go on with the idea of several pairs of horns referring to the history of breeding cattle in that area. Stories about haunted cows and spells were important aspects in our development of the artwork. Horns that are rising or drowning in a swamp would have referred to cattle attacked by a demon.

We drew small sketches and we discussed how we were going to use the willow to build the structures.

After arriving to Kurtakko we got to know the surroundings of our upcoming artwork, the swamp, Grand-Teuravuoma and the duckboards called Telatie which means a corduroy road. We orientated and acquainted ourselves to the environment by walking

through the swamp and woods on telatie and just observing the nature. We also made small-scale environment artworks with a couple or in a small group for an hour or two to get some practice. It's important to make a contact to the place itself when making a place defined environmental art. In Jokela's words: "...-birth process begins with a close orientation to the location: sitting, watching, smelling walking- in other words a holistic exploration of the place" (Jokela in Mantere ed. 1995, pg. 21).

The idea of horns, its realization and location beside the nearby lake started to come together in our minds, but it never fulfilled, because that evening in the group gathering it was realized that the horns were too simplified, straightforward and abstract. With the time we had it would have been too challenging to put it in to practice. Therefore we abandoned the subject and went along with our professor Timo Jokela's plan which was much more concrete, aesthetic and easily comprehensible: we would construct four massive willow cows.

We decided that every cow should have a different pose since we wanted to create unified but still lively whole. The essential matters when talking about the pose of a cow were the line of the back and the directions of the head and tail. Though it seemed to be very complicated to build a cow out of willow everything turned out to be quite simple – thanks to our clear construction planning.

Before starting to build the cows we got branches of willow from a river bank nearby. The main structure of the cow consisted of an A-shaped support and strong cross-directional willow logs that helped to sustain the work of art in balance. Firm and thick branches were used in the inner structures but the actual shape was formed with the help of thin willow whips that were twined together and put around the yet incomplete animals.

We had visited in a local cow barn and examined the anatomy and measurements of cows so we were able to put out knowledge in good use while assembling the structures of a willow cow.



A-shaped supports  
Photo: Linda Zwegberg

The working action was very energetic, and the results were there to be seen pretty soon. Because of the tight one-and-a-half day timetable we had, there weren't possibilities to concentrate on small details in the work.

The constructing work was made at the parking place in the other end of Telatie in Kurtakko – close to the final location of the objects: the swamp.



Co-operation  
Photo: Elina Partanen

This work we made is that type of environmental art, which grows from the place or site. "...- the reason for a work of art to exist springs on the whole from the surroundings of the work. The form, the material and even the birth process of the work is up to the site. Also the surrounding space itself can work as an artful element of the work." (Timo Jokela in Mantere ed.1995). The placing of the willow cows at the hay-coated swamp gives a picture of the surroundings as a natural pasturage area of the cows, even though it hasn't been that for years. Thus is the environment a part of the work and it also gives the major meaning for the work.

The cows' locating process appeared to be harder than we thought - because the pathway to the swamp, which was constructed out of wood, wasn't broad enough for two people to walk side by side. The cows were also very heavy and their balance was hard to handle while carrying.

This problem was solved so, that a couple of people was holding the cow from under the belly, and another couple of people was holding the back- and the front part. Nevertheless the cows were so heavy this work that seemed impossible, succeeded by co-operation.



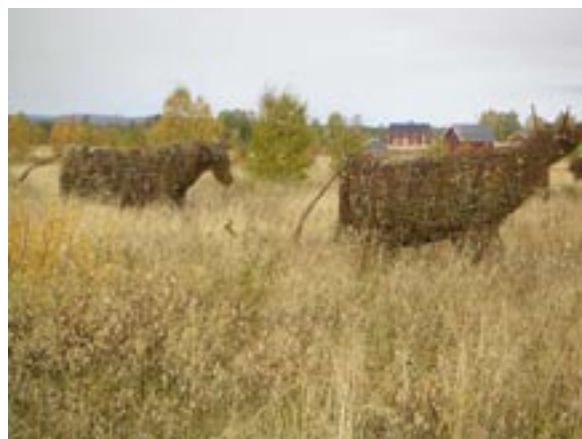
Carrying the cow  
Photo: Elina Partanen

We placed the works in a way that it was possible to see them from the longest possible distance. We cut down the extra shrubbery – for example small willows and hay- that obstructed the view. When we finally managed to carry all the cows to their places, the scene was impressive. Four massive cows pasturing in a cozy atmosphere on the swamp close to the nature pathway. Time will tell how the nature shall change our work: how shall the winter and the snow change the nature of the work. And also: what kind of emotions and feelings the work awakes in different times of the day, when the sun rises or when the night falls.

According to Timo Jokela's article, our work at the Telatie could be defined with environmental education method as an exercise which tests the scale of the environment and human "limits". The starting point is a large amount of material and the aim is a clear change in the environment (Jokela 1995). Working at the Telatie required all the participants a lot of preparation, co-operation and social skills not to mention physical effort. It was surprising to notice that a laborious and time-consuming project could be carried out in such a brief time, in almost one and a half day.

In reality, processing the idea and orientation in the surroundings was a longer progression.

The willow cow project has surprisingly far reaching effects. To our group it created a lot of feeling of togetherness and solidarity. Working closely together was a good way of acquaint people who were strangers to each other outside school environment. Besides working also evening gatherings familiarised people and made it easier to start a conversation etc. Our project also created something new into people lives and environment in Kurtakko. Telatie is a popular travelling sight and our work might attract traveller's attention and bring tourism in to the area and hereby gain economic profit to Kurtakko. Last but not the least, working in Kurtakko and Telatie taught us a new way to response environment. Nature is an all-inclusive experience.



The final work of art  
Photo: Elina Partanen

### References

Jokela, Timo: From environmental art to environmental education 1995 in Mantere, Meri-Helga: Image of the earth. Writings on art- based environmental education. Helsinki: University of Art and Design