

## FIGURES IN THE MIRE: TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE ART AND A RESPECTFUL MIRE RELATIONSHIP

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**Abstract:** Mire art is a versatile form of ecologically engaged art that reflects images of the relationship with nature in its time. This article regards mire art as transformative art that links both to climate change and new ways of experiencing the mire. Mire art no longer reflects so much the aesthetics of the mire enjoyed by humans, but rather the mire aside from human activity and the importance of protecting mire nature in the climate crisis. My perspective on the transformative aspects of mire art stems from the artist's choices, values and aims, which I explore by reflecting on both artist interview and my own experience of the artwork on site. The theoretical approach combines the study of cultural meanings and knowledge inherent in ethnological case studies with the concepts of art research. Art interventions can play a transformative role which increases knowledge, trust, and social capital. *The Invited Guests* series (Fin. Kutsuvieraat, 2020) by visual artist Reetta Partanen in the city of Seinäjoki, Finland, is a sculptural series made of organic material. The artwork is situated in the pristine mire in South Ostrobothnia, where peatlands are still used for energy. The article asks how the artist and her artwork emphasize the value of the mire as a natural place and softly question the dominant place of humans in the world. Importantly, the materials in the work have been chosen not to be a burden on the environment, but rather to benefit nature. The research shows that transformative art highlights the agency of nature, and in this study, the artwork gives mire a level of attention that differs from that centered on commercial use.

**Keywords:** cultural transformation, human-nature relationship, mire art, transformative art

## INTRODUCTION

Finland is known as a country with an exceptional number of mires. Mires are important as they regulate flood peaks, maintain biodiversity, and act as an efficient carbon sink (Lindholm 2018). Mires are a mixture of water and land, having layers of overlying organic matter. In principle, about half of the mires in Finland are in their natural state, but given that traces of human activity can still be found, the idea of untouched nature is therefore more of an abstraction. Alongside the agricultural use of peatland, drainage and other kinds of land use near mires have had negative effects on the hydrological regime (see *Metsähallitus*). Mires with duckboards are popular places for walkers, mountain bikers, orienteers, nature photographers, berry pickers, snow shoeing, and winter skiers. Furthermore, as an international phenomenon, the contemporary cultural uses of mires include playful team sports events ranging from swamp volley and soccer to bog snorkeling (Lauren & Piirainen 2023). In recent years, the topicality of the mire is clearly reflected in the growing number of environmental artists making art in the mire, providing viewers with experiences of nature and spaces to address change in an era of global climate crisis.

Culture has an evolutionary, holistic and transformative role in a framework that recognizes culture as a transformative force for sustainable development. It is important to consider how the integration of cultural, social and ecological aspects appears in mire art, and also its local transformative power (Dessein et al. 2015: 31, 33). In the urban landscape, artwork effects and its perceived transformations have been studied in human geography from socio-cultural and political perspectives in the context of anti-coal struggles and activism. The results show that along with its capacity to disseminate environmental and political awareness, artistic activism has emerged as a tool to tackle the socio-ecological crisis (Rodriguez-Labajos 2021: 44, 49). The thematic field of activism – art and activism – is very broad, encompassing various social problems and tensions (see Golanska & Kronenberg 2020). The message of art is not only conveyed by art organizations in specific indoor spaces such as art museums. In this case study, activism focuses on the growing appreciation of natural mires and their more-than-human world. Importantly, it means cultivating an awareness and contributing to social change (Latvala-Harvilahti 2021).

Ten years ago, it was thought that art could draw people's attention to the problems and contradictions of climate change (Miles 2010). But today, climate change art has already gone a step further. Emerging climate change art can connect viewers in order to understand the impacts of human-induced climate change and its consequences (Taplin 2014; Sommer & Klöckner 2021). As part of this new trend, mire artists raise serious questions among their audiences,

questioning unsustainable lifestyles and promoting a more sustainable future agency (Latvala-Harvilahti forthcoming). Interest in the growing impact of ecologically engaged art has intensified interdisciplinary debates on the relationship between art, inclusivity and well-being, as well as the role of art as a catalyst for people to act for a more sustainable lifestyle. Particularly, ecologically engaged transformative art uses materials that blend with nature and are useful to animal visitors, and aims to raise questions in the minds of human visitors.

This article addresses ecologically engaged mire art as a tool to strengthen the public's respective relationship with mire nature in general by way of a case study. The study analyses the transformative aspects and power of Reetta Partanen's artwork *The Invited Guests* (Fin. Kutsuvieraat, 2020), situated in the Sahanneva mire in Seinäjoki, Finland. Partanen's five-piece sculptural artwork is based on organic materials, and lines a kilometer-long art trail. Partanen talked to people working for the Nature Conservation District of Ostrobothnia,<sup>1</sup> and the ideas of combining art and mire conservation and organizing an event within this framework came up. The City of Seinäjoki was also overseeing a protected mire area, and together they agreed on the art trail. However, it is not a closed or regulated exhibit, and anyone walking there can easily end up in the art area, even those who do not visit art museums.

My perspective on the transformative nature of her art stems from the artist's use of materials and other choices and aims, and is explored by reflecting on both an artist interview and my own experience of her artwork. The overarching research question is: How do the artist and her artwork emphasize the value of the mire as a natural place and softly question the dominant place of humans in the world? The artist interview in this study was implemented with a combination of thematic and expert interview elements. The method of data analysis used is qualitative content analysis, based on repeated, open and critical listening to the interview. The key narrative of the interview was formed by the interviewee's own emphases and thematic openings, and is considered in more detail in the analysis. Following the interview, I went to see the artwork at the Sahanneva mire. My aim was to make observations of the artwork, and to get a feel for the place both physically and emotionally.

The next section introduces the contextual and conceptual background for the study, in which concepts of environmental art and process art, as well as transformative art in the context of contemporary challenges, sustainability and well-being are considered. The research materials and methodology chapter present the collection of the research material, including field reflections in the Sahanneva mire as part of an ethnographic approach. Next, the artwork and location of the Sahanneva mire is introduced and contextualized.

In three analytical chapters, the theme of change is examined through a thematic analysis. In my approach, the idea of change is situated in the context of transformative art by examining the artist's own relationship to mire, changes in nature and artwork, and the need for a more respectful relationship with mire as an aim of her artwork. The conclusion presents a reflection on how the artworks in the Sahanneva mire aim to respond to the transformation of the human-nature relationship.

## **CONTEXTUAL AND CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND**

Artists who become advocates for mire nature are not acting for external reasons, but are inspired more by their own environmental concerns and love for mires: especially, they wish to bring visibility to the mire as a valuable natural area (Latvala-Harvilahti & Laurén forthcoming; Kaukio 2022a). The history of on-site mire art in Finland dates to the 1970s, when among others, performance artist and painter Esko-Juhani Takalo-Eskola popularized mire art with naked mire dwellers spinning on a muddy ground (Takalo-Eskola & Linnilä 2017). Research based on environmental aesthetics saw the mire as beautiful and experiential, contrary to the mire imagery of its time (Hakala 1999). In the 1970s and 1990s, mire art was partly influenced by the same themes as seen in the 2020s, such as understanding the mire as a timeless or subconscious mystical place that humans have changed by draining it. However, by the end of the 1990s at the latest, mire art and the study of aesthetics and culture challenged the image of the marginal and work-oriented mire, emphasizing the mire's wanderers and its beauty (Hakala 1999; Laurén 2008). In the twenty-first century, the increasingly diversified work of mire artists has continued to stress mire conservation, and in recent years, a future-oriented and sustainable paradigm. One of the individual representatives of contemporary mire art is visual artist Kaija Kiuru from Sodankylä in Finnish Lapland, who has used her art to make people take notice of mining plans in the Viiankiaapa mire, which threaten Lapland's nature. By photographing the changing landscape, Kiuru has made visible the concrete boundaries of the mire and the symbolic boundaries between nature conservation and nature use (Kiuru 2022a, 2022b, 2022c; Latvala-Harvilahti 2021).

Ecologically engaged contemporary art is often seen as a pillar of the relationship with nature, and as an enticement to imagine future visions of the relationship between humans and the earth. The shift from seeing the environment primarily as a human resource to seeing it in terms of nature's rights and agency has increased empathy for both living and non-living nature. This

does not mean, however, that cultural traditions such as berry picking and nature walks are ignored. Rather, the aim is to find harmony and avoid indifference to nature. As part of a broadening perspective, scholars have noticed the urgent need to find new ways of discussing environments where humans and nonhumans are entangled. Accordingly, artists around the world often position nature as their co-artist (Huhmarniemi & Jokela & Hiltunen 2021: 2, 4; Huhmarniemi & Salonen 2022).

I understand novel positionings of nature as part of the “transformative mire art”. The concept refers to ecologically engaged art (DiSalvo et al. 2009) that links both to the rapid need for a change in lifestyle and sustainability goals in the mind of the artist, and to new ways of experiencing the mire environment and reflecting on the more-than-human nature. Transformative art asks whose well-being is of importance. Today, a more-than-human perspective that challenges human-centered art practices (e.g., Aaltonen 2022; Kokkonen 2017) seems to be a key theme in transformative art. Artists can take multispecies perspectives into account during the creation phase, for example, in the way that the artwork changes the surroundings of the animals. Transformative mire art seeks to generate targeted individual and social change in the human-mire relationship. One of the aims of transformative art is to use art intervention to enrich the experiences of nature. Transformative art as defined here is a phenomenon of the climate crisis. It can be approached as a cultural phenomenon, the causes of which are due to overconsumption in the Western world, and which artists and the creative sector are now seeking ways (e.g., through activism) to mitigate and adapt to (Karkulehto & Koistinen & Ugron 2022).

People can experience the global environmental crisis as both shared and private at the same time. Like forests and seas, mires have become seen as landscapes of hope and despair, and also as natural resource areas that are populated by their own species. From hope and despair, people also move onto the scale of well-being. The concepts in the field of ecologically engaged art reflect a relationship with a changing world, and a vision of what art can contribute to planetary well-being (Kortetmäki & Hirvilammi 2022). The recent rise of climate change art is a continuation of other forms and categories of environmental art such as land art and eco-art (Defrančesk 2022). Environmental arts are art works that are made in nature or in the cultural environment, and can take the form of a work, a process, or a single event (see Tieteen Termipankki). It involves people in a whole range of sensory experiences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile, and sometimes smell) and thus makes people aware of their environment, encourages pro-environmental behavior, and creates new meaningful relationships with the environment (Marks & Chandler & Baldwin 2014; Hannula 2002; Clarke 2010 [2001]: 92). In environmental art, moving

the same material and form to another place changes the work and may create a new work. An environmental artwork does not exist only in one place, but rather it is understood as living in time and linked to specific local cultural and social conditions (Naukkarinen 2003: 76–78). The importance of environmental art at the local level has been strongly reflected in the current tensions over peat use for energy, or the threat to the mire ecosystem posed by mining (Latvala-Harvilahti 2021). However, it is worth noting that the boundary between environmental art and other outdoor public art is fluid. Environmental art is a well-established art form that is a continuation of sculpture (Huhmarniemi 2021). The interviewed artist referred to her artwork as process art, which may be defined as “art in which emphasis is put not on the formal aspects of a work but on the processes involved in creating it and on the processes of change and decay it is subject to thereafter” (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith 2015 [1998]).

There are different approaches to evaluating and researching the impact of art. The most important impact relates to both the individual and the community level. Positive impacts on communities increase people’s experiences of belonging and participation (Houni & Turpeinen & Vuolasto 2020: 17, 41; Timonen & Rotko & Kauppinen 2022). Cultural well-being has become a high-profile issue in Finnish society as the work of applied arts in the social and health sector has strengthened. The state of the environment and well-being have come to be understood as being closely interlinked. The health and well-being promoting the power of art takes place in nature, and also through nature (Houni 2021: 65–67; Moula & Palmer & Walshe 2022). A recent study on the recreational use of mires has looked at the importance of cultural heritage in the UK. But the natural and cultural heritage values of mires are individually perceived, which is why we need research on the different users of mires, their mindsets, and their values (Flint & Jennings 2022: 175; Latvala-Harvilahti 2022). Hence, mire artists are one such group of mire users that deserve attention.

Especially in interdisciplinary sustainability research, well-being is seen in a broader context than the human being. In the sustainability transition, planetary well-being refers to the integrity of the processes that are central to well-being at local and global levels, alongside the preservation of the web of life (Kortetmäki & Hirvilammi 2022: 62–64; Kjell 2011). The viewpoint of planetary well-being (Koistinen et al. forthcoming) can be approached from the idea of cultural intervention, applied from the typology of visual art forms and corresponding dimensions of public engagement (Nurmis 2016). Communication researcher Joanna Nurmis states that artworks are divided into three categories: 1) representations (paintings), 2) performance environments (interactive installations), and 3) interventions (Nurmis 2016: 506). The last one is of special interest in this article, as the aspect of engagement in interventions

is *behavioral*. Typical of such interventions is that artists place works within the public space or landscape to force an encounter that would otherwise not happen. In addition, the artists show a familiar space (like mires) in a new way. Each landscape offers a visible part, but also an invisible, individually sensed landscape that generates images, ideas and attitudes (Haanpää & Laakkonen 2018; Atha et al. 2019 [2013]). What is more, the level of engagement is a *motivation to act*. This is an example of the power of (mire) art and can provide a deeper understanding of the place of humans in the ecosystem (Nurmis 2016: 507; see Siivonen et al. 2022: 228). Critical interventions in culture are acts in which the values of an alternative world are expressed and shaped (Miles 2023); however, the stories and images about certain places reflect meanings we can recognize from various contexts and discourses (Karkulehto & Koistinen & Lummaa 2020: 1, 7).

In community development, art and artistic interventions can play a transformative role which increases knowledge, trust, and social capital. From the point of view of the instrumental role, art can be seen as a tool for education and personal development. The idea of transformative art is seen also in new perspectives on collaborative art which understand art as a transformational force to strengthen community and enhance well-being. Art projects may connect people to the natural world and spark conversations on coexisting with nature (Bublitz et al. 2019). Furthermore, the transformative force of art can bring forth community-based solutions to cope with tensions or contradicting values (see Häyrynen & Devery & Banerjee 2021). For example, in the environmental struggle related to mining, art-based resources include promoting cultural resilience, impacting values and fostering hope, and hence contribute to cultural sustainability (Huhmarniemi 2021: 2). Thus, mire art is contextual art in that it reflects the main themes of society. Today, mire artists who combine scientific knowledge and create a space for dialogue can be considered under this prompt genre of climate change art, underpinned by a planetary boundary thinking. As Karkulehto, Koistinen and Ugron (2022) argue, creative practices are an element of transformative planetary activism, which imagines various futures based on an ethical consideration of nonhuman others and a collective caring for the planet.

## RESEARCH MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGY

The study is based on an interview with the visual artist Reetta Partanen, and an on-site observation of her artwork in 2022. The Mire Trend research project (of which this article is a part) decided to conduct interviews by phone because

of the COVID-19 pandemic. This proved to be a helpful solution, although it is not a substitute for a face-to-face meeting. The interview with Reetta Partanen, which lasted just under an hour, was informal in tone, and followed the framework developed in the Mire Trend research project. Firstly, Partanen answered questions about her background and talked about her childhood experiences in nature. I then addressed the art-related questions we had created for interviews, which included discussions about the idea and aim of the artwork, details, and feedback.

In ethnographic research, interviews are seen as a flexible tool for exploring knowledge and understanding. The interview is a conversation, and an interaction situation in which both the interviewee and the researcher draw on cultural knowledge and produce articulations of the subject matter (e.g., Nikander 2010: 254–255). However, I wanted to adopt the role of a listener rather than interlocutor for myself, as giving space to the interviewee seemed essential. Instead of asking questions, I tried to focus on the answers and the formation of the narrative from her point of view. The interpretation that appears from the interview is the result of a dialogue between theory and empirical data. I was especially interested in seeing the connections between what was said on different topics, as a way of understanding the larger context. I also hoped that the interviewee would use words, linguistic and narrative expressions that reflected her own meanings and perspectives, rather than unknowingly imposing assumptions or definitions in my speech that might over-direct the constructed discourse.

Having worked in environmental arts for a long time, Partanen is an expert on the subject. The interview situation is often conversational, with the interviewer allowing side-tracks from the main topic as appropriate. As an interviewer, I found it important that she was able to bring up something I had not thought of beforehand. There were narrative features in the interview which appeared from the verbalization of a process of change that the interviewee considered to be important. Typical of ethnographic interviews, our discussion generated talk about the overall place of mire art in today's world, rather than short answers to preconceived interview questions. The loosely framed discourse allowed for versatility, and as a researcher, I also approached the meaning-making processes from surprising perspectives (Huttunen & Homanen 2017: 141; Alastalo & Åkerman & Vaittinen 2017: 230). The method of analysis used in this study is qualitative content analysis. As a content element of the interview, I focused on the theme of *change* by finding the links between the artist's own human-mire relationship, the meanings she assigns to process art, and the impact of art: in particular, how art can influence the way we think about nature. Throughout the process, it was always borne in mind that artistic means serve as a tool to articulate and communicate questions about the environment.



The experience of the Sahanneva mire art trail in 2022 as part of my approach was different from usual ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Palmu 2007). Except for my spouse, the mire was free from other people. I was able to compare the pieces of the artwork with the photographs of the opening of the art trail found in the press and social media. When I walked around, the physical experience and mental tuning was different from leisure time spent in nature. I had interviewed Partanen beforehand, and when I looked at the artwork, I recalled what she had said. After visiting the art trail, I thought that the interview should in fact have been done there, on the site. I also believe that my own sensory perceptions would have broadened and deepened the interview, but when I arrived at the mire, based on the interview, I already had some vision in my mind. My field diary was visual as I took about 50 photographs of the art trail. Later, while listening to the interview and writing the text, I looked at the photographs again. This allowed me to return to what the individual artworks looked like in nature and what was around them (see Kupiainen 2022: 219).

## **THE SITE AND THE ARTWORK**

In South Ostrobothnia, a phased regional plan which covered both peat production and mire conservation came into force in August 2021 (see *Vaihemaakuntakaava III*). The location of the artwork south of the city of Seinäjoki is at the center of the province of South Ostrobothnia. In the Seinäjoki region, mires have previously been drained for forestry and the economic perspective towards mires is highly visible. The coexistence of peat policy and ditch restoration is an everyday issue for locals. The European Union is working to halt the loss of biodiversity in its territory, and one of the main ways to achieve this is through the Natura 2000 network (Ympäristöministeriö). Altogether, there are six biodiversity-friendly Natura 2000 sites in Seinäjoki. The Seinäjoki Environmental Protection group organized a restoration project in the mire by damming forest ditches. The protected area covers 170 hectares. The plan also contributes to the energy self-sufficiency of the province by allowing enough peat production areas to meet the needs of the energy industry (*Vaihemaakuntakaava III*). Art in the mires of Ostrobothnia area is not a unique phenomenon, as in recent decades local mires have been used for artistic projects. However, I am not aware of any art events having been organized in the Sahanneva mire in the past.

The Sahanneva mire is located about 10 kilometers (about 6.21 mi) from the Seinäjoki center. The Sahanneva mire is quite dry, and a combination of pine mire and open bog. The planned restoration will be carried out by damming

forest ditches (Sahannevan luonnonsuojelualueen vesitalouden ennallistamissuunnitelma 2022), with the aim of improving biodiversity, mitigating climate change, and improving water protection, while considering the recreational use of the area. In 2016, the Regional Council of South Ostrobothnia conducted a map-based survey open to all to support the preparation of the regional plan, the purpose of which was to find out the respondents' thoughts on the mire nature of South Ostrobothnia, its different uses and exploitation methods, and the values associated with mires. The survey received hundreds of responses and showed that most respondents visited the mire a few times a year, but there were also dozens of monthly and weekly visitors. Drainage and peat production were seen as threats to mires, and concerns were expressed about the changes that had already taken place in mires, the future of pristine mires, as well as the lack of appreciation of mires (Etelä-Pohjanmaan suoluonto-kysely 2016).



**Figure 1.** *The Invited Guests Art Route in the Sahanneva mire invites you to walk in mire nature and wonder where you can find art. Photograph by Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti 2022.*

As a marked art trail, the mire serves as a regional resource where art can be used to strengthen the inclusiveness of artistic and natural experiences. The route (Fig. 1) was chosen by Partanen from the perspective of walking through diverse types of land, where there is a wide mire and a small drier spot with different vegetation, which makes the diversity of the mire more visible. There are some duckboards in the area, but the art trail requires stepping into a slightly submerged mire. The mire is not the only attraction in the area, as right next to the art trail is a stargazing observatory, which hosts star and sun shows for the public. At the end of the hiking trail there is a traditional camping hut that is in active use. The announcement ceremony for the designation as a mire reserve was held at the opening ceremony of the art trail in 2020, which was attended by around 40 people. In areas of fragile mire ecosystems, regional community-based creative processes can be an effective way to build, among other things, knowledge, commitment, social capital, and ecologically sustainable development (Brandenburg 2008: 27, 42).

*The Invited Guests* artwork in the Sahanneva mire is a sculptural series made of organic material. For Partanen, making environmental art and eventually process art was her great dream. The artist used water-resistant *urushi* that is made from the sap of lacquer beans, traditional Japanese *kakishibu* with a high tannin content, as well as tar, flax fiber, wood, and soil. Ecologically engaged art is a set of common themes explored through a range of materials and practices (DiSalvo et al. 2009). The five independent parts of the artwork differ from each other, but most show familiar aspects of nature such as a bird sitting on a branch, or berries blossoming. Objects in nature have features of framelessness and involvement as they cannot be set apart so clearly – they are part of their environment, and in a symbiotic relationship with other living or non-living beings (Defrančeski 2022: 25). Accordingly and for example, the soundscape of nature can become part of the art experience. From this point of view, the experience of art in a mire is different every time. On the art route in question, the figures are placed in the landscape without any signs giving their name or other detailed information. First there is a life-size fox (Fig. 2), which is placed standing on its feet. According to my memory, the distance between the first and the second work is less than ten meters, where you find a two-meter-long mire butterfly on the ground, then soon a black grouse on a tree branch, and as you go further, along the path comes a large cloudberry, which grows upwards from the ground. The last installation is a human as part of a tree.



*Figure 2. When I visited the mire, the changing seasons and the normal life of nature had already changed the pieces of artworks. Photograph by Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti 2022.*

## THE ARTIST'S RELATIONSHIP TO MIRE

The artist of *The Invited Guests* specializes in sculpture, installation, and community art. For over five years her works have been characterized by a sense of responsibility for the environment and the place of humans in nature. In the interview, she points out that in Finland the human-forest relationship is much talked about, which is in contrast to the human-mire relationship. The title of the artwork refers to an encounter, and Partanen does not separately refer to humans as guests:

*The name of the work comes from the fact that the mire is an area that invites different organisms and animal species to come together, for which the mire is important in diverse ways. Some may visit for a day or two hours, others for a lifetime. (Interview 22 June 2022)*

Partanen says in the interview that her artwork is a tribute to the mires, and represents a trend of the 2020s, in which the artist is deliberately seeking to support a cultural transformation that includes respectful relationship with mire. The mire experiences of her adulthood seem to be the key narrative of the interview, although in the other interviews with Finnish artists conducted by

the researchers of our project, the influence of mire experiences from childhood has been more common. A human-mire relationship refers to one formed through human experience, and shaped and changed in a process-like way over an individual's life. It is influenced by the knowledge and emotions associated with mires, as well as their cultural heritage (Laurén 2022; 2006: 90–97, 209). As a living heritage, mire is a dynamic part of everyday lives that empowers communities and sustainable development (cf. Poullos 2014). Perceptions of mires have changed. For example, the mire no longer terrifies modern visitors as it used to (Kaukio 2022b). This is also reflected in Partanen's interview when she describes how her mire relationship changed due to her quite recent experiences in the mires. First, Partanen describes her feelings of excitement and fear about the mire, and how a sense of danger was present when she experienced the mire as a little-known terrain. As the feeling of familiarity became stronger, her shoes got wet, and she was no longer afraid of sinking into the mire (Laurén & Piirainen 2023). Thus, the feelings of alienation and uncertainty towards the mire turned to those of familiarity and enjoyment. This change was driven by her living near the mire conservation areas and working as an art instructor. In cooperation with a nature adviser, Partanen took people into mires, and spending more time in mire nature made her familiar with the characteristics of the mire and the annual cycle of its nature, shaping her thinking as an artist.

*We also went through these (stories) a lot with our clients on various nature walks. That's when the "will-o'-the-wisp" and all that kind of folklore about the mire became familiar and close. It has made quite an impression on me. (Interview 22 June 2022)*

Partanen states: "The protection of mires is particularly important in a province where peat burning and the resulting destruction of mires is still going on" (visual artist Reetta Partanen's website). The geographic context and restoration processes of the location of the artwork are of particular importance in Seinäjoki. The conservation aspect was the starting point for *The Invited Guests* installation, and the brainstorming and background work of the artwork started in co-operation with the Finnish League for Nature Conservation, Ostrobothnia District, and the Seinäjoki Art Museum. Partanen explains:

*In Seinäjoki there is still a lot of peat burning ... there are very, very many mires, but they are used – it is terribly important to somehow give a different kind of attention than human utility. (Interview 22 June 2022)*

An outspoken tone has become common among environmental artists. However, many artists do not relate to activists who define or advocate a particular message. Partanen finds my question about art that carries a message interesting, but does not identify with (what is in her words) “exclamation mark art”. Rather, she describes her art as “question mark art”, in which the works allow people to reflect on things from their own point of view. But she sees this as a contradiction in terms: on the one hand she is a member of society and art is a part of it, and on the other hand, she does not like to call herself an activist who proclaims the truth. Instead, she wants art to reflect the thoughts and feelings of the visitor. According to Partanen, walking and exploring in the Sahanneva mire are a part of the (art) experience, not just watching. As visitors walk along the art trail, they must see nature and look for where the next work of art might be. In this way, as they walk, they form an observant relationship with nature, stopping at individual works to examine their observations.

The meanings attached to the environment are more comprehensive than before, as it has been associated with problems that threaten both the well-being of people and of nature as a whole (Haila 2022; Meadowcroft 2017). As a message of environmental mire art, the emphasis on change or process is therefore aligned with individual experiences of nature, as environmental art can make one notice changes elsewhere, and reflect on how one relates to them. This can also broaden the temporal perspective towards the future (Sepänmaa 1986; Naukkarinen 2003: 82), and by creating a new relationship between people and the mire, environmental art builds a unique way of looking at life, and a planetary understanding of the rapidly changing environment (see, e.g., Marks & Chandler & Baldwin 2017).

Most of us have already lived with negative experiences of the consequences of climate change (e.g., unbearable heat, drought), and have felt, for example, a fear of forest fires or a sadness about the drainage of mires. Nurmis (2016: 504) asks what messages contemporary climate change art can send. We in the West have grown up in a modern consumer society and associated lifestyle, and it seems that, as if by accident, we have become accustomed to over-exploiting nature. Part of environmental art’s effectiveness is therefore to surprise the viewer, to astonish, to open a space for new perspectives and questioning, and to arouse interest and emotions (Latvala-Harvilahti forthcoming). Although art is flexible as a field of action and therefore in principle well suited to reaching all people, the cooperation between art and other sectors of society should be normalized to turn the message into action. During the interview, I asked: “Did the climate crisis and feelings of climate concern somehow come up in that context?” She at once replied, “Yes, yes they did.”

*I feel that it is now part of this whole. [laughter] ... If you have an artist who in some way deals with nature in their art – or in this world situation – it can be difficult not to deal with the lack of species or how different decisions affect our environment, or how an artist can create, for example, space for a different relationship with nature, which in turn can affect in its own way how we relate to our environment. (Interview 22 June 2022)*

The above interview quote reveals her view of her own role in transformative art practices. Partanen uses a concrete example to highlight the importance of the worldview and how it affects our relationship with nature. In her view, in the past, there was a significant link between the folk beliefs associated with wildlife and human behavior. When nature was believed to belong to various magical creatures, it was not regarded as inanimate:

*How important have magical stories been for the human relationship with nature in the past? How have we thought that out there in nature, there are different little human-like characters living their own lives, and how they are affected. That's quite a different approach from the science-based approach of the modern world, where we approach the environment through science and utility. (Interview 22 June 2022)*

This anti-scientific and anti-profit mentality and a concrete approach based on a respect for nature has, in her view, protected nature from overuse. In folklore, environmental narratives have reflected a code of behavior: elves were seen as guardians of the invisible boundaries between man and nature. A person entering their territory had to ask permission from them, and without their permission and indulgence, human activities were unsuccessful (Sarmela 2007 [1994]: 379, 384–385). Compared to folk belief, it is worth asking why the animals that are dependent on the natural environment are no longer enough to inspire humans' respect for nature. Reflections on whether we could think differently about nature and understand that we cannot control it, surface in the artist interview. The idea of art that was created *with* the mire is in the background. In addition to its visual appeal, the mire is a multi-sensory place where listening, smelling and walking are important, alongside looking. In addition, the mire has its own stories, which have influenced the way we think about the mire (see Laurén 2006; Kaukio 2023). The co-agency with mire is part of art that considers more-than-human values. Then, art is not made on the conditions of the human viewer or taken to conventional places to be experienced, and the fact that the mire and its animals are allowed to transform and exploit (process) art is a reminder of the power and authority of nature.



**Figure 3.** *The only human figure in the series resembled a skeleton because of its transparent structure. Photograph by Lauri Harvilahti 2022.*

The full-size human (Fig. 3) built into a tree is a reference to Partanen's earlier sculptural installation, where figures were made of natural fiber masses. Notably, the pieces of artwork in the mire transcend interspecies boundaries, for example, by presenting blood vessels that become roots or showing trees that begin to grow from human feet.

## CHANGES IN NATURE AND ARTWORK

Research on environmental art has emphasized questions of spatiality, such as how the work fits into the space, whether it creates a certain atmosphere or tension, dominates the space, or surrenders to it (Naukkarinen 2003: 74). Furthermore, due to the visible changes in the material caused by physical exposure to natural forces, the experience of art changes over time (Defrančeski 2022: 22). The mire changes and the forces of nature change the artworks. The art in the Sahanneva mire is understood as multi-level: it is not just individual works along the art trail, but also Partanen's premise that an essential part of the experience is wandering in the mire and finding the art (such as the



cloudberry in Fig. 4) placed in nature. In environmental art, temporality is a factor that influences art. Permanently placed in a mire, such artwork provides a repetitive experience for those who walk in nature. In the field of neuroscience, research on neurocognitive effects has looked at the repeated experience of art. Since a key feature of the brain is its ability to change because of experience, the effects of repeated experiences of art can be long-lasting. Moreover, the experience of the same work can change over time and affect people in different ways (Preminger 2012). The artwork in the Sahanneva mire strongly associates humans with nature, both as part of it and responsible for its future, and not with being a bystander or master of nature (see Sinervo 2022). This also relates to the fact that art has a strong role to play in environmental education, and is reflected in art teacher training, with an emphasis on environmental and community art activities. The paradigm shift also reflects a strong understanding of nature as a more-than-human environment. In addition, art education is focused on releasing eco-anxiety and increasing educators' capacities in facilitating transformative experiences (Huhmarniemi & Jokela & Hiltunen 2021). An eco-social framework of art education influences sustainability awareness. In other words, art education of this type can act as a *driver* of transformation in society towards a sustainable future (Foster & Salonen & Sutela 2022).

The theme of change is reflected in *The Invited Guests* on many levels. In the mire, the artwork is at first as Partanen intended it to be. But nature takes part in the creation of art. Figures can be transformed just as much by the animals moving through space, for whom the pieces are not seen as art, but simply as part of the habitat. Moss can grow within the works, and branches change their position with the seasons. Similarly, rain and wind can remove parts of the work, snow may cover the pieces, or fog may obscure the visibility from one piece to another. Thus, the multi-sensory nature of the art with the influence of the seasons is at the core of the art experience.

Changes in the mire also include changes in environmental values. The space in which the art trail was created is not just any natural mire, but a differentiated space marked by values that emphasize conservation. Consequently, environmental thinking, concern and feelings naturally became part of the project. Partanen said that the values of nature conservation were highlighted in a panel discussion on the opening day in regard to the relationship between nature conservation and art. In the art pieces, the delimitation of the mire art is managed by the signage at the start and end points of the art route. The timing of the work and the actions taken on the mire (i.e., the publicizing of the mire's protection) can also be seen as one of the settings for the work.



**Figure 4.** Art in the Sahanneva mire is reborn every day, and also according to natural light, as there is no separate art lighting in the mire. Photograph by Lauri Harvilahti 2022.

Moral and ethical issues are central to art in nature. Partanen argues that art that is placed in a mire should not disturb nature (see Laurén 2022). Hence, the materials were selected from the perspective of ecological sustainability, and will decompose over time. During the interview, we did not discuss in detail her thoughts about the changes and forms the pieces might take in years or decades to come. The use of an old Japanese varnish, *urushi*, which is resistant to cold and water, ensures that the works do not decompose as quickly in nature as they would without the varnish, so in this sense she has influenced the natural decay. But the artwork may have a positive impact on the mire's own plant and animal life, and, for example, the design of the works also considers that the artworks can act as insect hotels in the mire. Furthermore, environmental education values can be seen behind the work, and the interviewee was fascinated by the idea that art could introduce people to different areas of the mire and support the idea of spending leisure time in nature. Underpinning this is a consideration that a work of art has its own intensity, so it is essential to ask what art can do and what effects it may have on its audience, and not only what art means or what it refers to (see Kontturi 2018).

Art serves as a tool for juxtaposing the personal and the public, and makes us reflect on what it means to be in the world. The relationship between art and well-being has been described as, for example, focusing our attention on what is important and thus enhancing the individual and collective quality of life (Brandenburg 2008: 19). In practice, process art in the mire may make the

Anthropocene – the epoch when humans exist as a global geological force and the main determinant of the environment of the planet (Chakrabarty 2021) – *a cultural reality*. An important characteristic of such art is its ability to reflect back to the viewer in a different manner from media texts or research reports on environmental problems, as a work of art activates emotions, directly touches the most personal core, awakens a sense of responsibility, and challenges the viewer to reflect (Nurmis 2016: 506). On the one hand, one might also think that in a fragile mire ecosystem, humans could also be seen as ‘uninvited guests’. However, environmental art stands for the positive impacts of human activity on nature, and through *The Invited Guests* artwork the mire is positioned as a unique local place, and as part of the mire culture. Thus, the environmental art series transforms the natural environment into an experiential space:

*It’s very fascinating for an artist – that it’s inherently a very multi-sensory place. I somehow think that the smells of the mire and what happens around it become part of the experience, and that my work also becomes part of the mire in that way. (Interview 22 June 2022)*

In the mire, environmental effects can be site-specific in many ways. The ‘look’ of a piece of art in mire is influenced by the natural environment and the materials the artist has chosen to use. The relationship of the works to the mire is reflected in the fact that the pieces depict the typical flora and fauna of the site, albeit making something large when in real life it may be small. Except for the mire butterfly (Fig. 5), the pieces had been in the mire for two years.



**Figure 5.** *The butterfly has been in the art route since 2022. Photograph by Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti 2022.*

The natural materials and colors used in the works on the art trail blend in with and resemble their environment. When my eyes first caught a figure, it took a moment to see it for what it was. For example, the fox figure was partly broken, much of the surface material on the front of the fox was gone, and the branches that had been placed inside the surface of the work were clearly visible and the original colors were faded. A black grouse (Fig. 6) was hanging on a branch by only a toe. My attention was then drawn to the oversized mire butterfly, which lay on the ground as if in surrender. There was space to move around each piece of art, which allowed the works to be viewed from different angles. Although startling at almost six feet tall, the human figure, intertwining wood and man, did not seem particularly fatalistic. Rather, one could describe it as the gradual disappearance of man, and this has been enhanced as the growth of the branches and their wrapping around the body have increased compared to the opening day photographs.



*Figure 6. The figure of a black grouse looked deceptively like a real bird. Photograph by Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti 2022.*

## **THE NEED FOR A MORE RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE**

Cultural transformation into a sustainable society takes place by influencing communities, but it is also essential to influence the worldview at the individual level. In the interview, the artist also refers to her own individual experience

and its effects on her. Particularly, mire art invites us to take an exploratory and empathetic approach:

*I hope that The Invited Guests work could, at least in some small way, create a more respectful relationship with nature, a bit of what I experienced in the mires in Kainuu. That you can visit in different seasons, and you can just sit there and wonder, and respect the mire.*  
(Interview 22 June 2022)

In her book *Environmental Crisis and Art*, Eva Maria Räßple (2019) addresses some contemporary challenges of ignorance towards certain environmental problems. What is crucial in her mind, is the sensibility and ability to take the standpoint of others – including species and ecosystems – into human imagination. Recent research in education and health interestingly shows that arts-in-nature has supplied stimuli to increase nature connectivity, understand environmental issues, and to explore ways to prevent environmental disasters. Among children and young people this has led to a higher environmental awareness and pro-environmental behaviors, and also a potential decrease in eco-anxiety (Moula & Palmer & Walshe 2022). In the interview, I asked whether Partanen had received any feedback from children in the mire. It turned out that children were fascinated by the art trail, and according to her feedback at the time, the importance of creating an opportunity for the mire to be seen was a highlighted point. Apart from the opening, she has not received much feedback on the work. But the reason for this (as she understands it) may lie in the fact that the work is outside in nature, and not indoors.

An ecologically sustainable human-mire relationship frames the interviewee's narration on change, and is reflected in the primary positioning of the non-human as the voice of the mire. Partanen wanted people to come to the mire themselves. The mire and stillness become part of the work, just as the artwork becomes part of the mire and the mire area. As an environmentally sensitive art form, *The Invited Guests* can influence people's 'cultural filter' (assumptions) so that they feel the need to broaden their thinking, and with this change, their own consumption behavior (see, e.g., Pepper 1984). Thus, art is part of environmentalism, seen as a transformative consciousness and awareness, with knowledge and an understanding of nature and human beings as part of it (e.g., Borgdorff 2010; Miles 2006).

## CONCLUSION

Environmental artists respond to topical issues by challenging the idea that humans have a greater right to control nature than other living creatures. In the 2000s, the increasingly diversified work of mire artists continued to stress mire conservation, and in recent years, a future-oriented and sustainable paradigm. The aesthetic gaze of art on the mire has sharpened, and in the wake of the global environmental crisis, has been accompanied by a conscious effort to make a difference. Nature values, more-than-human thinking, and ecological choices in materials form the basis for what I as a cultural researcher have earlier called transformative art. The linked concept of process art is part of a certain environment and ecosystem.

In this article, I examined *The Invited Guests* artwork (2020) by visual artist Reetta Partanen in the Sahanneva Mire, in Seinäjoki, Finland. It provided a case study for examining the transformative aspects of mire art that decomposes in nature, and provoked emotions and thoughts among visitors. The non-permanent nature of process art highlights the parallel lives of nature and humans. My perspectives on the theme of change were built around transformative art, the changing environment, and the relationship of Partanen's own experiences of the mire and the need for a more respectful relationship with mire nature.

The mire opens up perspectives on art's intention to contribute to its time, in this case to the relationship of humans to nature and ecology, as well as to the local conservation process (see Kajander 2022: 139). It seems that despite the growing concern about nature, we need ecologically engaged art to make climate change a tangible issue, and to open our minds to complex problems and future dimensions (see Nurmis 2016: 507). As the interest in cultural tourism and eco-tourism grows, the phenomenon of mire tours may become common in Finland. In the United States, mire commodification for tourism can be understood as a process of social spatialization, and encountering mires as 'lived places' rather than as a zone of 'natural resources' is a novel product for those who are willing to pay for a tour (Keul 2013). Mire art also enlivens nature, even without a guide. Nature tourism should be managed, as large numbers of tourists are, however, uninvited guests of the mire. It is difficult to say to what extent people would still perceive the mire as a frightening environment if they had to go there alone to experience art. However, in this case study, the art aims to reduce any fear of the mire by placing the art trail in a safe area (Laurén 2022).

The artwork provides an art intervention with the possibility for repeated art experiences that softly show the power of nature in a work of art. The artwork was not created in collaboration with the communities, but the art trail is made up of five art pieces, and borders the mire as a local attraction. For

visitors, a mire art trail provides both material artwork and experiences of mire nature. *The Invited Guests* creates an understanding that humans must care for the well-being of the mire, and the well-being of nature also supports human welfare. The key to embracing transformative art is the artist's own worldview, values, and their relationship with nature. In the interview, Partanen talked about her own experiences and the phases in her human-mire relationship, and considered the world view of earlier generations that was constructed by narratives, folk beliefs, and other modes of intangible cultural heritage of the mire. The message the artist wants to convey is that a new kind of human-mire-relationship is vitally needed. Ecologically engaged art may become one of the transformative forces of our time, deepening our understanding of planetary boundaries, and even changing people's relationship with nature. The case study shows the challenges that many municipalities face in reconciling the material and economic benefits of mires, with the need to protect the human-mire relationship and mires themselves. Art placed in the natural environment may be one way to attract new people to nature, which increases the recreational use of nature. But changes in environmental thinking are influenced by people's own experiences in nature, so any exposures of this type are likely to have positive effects on the human-mire relationship.

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## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> The Finnish Association for Nature Conservation with its local associations is the largest non-governmental organization for environmental protection and nature conservation in Finland.

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## INTERVIEW

Pauliina Latvala-Harvilahti's interview with visual artist Reetta Partanen on 22 June 2022. The material will be saved at the Finnish Literature Society's Archive in Joensuu after the Mire Trend research project is completed.

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