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Helsinki Biennial 2021



The inaugural Helsinki Biennial 2021, is held on the Finnish archipelago, Vallisaari island, from 12 June – 26 September 2021. The biennial brings contemporary art to the former military island as well as further artworks on the city's mainland. Helsinki Biennial presents 41 artists and artist groups from Finland and across the globe, showcasing 75% new commissions and site-specific installations which engage with the cultural history, geopolitical location, and diverse environment of Vallisaari.

Curated by **Pirkko Siitari** and **Taru Tappola**, head curators of Helsinki Art Museum (HAM), *The Same Sea* reflects upon the ever-pressing notion of interdependence. Artworks in the biennial explore diverse and topical themes ranging from humankind's relationship to nature, time and change, borders and identities, and concepts of empathy.

Vallisaari forms the tangible and conceptual starting point for the curation of the 2021 biennial. Using the context of the island's unique cultural history and natural environment, artworks have been placed in, and created for specific locations, in genuine interaction with their surroundings.

Many of the sites on Vallisaari are incorporated into the artworks themselves. **Dafna Maimon** leads us through a cellar vault which have been transformed into a digestive system, and **Tuomas A. Laitinen** creates an alien habitat in a former gunpowder cellar. Samir Bhowmik hosts visitors on an expedition tracing the route of an imaginary subterranean and underwater cable which runs through the island. Sitting atop a former elevator shaft, **Tadashi Kawamata's** *Vallisaari Lighthouse* offers a temporary, towering landmark comprised of found scrap material from Vallisaari, which can be seen from various viewpoints at sea, the neighbouring UNESCO heritage island of Suomenlinna, and the Helsinki waterfront.

Our **relationship to the natural environment** is explored further in other works. Greeting visitors as they arrive on the ferry from mainland Helsinki is **Jaakko Niemelä's** installation *Quay 6*. Constructed from scaffolding and reaching six metres high, it mirrors the projected rise in sea level should Greenland's northern ice sheet vanish completely. On the Eastern side of Vallisaari, **Alicja Kwade's** *Big Be-Hide* is positioned on a thin strip of land that connects Vallisaari Island with the neighbouring Kuninkaansaari Island. The sculpture comprises two stones – one from Vallisaari and the other a man-made replica – either side of a mirror. The work poses questions about our place in the universe and highlights the continual transformation of the natural world.

The desire for togetherness and **empathy** are central to the work of many biennial artists. **Kyungwoo Chun's** two participatory works *Bird Listener* and *Islands of Island* are created with the help of biennial visitors: activating the role of the listener and narrator, the installations invite visitors to confront and discover themselves and others. The concept of empathy is also given further credence within the context of ecological ethics: inside the Alexander battery, **Christine and Margaret Wertheim's** luminous *Helsinki Satellite Reef* simulates the undersea ecosystem and celebrates nature's diversity as well as the power of collaboration. Made of recycled plastic, this handmade coral reef was created over time with

more than 3,000 residents of Helsinki, manifesting as an urgent reminder of the vulnerability of coral reefs and their human-caused destruction.

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