

OFF SEASON ART GARDENING



A NATURAL APPROACH TO PUBLIC ART



Above: As part of the pilot project Jette Mellgren created *Bäcken Shelter* from willow branches in Mariestad.

Cover image: Digital sketch for Vaidas Ramoška's interactive sound sculpture.

EXTENDING THE BOUNDARIES

Public art. Does it always have to be a weathered bronze statue mounted on a high granite plinth? Or can it be something quite different? Something that connects with and speaks to the general public, rather than merely to those with an interest in history or a penchant for high culture. Of course it can! Proof of that was evident in Mariestad in 2010, when we invited graffiti artists to decorate a line of grain silos prior to demolition. Moreover, the concept of 'land art' has already been in existence for more than 50 years, albeit most commonly in the form of monumental landscape projects.

Now, however, we felt the time had come to take the next step and create something new on a more manageable scale. Something that people of all ages can encounter in their day-to-day lives, explore and interact with, all year round. Something that has its origins in our natural surroundings, yet is seen through the unique lens of the artist's eye.

That was more or less how we reasoned in Mariestad back in 2017, when we first hatched the idea for what *Off Season Art Gardening* might produce.

A PILOT PROJECT PAVES THE WAY

Over the years Dacapo, a municipal network for educational collaboration in Mariestad, had already built up a fund of experience about how to create attractive green environments. It soon became apparent that this new approach to art in public places would be a perfect form of expression for common European cultural ambitions. However, an EU project must involve organisations in at least three countries. The question, therefore, was: Where should we turn to in order to find like-minded partners?

We had heard about a Dutch-based arts organisation called *Sense of Place* that had worked professionally with land art in the form of various types of outdoor installations. This new idea appealed to the project leaders there, and they wasted no time in jumping on board. We had also carried out a number of previous projects together with the *University of Skövde* in Sweden, and staff there once again expressed their willingness to act as both a source of ideas and an intermediary. A number of proposals were bounced back and forth, and our contacts with the academic world soon bore fruit: there already existed a well-established cultural exchange programme with the *Municipality of Ukmergė*, some 70 kilometres north-west of the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius.

It was not long before agreement was reached about how the basic ideas behind this project might be systematised to meet the criteria for the EU's Creative Europe programme. The *Lake Vänern Archipelago and Mount Kinnekulle Biosphere Reserve* also joined the project as a member of the steering committee. Guidelines were laid down for a pilot project so that these ideas about more democratic expressions of public art could be put to the test in a real-life setting.

The results were encouraging. Much of what became, in essence, an art gallery in a shared public outdoor space turned out very well, while other aspects cast useful light on what might be considered to constitute the weak points in this undertaking. Everything, however, served as valuable experience ahead of the full-scale project, which was owned by the Municipality of Mariestad. The project was conceived as a three-year commitment of cross-border collaboration and study trips. Also, *Artists in Residence* programmes would enable artists to work for a specified period of time on creating works in close liaison with local experts in the fields of horticulture and landscape architecture.



Included in the 2018 pilot project in Mariestad were a number of commissioned works. As a direct consequence of the fact that the municipality forms part of one of the world's model areas for sustainable development - the Lake Vänern Archipelago and Mount Kinnekulle Biosphere Reserve - these commissions were to be created exclusively from natural materials.

The project also embraced a temporary outdoor exhibition on the banks of the River Tidan and a number of workshops, where invited artists worked as co-creators together with children and young people. Jette Mellgren produced her *Bäcken Shelter* using willow branches. The same material was also chosen by Ninette Koning, whose oversized lifebuoy, *Save the Nature*, proved so popular that it was literally worn out.

Jenni Ward's *Umbel*, with its ceramic flowers on metal stalks, took shape in the University Park, and among the Art Walk's installations were creations such as *Utsiktsfönster*, *Mariestad's Meteor*, *Ortslöjd* and *Knopp & Topptälj*.



'Chrysalis is a sculpture or a building, a creature, a nest, a spirit or a temple. Observers may experience it as a faceless being or a quiescent insect pupa,' explains the artist Ulrika Jansson, whose work now stands beside the harbour in Mariestad. Inside the sculpture ambient noise from outside is reduced and nests for pollinating insects are integrated into the work, reminding us to lend a helping hand to all the many living things in our surroundings on which we are ultimately dependent.





A NEW APPROACH TO DEFINING PUBLIC ART – SITE-SPECIFIC AND SUSTAINABLY PRODUCED

The basics that define the project became clear at an early stage. In order to engage as many people as possible, works were to have close links with their setting. They were also to illustrate sustainable values, with natural materials, vegetation and the year's changing seasons serving as key ingredients in their design. It was hoped that the project would also serve as a learning process, demonstrating the practical challenges of working with fragile, living materials.

Sustainability was also to include interaction and co-creation. Values here are created through new forms of interaction in a process founded on openness and mutual trust - partly between the artists themselves, but primarily with the public, who will then be able to enjoy the works created, witness how they change over time and, it is to be hoped, find the inspiration to embark on their own creative projects in their gardens, in communal courtyards and on their balconies.

THE SELECTION PROCESS

– THREE COUNTRIES, THREE METHODS

It soon became evident that the preconditions for the project differed so significantly between the three participating countries that there was little likelihood of implementing a common selection process. For historical reasons artists in Lithuania had only limited experience of working creatively with public art of the kind that the project entailed. In the Netherlands the project was seen chiefly as an opportunity for individual artistic expression, while here in Sweden we chose to focus instead on the observer's perspective.

Our Swedish approach was to initiate an open tender procedure via numerous channels. This generated nationwide interest from some 30 artists, all of whom were fully aware of the ambition to explore the potential of collaboration with principals, craftsmen and women, fellow artists and – not least – the general public, with the aim of finding solutions that could become more or less permanent fixtures in our public spaces.

In the Netherlands the focus was very much in line with previous projects for temporary installations, some of which were intended to be on public display for just a few days. Here it was mostly art students who were chosen to participate, as it was felt that they would derive the greatest benefit from the collaborative process. That said, however, the choice fell not on budding young talents, but rather more experienced students, who have focused on telling the story of the site where their works are shown.

In contrast, Ukmergė in Lithuania elected to give well-established local artists the chance to show what they could do. The selection process made clear that some form of previous experience of land art projects was desirable, as well as a willingness to engage in an international exchange of experiences. A knowledge of English was also important in order to facilitate communication within the project.



During the activity week on the Dutch island of Terschelling the Swedish participants in the project, Ulrika Jansson and Jonas Liveröd, created a work they call *The Vessel*.



PROJECT TIMELINE 2018-2021



MARCH 2017

Initial thoughts about the project

JULY-OCTOBER 2017

Contacts established with the
University of Skövde, Sense of Place
and Ukmergė

JULY 2018

Application approved

DECEMBER 2018 TO DATE

Art Walk along the River Tidan

JANUARY 2019

Initial meeting between the three
countries

JUNE 2019

Social media launch

JUNE 2019

Artists in Residence,
Terschelling

SEPTEMBER 2019

Artists in Residence,
Mariestad

MARCH 2021 (DIGITAL)

Artists in Residence,
Ukmergė

APRIL 2021

Concluding conference

APRIL-JUNE 2021

Summation of experiences

There has also been an ongoing exchange of knowledge and experience throughout the duration of the project.



A sense of Terschelling: *Floating Island* (above and right) was created on the Dutch island of Terschelling by Cora Bosch and Jack Visser.

Vaidas Ramoška and Andrius Janulis chose to call the work they produced there *The Time* (see also previous spread).





ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE – COLLABORATION IN PRACTICE

Three residential weeks have been held during the course of the project, enabling artists from all three countries to visit one another in order to collaborate on various projects, exchange ideas and seek and share inspiration.

Parallel with this there have also been study visits, where the partner organisations have met not only one another, but also the artists involved. This has resulted in cross-border learning and fostered a deeper understanding among different professions.

The first residential week took place in the Netherlands in the summer of 2019 in conjunction with the Oerol Festival on the Frisian island of Terschelling, where the relationship between land and the tidal sea was expressed through the medium of various land art installations.

ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE – SWEDEN'S TURN AS HOST

Mariestad hosted the second residential week in September 2019. Study visits and guided tours gave artists a brief insight into the soul of the local community so that they could better appreciate the importance of the town's location on the shores of Sweden's largest lake.

Here the process gained an extra dimension through a firm focus on gardens and horticulture. A major cultural symposium was also arranged, giving participants – business leaders, politicians and cultural workers from many different sectors – the opportunity to acquaint themselves with other *Creative Europe projects*, and listen to lectures and panel discussions.

A new approach was taken with the presentation of a couple of five-metre high statues in corten steel that were already standing at Sense of Place in the Netherlands. In Mariestad these took the form of a virtual exhibition, which could be enjoyed in the University Park by everyone with a smartphone.

Travel restrictions meant that a remote-managed solution had to be found for Vaidas Ramoška's work *Houses on a Stone*, with the little sculpted houses being put in place with help from local craftsmen and women. The stone that was chosen was placed between three oak saplings, planted by participating artists from the various countries under the leadership of Simon Irvine, who has achieved international renown through his work with the gardens at Läckö Castle. The work also included a workshop, based on instructions provided in the form of a poem.



Interpretations of Mariestad. The three works are *Mariestad Totem* by Jonas Liveröd (in the guest marina), *Houses on a Stone* by Vaidas Ramoška (adjacent to Leksbergsvägen) and *Waiting for High Tide* by Jan Ketelaar, which was exhibited virtually.



Tones of Ukmergė. Above: *City of Percussion* by Andrius Janulis in Ukmergė city centre.

Far left: *Howling* by Jack Visser – a long spiral of corten steel that visitors themselves can step inside. The spiral shape is reminiscent of a fern leaf that unfolds in the spring (see also opposite page).

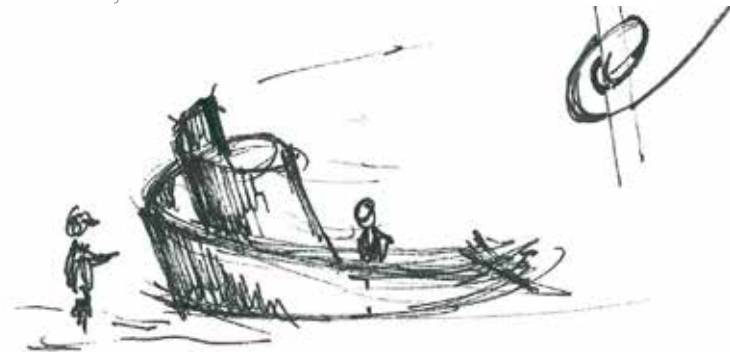
Left: Ulrika Jansson's proposal, with the working title of *A New Ritual for the Šventoji River*, is an invocation of Upinis, guardian spirit of flowing waters in Lithuanian folklore, and is intended to be placed in the middle of the river channel.

ARTISTS IN RESIDENCE AS A DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

Inevitably the corona pandemic has upset certain of our plans, so the third residential week in Ukmergė had to be rescheduled for March 2021, when it was conducted via the internet. Prior to this, however, in an attempt to bridge the physical divide by conveying the essence and character of Ukmergė, the artists received boxes through the post filled with site-specific objects specially selected to appeal to all the senses.

Lectures were held online and the artists worked with digital sketches and virtual reality solutions on the theme of *Sounds of Nature*. It was possible, however, to complete some of the sub-projects in physical form. One such example was *City of Percussion*, Andrius Janulis's installations of musical drainpipes at several sites in the city.

While it was disappointing not to be able to meet face to face around completed works of art, this solution was a considerably better alternative than cancelling the event altogether.



LAND ART AS AN ENGINE OF DEVELOPMENT

The university's participation, both through lectures and research activities, enriched the project with an academic perspective. Lars Vipsjö, a senior lecturer in Media Arts, Aesthetics and Narration at the University of Skövde, is project manager for Cultural Heritage and Gaming Technology in Skaraborg, a project that combines artistic strategies with the potentiality to develop tourist destinations and cultural heritage through site-specific art, storytelling and digital tools. Lars has generously shared his experiences in this field through lectures and workshops in connection with the residential weeks, to show how digital media can be used to engage people in new ways. His report, Digital Site-Specific Narration - Alchemy or Tool? can be downloaded from the University of Skövde's homepage, www.his.se.

Lotten Svensson, a senior lecturer in Production Technology has produced the report *Bilden av en plats* ('The Image of a Place'), which shows how culture in its various forms can be combined with entrepreneurship to promote rural development. One of her conclusions is that interest can be stimulated by land art works that consist partly of changeable and corruptible (i.e. short-lived) materials, which can spark curiosity and a desire to revisit the area over time to witness the changes that are taking place.

Lars's experience of international research applications in the fields of rural development, trade and entrepreneurship were of great benefit to the implementation of the project, as were Lotten's well-established contacts in Lithuania. Representatives of the university have also served as a link between the various parties and facilitated collaboration by providing solutions to numerous practical issues.



Above: An illustration from Lars Vipsjö's series of children's books, *Kiras och Luppes Bestiarium: KLUB* ("Kira's and Luppe's Bestiary": *KLUB*), which can be seen as a hybrid of picture book and comic in digital form.

Far right: Some of the artworks in the pilot project conducted in Mariestad.

Right: Lotten Svensson's report reveals how cultural entrepreneurship can promote rural development.



Ny rapport om platsers utveckling på landsbygden

2019-10-24 10:00

Projektet CIV Season Art Gardening går in på sitt tredje och sista år. Samtidigt, landskaparkitektur och trädgårdskonst för att placera i det offentliga rummet med hjälp av lokala konstnärer. Som en del i projektet kommer nu Lotten Svensson från Högskolan i Skövde med en rapport om utvärderingen av kulturella uttryck och landsmärken på landsbygden.



THE FUTURE OF ART GARDENING

Summarising the project with a final digital conference in late April 2021, it is clear that almost all of the sub-goals formulated when the application was made have, indeed, been achieved. Where we may yet have fallen short of our ambitions, this is due mainly to changed circumstances and the fact that the needs, too, have changed during the course of the project.

Both the project owners and the artists who have participated see great values in what the project has taught us about creative collaborations across national borders and between disciplines. The language barriers have not been insuperable, valuable new contacts have been established, and the exchange of ideas has been enriching and inspiring.

We have also learned a great deal about what works in practice and which aspects perhaps deserve a little more thought. For example, how accessible should the artworks be and how short-lived should they be in their natural settings? The repercussions of the pandemic have also accelerated the development of new, virtual and maybe even more interactive ways of experiencing art on its own terms.

Public reaction to the results of the project has been predominantly positive in all three countries. Workshops and art walks have been conducted, lectures held, and the artworks that have been created have, to a great degree, reached - and engaged - those who have come into contact with them. There have been many words of encouragement and few expressions of indignation.

More important still, it would seem that one of our original hopes is within reach - to inspire others to take their own initiatives in this area. Various groups who share an interest for the form and content of public spaces are now seeking to collaborate around new projects. And maybe, maybe ... we will see more and more private gardens come alive with artworks, small and large, that are in harmony with their natural surroundings.



Public art that is close to nature does not have to be created by professional artists in order to fulfil an important role. For evidence of that, one need look no further than to these highly imaginative insect hotels created by enthusiastic pre-schoolers in Mariestad.

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS

Sweden::

Ulrika Jansson seeks to create an awareness around today's threats to the environment by exploring how we humans interact with ecology and culture. With her sculptures, sketches, videos, mobile media and installations Ulrika has taken part in exhibitions in a number of countries.

Jonas Liveröd's artistic activities extend across a broad spectrum of materials and media. He has received several awards and has had solo exhibitions in a number of countries.

Ulf Klarström is a musician and composer who explores how art and technology can be combined, chiefly in the form of interactive sound experiences.

Netherlands:

Cora Bosch, a student at the Art Academy Friesland, works with a wide variety of media from sketches to land art, but her passion is for sculpture, where she uses different materials to create contrasts between surface and content.

Jack Visser is an artist who enjoys experimenting with unconventional combinations of materials. Much of his work focuses on installations, where he seeks to share his fascination for nature and natural forces.

Joop Mulder, who passed away in the spring of 2021, was the driving force behind Sense of Place and the annual Oerol cultural festival on the Dutch island of Terschelling. Much of his work revolved around strengthening the bonds that hold local society together and creating awareness of the artistic values of rural environments.

Jan Ketelaar, poet and owner of a ceramic workshop in Drachten, also works with sculpture. Under the aegis of Sense of Place he created the five-metre high statues *Wachten op hoog water* ('Waiting for High Tide'), which in virtual form became part of the artists' residential week in Mariestad.

Lithuania:

Vaidas Ramoška is well-known in his home country and has created a number of monuments rooted in traditions of craftsmanship. He works in a variety of materials and seeks to use his art to tell stories and generate ideas rather than simply serving as a decorative element.

Andrius Janulis is a blacksmith and metal sculptor. He often works on a large scale and has taken part in a numerous exhibitions, including some in Sweden.

Česlovas Lukenskas is a pioneer of contemporary interdisciplinary art in Lithuania, whose paintings and sculptural installations have earned him a number of awards and paved the way for solo exhibitions in many parts of the world.



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