InVisible Culture

Dolce far niente, Ärjä

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Ärjä island is known for its long sand beaches, high shoreline cliffs and deep pine forests. The island is a geomorphically important ridge island on the Oulujärvi ridgeline in Kainuu area, Finland. Its cultural history includes ancient indigenous Sámi settlements with grazing grounds and ritual sites. Later it became known as a pirate base in the 1860s, for its pine tar runners, and, since the 1920, as a leisure location for forestry company's holidaymakers (fig. 1).¹ Ärjä is also part of the EU's Natura 2000 natural territory program and a national beach protection initiative.

Figure 1. The tradition of taking it easy in Ärjä has at least a 100-year history. Holidaymakers in 1927. Photo courtesy Kainuu Museum archives.

The Ärjä Art Festival, established in 2018 by the art group Vaara, is a designated anti-festival that provides little in the way of material infrastructure, thus requiring visitors to carefully prepare their visit. As Ärjä island is a delicate nature destination, the event is grounded in a holistic ecological and low-emission approach, with the aim of using art to create new communal forms to engage and deal with the changing world:

Experiencing, gathering, and multidisciplinary art forms open the unconscious layers of the mind and body. The island's nature, water, trees and sand open the senses, soothe the body and the mind. In the program of the Art Festival, experiential art and the interfaces of science meet. The goal is a step towards an environmentally conscious humanity.²

It is a small-scale camping festival without electricity or amenities which leads to a slower tempo in everything.

During the 2019 Ärjä Art Festival I conducted a performative art experiment: an emotional mapping photoplay that unfolded during the festival weekend.³ By a serendipitous turn, I had received a donation of a boxful of expired disposable cameras. I was happy to give them a second life as artifacts of artmaking instead of having them end up in a landfill. These toy-like cameras were distributed to participants with the task to take photographs capturing the emotions that they experience during their stay on the island. The aim of this playful intervention was to visually map the emotions elicited by a place. I encouraged visitors to take time to reflect on their emotions, choosing and framing vistas that depict their “inner world” through the external terrain of the island—a process that gestures towards what Jonathan Flatley has called *affective mapping*: using aesthetic practice not to generate realistic representations of a social space, but instead to elicit a representation of the affective life of the participant.⁴

By providing participants with a toy (disposable camera) as well as a simple, playful task, they were given an excuse to stop and linger, to take time to connect with the place and attune themselves to the emotions it evokes, to see the place from new perspectives and finally become sensitized to its narrative and emotional layers as well as its ludic potentials.⁵ It was an art-based excuse to loll down on tussocks and gaze at the wind swaying in the canopies.

The 2019 Ärjä Art Festival drew approximately 160 visitors. A total of 96 disposable cameras were distributed to voluntary participants. At the end of the festival weekend,

a total of 82 cameras were returned with a permission to use the images for research purposes and publish them either separately or as part of collective emotional map.

The main motif in the photographs is the dreamlike atmosphere of Ärjä island, amplified by the visual effects afforded by the use of expired disposable cameras, a medium that facilitated a kind of aesthetic time travel, achieving an effect similar to an Instagram filter but without relying on stylized digital processing. Given the delayed development of photos taken with analog instant cameras, the visual data contained very few intentionally posed images, instead skewing towards the reflective, ambiguous, and lyrical. Using an old-fashioned film camera seemed to open up the senses to the bygone stories of the island. Idleness dressed in play endorsed participants to listen to the place, and dwell on the treetops, the sky, and other details of the landscape that they would normally pass by. Framed by the experience of shared respite on the island, participants' photographs created a collective archive of multi-sensory and contingent encounters with the island, which in turn provides an opportunity not just to gain a deeper emotional attachment to the place but also to cultivate a broader commitment to natural heritage conservation—for Ärjä, where such a process is now underway, and for other places like it.⁶

Figure 2: Camping life during Ärjä Art Festival. Even though during the 2019 festival weather conditions were harsh most of the time—rainy, windy and cold—the only possible way of staying overnight, camping, was not unilaterally considered a burden by participants. Many of the almost 200 images submitted on this theme depict it as enjoyable and a way to re-connect with nature, offering an excuse to be idle even during the daytime despite the other people around.

Source: Camera 79, anonymous participant.

Figure 3. Of 139 images belonging to the theme group of facial expressions, only 9 entries expressed a sense of idleness, but those that did were touching. Source: Camera 12, anonymous participant.

Figure 4. Meditating on the beach. Source: Camera 66, anonymous participant.

Figure 5. Resting inside tent. Source: Camera 68, anonymous participant.

Figure 6. Gazing at the horizon. Source: Camera 78, anonymous participant.

Figure 7. Animals on the island seemed to function as obvious interlocutors for depicting participants' own emotions. This image shows an annoyed tiny dog surrounded by obtuse sheep. The dog is only visiting and visibly stressed, but the sheep have stayed on the island all summer and adapted to the pace and idleness of the island. Source: Camera 30, anonymous participant.

Figure 8. A relaxed sheep. Source: Camera 28, anonymous participant.

Figure 9. Several images combine two or more themes. Here we find both the leisure of camping life (which surfaced in 198 images total) and an image of an animal (46 images were taken of animals other than sheep: 44 dogs and 2 snakes): the dog outside seems to be waiting for an adventure, but the one inside is happy lingering inside the tent with the owner. Source: Camera 48, anonymous participant.

Figure 10. Another example of a frame combining different themes: a close-up detail of coffee in a kuksa, a traditional wooden coffee cup used when hiking, which also features a reflection of the sky. Such details of nature and miniature scale set ups made for the most popular theme amongst the emotional mapping images. Emotional reflection, it seems, invited participants to stop and observe tiny elements that might be easily ignored otherwise. Source: Camera 44, anonymous participant.

Figure 11. A significant number of pictures were taken towards the sky, from the worm's eye view. These images speak to a sense of liberation, lifting one's thoughts to the heights, "ad astra" and letting one's mind fly. It also reflects the decelerated pace of the location: participants had time to slow down, loll down on the mosses, watch the swaying of the tree crowns and passing of cloud creatures.

Source: Camera 55, anonymous participant.

Figure 12. Another sense of liberation: several entries showed disrobed clothes left in the beach, banks and moss. Source: Camera 82, anonymous participant.

Figure 13. Feet, footprints, shoes and wellies gathered 46 entries. Does it depict rooting to a place through our feet or looking down while lost in thoughts? Source: Camera 45, anonymous participant.

Figure 14. The most impressive collection was that of 86 images depicting solitary figures, small and alone in the landscape. Here, the proportions of the world slip into their place, with participants feeling small in the lap of the forest. Source: Camera 40, anonymous participant.

Figure 16. Or are we witnessing an innate and intuitive willingness to honor the indigenous Sami and also Finnish tradition of asking permission from a place before entering? Are we seeing a small child or an elf of Ärjä here? Source: Camera 77, anonymous participant.

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Footnotes

1. Anni Koskela, Ärjä 2024: Ärjänsaaren kehittämisohjelma 2018-2024 {Ärjä 2024: The development programme of the Ärjä island for 2018-2024} (Vantaa: Metsähallitus, 2017), 2, 17; Julia Sieppi, "Government Buys Naturally Diverse Historical Island from Forestry Giant," Yle Uutiset, February 8, 2017. [↵](#)
2. Ärjän taidefestivaali, <https://arjanfestivaali.fi/>, accessed November 22, 2020. [↵](#)
3. I want dedicate this work and give my humble thanks to everyone who participated and gave permission to publish the photographs they took during the playful emotional mapping intervention during Ärjä art festival 2019. I owe thanks also to Emilia Hyvönen of Vaara Kollektiivi for patience in answering all my questions, Metsähallitus for financial support for developing the films, Minna Hautio for overall mirroring of thoughts, Mika Suominen at M-Data for technical support, Kari Molarius at Monipalvelu for scanning the developed films and Teemu Salminen at Focus Nordic for donating the expired disposable cameras to be used in an art-making context instead of sending them to the landfill. [↵](#)
4. Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 80. [↵](#)
5. See Juha Hakala, *Tylsyyden ylistys: Ikävystyneisyys on luovuuden alku* {Praise the Boredom: Tedium is the Beginning of Creativity} (Helsinki: Alma Talent, 2018); Marko Leppänen and Adela Pajunen, *Suomalainen Metsäkylpy* {Finnish Forest Bath} (Helsinki: Gummerus, 2019); Sebastian Deterding, "Alibis for Adult Play: A Goffmanian Account of Escaping Embarrassment in Adult Play, *Games and Culture* 13, no. 3 (2018): 260-279, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017721086>. [↵](#)
6. In 2020, the Finnish Supreme Court banned logging on the nature conservation islands of Lake Oulujärvi, to which Ärjä belongs, a strong argument for the conservation of the landscape. Heidi Peltonen, "Korkein hallinto-oikeus kielsi hakkuut Oulujärven Natura-alueen saarissa" {The Supreme Administrative Court banned logging on the islands of the Oulu Lake Natura area} *Kaleva* January 20, 2020, <https://www.kaleva.fi/korkein-hallinto-oikeus-kielsi-hakkuut-oulujarven/1657589>. [↵](#)