

Helsinki Biennial 2020: *The Same Sea*

Curatorial Statement from Pirkko Siitari and Taru Tappola

Not one grain of sand stirs without a shift in the shape of the universe: change one thing, and you will change everything.

- Wei Wulong, *The Path of Tea*, written in the 7th Century of Old Quian Time. Fictive quotation from the novel by Emmi Itäranta, *Memory of Water*.

Interdependence is the main theme of the Helsinki Biennial 2020. Each thing and action has an impact on something else and supports the entirety. In 1971 Barry Commoner, American biologist and pioneer in ecological sustainability, defined four laws of ecology. The first of these laws is simple and encompasses everything: Everything is Connected to Everything Else. But it is only now, half a century later, that the world has woken up to the ecological catastrophe that is unfolding and the fact that the entire biosphere is connected. The Biennial's title, *The Same Sea*, refers to this situation, which concerns everyone but affects different places in different ways. Like the sea, it is a complex, inconstant entity that bypasses all boundaries and appears different from contrasting perspectives.

The seas, continents and islands are intertwined ecosystems that form actual and symbolic networks. Islands offer shelter, places to live and strongholds. The sea separates and connects. People and other organisms, innovations, trade, power and communication have all travelled along the highways of the sea. We often talk about the seas, but in reality there is only one sea, a continuous layer of saltwater that surrounds the continents. Similarly, there is only one body of water on our globe: the same water molecules incessantly circulate through everything living and lifeless. The biota and physical conditions of the sea, such as temperature, currents and surface level, all have an impact on our shared future, all over the world.

Helsinki Biennial will take place on the island of Vallisaari, which is part of the chain of historical island fortresses off the coast of Helsinki. Vallisaari forms the tangible and conceptual starting point for the curation of Helsinki Biennial.

Vallisaari is a 15-minute boat ride from the centre of Helsinki and is a neighbouring island of the Suomenlinna island fortress, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Vallisaari was designated for military use at the end of the 18th century, when Finland was part of Sweden, but its construction as a sea fortress only started in the 19th century during the Russian rule. The island played its own part in the Finnish Civil War, and after Finland gained its independence in 1917, the Finnish Defence Forces kept its largest store of ammunition on the island.

During its known history, the island has been used and inhabited by seal hunters, seafarers, pilots, residents of the neighbouring islands, Russian military personnel and Finnish Defence Forces personnel and their families. The last inhabitants left the island in 1996. The military island was closed off for a long time and was only opened to the public in spring 2016.

Though humans have spent just a short period of time on Vallisaari, they have left a huge mark on the island. At the beginning of the 20th century almost all the trees on the island had been chopped down. Explosions and construction have mangled the surface of the island. Human activity has adapted its species and biotopes. When the defence forces left the island, the controlling grip of humans lessened and plants and animals have gradually taken over. A thousand species of butterflies have been found on the island, and all six species of bat that occur in Finland. Eighty percent of Vallisaari is now a nature conservation area and the rest is designated for recreational use.

Vallisaari has defined and inspired the work of the artists participating in the biennial. We invited artists to come and create new site-specific and temporary artworks or to exhibit existing artworks, which will engage in a dialogue with the island. We went on expeditions to the island with the artists, to discuss it as a context for art and to seek suitable locations for the artworks. Multifaceted cooperation is needed in the creation and exhibition of art on Vallisaari in order to be able to take the unique environment into consideration. The idea and location for each artwork have been evaluated from the perspectives of nature conservation and the preservation of historical buildings. The artworks will be located outside along the cobbled path and inside historical buildings, gunpowder cellars and empty residential buildings. This will highlight unknown and abandoned places and give them new meanings. Each artwork has a reason for being where it is.

The location is more than direct experience, more than direct observation. It also involves temporal layers, historical and biological processes, and economic, political and social structures that are all connected. The location is a network of ecosystems made up of all of these, which is further connected to larger entities. In addition to its actual geopolitical location, cultural history and nature, Vallisaari offers the artists broader topical questions that flow forth from the island. These include time and change, the relationship between people and other species and the micro and macro worlds that remain outside of normal observation. A few of the artists have taken their subjects from the daily life of Vallisaari's former inhabitants and from the island's military history. Some of the artworks deal not only with the local and global consequences of human activity but also with alternative images of the future.

In September 2019, at the time of writing this, the IPCC published its second report, which addresses the increasing rate of climate change and the severity of the consequences. We believe that art has an important role in this situation. It has the unique ability to broaden our way of thinking, our understanding and imagination. It

can create channels for discourse, radical empathy and ecological ethics, and at the core of all these is the understanding of interdependence.