“Nature is the art of which we are a part”

A journey with Finnish artist Leena Valkeapää

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I have driven to Muonio, some 125 miles above the Arctic Circle in Finnish Lapland, for one purpose: To climb to the top of Olostunturi, or Olos Fell, and see The Shadows of the Wings, a large-scale environmental artwork in a wind-power park created by Leena Valkeapää. It is perhaps the most sprawling and remote art-in-the-landscape site in Finland, a country whose pantheistic roots in nature and the forest continues to shape its culture and to produce sui generis, land-based artworks.

It is mid-June, in the time of the midnight sun, so it won’t matter what time I decide to hike up the fell—there will always be enough light. Were it not for the continuous though hue-shifting daytime, many reindeer may not have been as visible on the road, possibly preventing collisions, a problem in Lapland. This far north—68 degrees north latitude—and at this time of the year—a week before Juhannus, or mid-summer, a national holiday—the sun will slink towards the edge of the horizon, seemingly hang suspended, then swoop back up again in its circular journey around the sky.

Approaching Muonio on the 140-mile road from Rovaniemi, the modern and touristy hub of Lapland province, I spot the five wind turbine towers of Olos Fell commanding the barren crags above the spruce line. I am not sure exactly what the artwork is composed of or how accessible it is. I only know that it consists of rocks and stones in cairns and lines and that it is altogether about a mile in length. I have seen a few pictures, yet none could capture the context and whole piece.

But I was drawn to what Valkeapää (then Leena Ikonen), a notable Lapland-based environmental artist whose work I had also seen in her native Turku, a major southern port city, wrote about the project (in Finnish, Siiven Varjot) after she completed it in 1999: “I work in a region that lies between the landscape of men and the landscape of the wilderness…I respect the history of the place by keeping my signs soft--I wish to borrow this space for a moment, understanding that time has run before me and will continue to run after I am gone.”

Saunavene. 1998, Kätkäsuvanto, Muonio © Leena Valkepeää

Muonio ("The Pearl of Lapland") is unremarkable, except as the "last outpost before the Lappish fells," according to local literature. Fells are bald, rocky hills that rise out of the boreal forest or tundra; they are the highest points of Finland. From here, you can cross a bridge over the river to Sweden. An old wooden church, dating to 1817, dominates the town; when retreating Nazis torched Muonio (along with other Lapland communities) during World War II, the church was spared. A modern town sprang up around it.

Siiven varjot. 1999, Olostunturi, Muonio. © Leena Valkepeää

The next morning—following a cathartic midnight-sun sauna at the Lomamaja Pekonen, or Pekonen Holiday Cottages--I drive the three miles to Olos. Not knowing the best way to reach the top of the 1,670-foot-high fell, I park behind the Lapland Hotel Olos and start hiking on ski and snowmobile trails. The hotel seems to be vacant now in the summer, awaiting winter sports tourists. As far as I can see, I'm alone. Dramatically sculptured white clouds drift against a stage-set blue backdrop. I'm up on top in less than an hour. It is a harsh, mostly barren landscape, with boulders, protruding lichen-covered rocks, and strewn, stubbly stones. The wind towers' propelling wings make sun-slashing shadows. There is a surpassing view--of Muonio, of surrounding spruce and birch forests, of the distant, snow-daubed fells of Pallas-Ylläs National Park. The wind sails and whistles; Snow Buntings, flashing white, flit and skitter.

I only gradually became aware of the art, the aestheticized landscape, everywhere, not quite hiding in plain sight.

With some planning, you can get in a vehicle (preferably a four-wheel drive) and visit the iconic monuments of Land Art in desolate, largely uninhabited regions of the American West—Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, by the Great Salt Lake in Utah; Walter De Maria's Lightning Field, in New Mexico; Michael Heizer's City in Nevada; Nancy Holt's Sun Tunnels, also in Utah, etc. Yet these are mostly large-scale earthworks that have been imposed onto, rather than complementing, the landscape: They are more on the land than part of the land (environmental art), more unnaturally sculptural than naturally sympathetic to space, place, or landscape—or "earth-sensitive."

"The development of Land Art in many ways mirrored the post-war evolution of eco-thought," writes critic Jeffrey Kastner in the book he co-edited, Land and Environmental Art. "The early wilderness-colonizing efforts of the first generation American Land Artists actually paralleled the ideas of conquest and exploitation that characterized the industrial era…The great earthmovers who worked to forcibly rearrange the stuff of the natural world in an effort to mediate our sensory relationship with the landscape were succeeded by artists who sought to change our emotional and spiritual relationship with it." (1)

This would characterize much of the environmental or landscape art in Finland, where it's called ympäristötaide, or "art of the surroundings." It reflects and poeticizes relationships between human culture and the culture of nature. (It is not often "ecological" in the sense of actually remedying damage, except to help heal the human/nature rift.) As critic John Grande writes in Balance: Art and Nature, this art provokes "a nature-specific dialogue that is interactive, rooted in actual experience in a given place and time, with nature the essential material and ingredient of the process…Above all, it displays a respect for our integral connectedness to the environment…[It]

reaffirms nature is the art of which we are a part." (2)

In Finland, such artwork is omnipresent and all-seasonal, both permanent and ephemeral. It has been inspirited with an archaic power and meaning because of people's atavistic closeness to nature, landscape, and myth, expressed through the pagan roots of the Kalevala, the national folk epic, and Finno-Ugric mythology. While Finns may be closer to their history as a "forest people" than most other Western countries, that is rapidly changing. Still, the forest spirits (metsähiisi), sacred groves (hiisi), and ceremonial stones (seita), animate spirit of place and artistic expression, often in surprising and mystifying ways. (In fact, Iron-Age hiisi and seita can still be found at certain sites.) (3)

"Even at the present time," points out Timo Jokela, a pioneer of environmental and community art in his native Lapland, "a work of art placed in the landscape challenges us to ponder who we are, where we belong, and what our place is in the great universal cycle." He goes on, "A forest is not only the wilds of nature but also a part of Finnish mythology and identity." (4)

Jokela's essays—like those included in the recent book the University of Lapland art professor co-edited, Art, Community and Environment: Educational Perspectives—serve as a guidepost for decoding the cultural meanings of art and the Northern environment. "How we understand the landscape in Lapland depends on whose descriptions and texts we are interpreting," he writes. "It is precisely the 'who' here that has become the crucial question in discussions of the esthetic aspects of art and nature that have taken place in post-modern discussions of nature." (5)

I'd like to think that Leena Valkeapää sought to find meaning in Lapland's landscape when she worked on the Olos Fell in the 1990s. She is from somewhere else. She was born in 1964 in the town of Mynämäki in southwest Finland, near Turku, and raised there. She attended art schools in Liminka and Turku, receiving her MFA in sculpture in 2004 from the University of Art and Design in Helsinki, where she is a PhD candidate in the art education department. After graduating, she moved to the North permanently to join her husband Oula Valkeapää, a Sámi (indigenous Laplander) reindeer herder, on his homestead in what she's called the "tundra wilderness" some 20 miles outside the Alpine-like Kilpisjärvi, the northwestern-most town in Finland.

(I had once driven to this supremely desolate—and spectacularly scenic—sub-Arctic village north of the massive, sacred Saana Fell, before I knew Leena lived here. I only knew it as the birthplace of Wimme Saari, the internationally known Sámi musician who performs joiks—traditional chant-like shamanic songs—with a techno-ambient beat.)

In the context of a "cultural history of nature," as University of Lapland social scientist Jarno Valkonen has put it, popular conceptions of Lapland have changed over the decades. What was once seen as a land of endless pristine forests and peatlands had become, by the 1950s, a land of inexhaustible natural resources, a vast repository of raw materials. That largely meant logging. Then it came to be seen as desolate, unproductive, with limited opportunities. More recently, with growing eco-consciousness, it has been seen as a polluted, vulnerable, threatened Arctic region, leading to forest protection. (6)

Now green energy—wind—has become another inexhaustible resource, and while it is not despoiling the land, per se, turbines are disrupting the view of the landscape. There are five 200-foot-high wind towers spread out across the top of Olos Fell, making up the Fortum-owned wind energy park, one of a half-dozen in Finland. Valkeapää lined the perimeter of the park with white and pink-hued rocks, ancient igneous granite as well as quartzite. At the foot of each tower is a cairn, each with different kinds of rocks, gathered up as a sort of marker, offering—or grave. Descending a different pathway than I'd come, I only gradually notice mounds of rocks at certain intervals along the trail; now I couldn't be certain if the mounds had been along other trails, so artfully did they blend into the terrain, or seem part of it, not placed there.

The rock installation was an ordered distillation, a subtle alteration, of the natural landscape, though the natural landscape was still all around you. The co-existence of the natural and human-made

mirrored the nature/culture duality of the wind park in general.

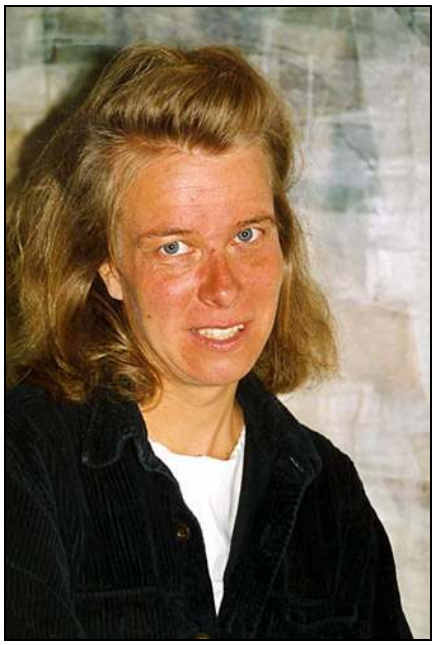
I would see other extensive stoneworks in remote Finnish Lapland, most notably those by Rovaniemi-based sculptor and environmental artist Kaija Kiuru in Pallas-Ylläs National Park. The largest, Cover of the Earth (Maan Kansi), is a landscaping project sponsored by the Finnish Road Administration. It took Kiuru three years, until 2003, to create the massive undulating patterns on roadside slopes with native stones, trees, and vegetation as well as sand and gravel. A year later, she built the nature installation Little Riverbed (Pikkukuru) in and along a streambed that runs near the park visitor center.

But to me, Valkeapää's Shadows of the Wings has more of a beguilingly primordial and ceremonial character. I recalled photographs I'd seen of 4,000-year-old stone rows in parts of Great Britain, like in Dartmoor, South Devon, and in Brittany, ancient monuments that had a religious or astronomical meaning. Their physical, ritualistic character was echoed in contemporary times by the likes of English land artist Richard Long, who made walk lines and stone lines and circles in the British countryside. (7)

Rocks and stones are not just of the earth; they represent the earth, the world itself. Most cultures have ascribed magical powers to them, as symbols of fertility, of beginning, of healing. In Finland, the pre-Christian seita were powerful, sacred or sacrificial stones, places of worship linking humans with the natural spirits. The Sámi considered rocks gods, and smeared them with fish oil or reindeer fat as offerings. They brought strength, luck, and help. (8)

In a series of e-mail exchanges, Valkeapää wrote about her years-long involvement with Olos Fell. She had been making paintings and wood reliefs whose abstract imagery was drawn from "northern landscapes," and exhibiting them in museums and galleries throughout Finland beginning in the late 1980s. Then she created temporary installations using thousands of stones, arranged in different ways.

Says Valkeapää: "But always in my mind is a question: Why do I make objects? Does the world really need new objects?" Soon, she saw environmental art as a solution: "[It] is part of large projects; it is not only art. My idea is avoid the objects and try to make harmony, so that the art is still there…I hope that the audience notices the surroundings. I hope that my art is not an object but a part of the entity." (9)


Leena Valkeapää

After the Olos Hotel was built in 1994, its owner asked Valkeapää to design a garden on the five-acre grounds, which at that time was mostly grass and sand. Working for the next two years, she landscaped using native materials--local rocks and plants, including many flowers. "It looked like nature itself," she says. "It was the first ecological garden in Lapland." But it was partially destroyed a few years later when the hotel added buildings.

By 1998, Valkeapää was working with the Kemijoki Co. to continue the rock garden idea as part of the wind power park it was building atop the fell. "My way of working is to use the material which the place is serving," she says. Normally, the stones would be removed for the building project, but in this case they were excavated and saved for her use. The artwork's title, The Shadows of the Wing, comes from the wind moving the towers' wings, and making shadows on he land.

"Olostunturi was a beautiful place to make art," explains Valkeapää. "That large landscape gives a dimension; all that humans are doing is small. I wanted my artwork to note that. I wanted to make space. After all I think that minimal way of art was a right solution—a 'soft sign' keeps the surroundings as a main point. In my purpose, the stone lines are a way of seeing."

In the couple years following her work in Olos Fell, Valkeapää completed other rock-centered artworks. Icy Veil (Jäähuntu), composed of steel, sculptured rock, and flood- lights, welcomes travelers to Turku on the busy Helsinki Road (about two hours away). The work, while functional, "is a gesture to nature—and to the environment modified to meet man's needs," writes art historian Satu Reinikka. (10) In this 1999 City of Turku project, Valkeapää repeated the shapes, angles, and seams of a rock-outcropped wall with a series of steel mesh structures, and placed lights inside. At night, especially, the play of light and shadow not only bring out the sculptured nature of the rock, but also illuminate the road, the sidewalk, and surrounding land.

Like the Olos rock installation, Icy Veil didn't need to be there. Yet, as a functional amenity, an aesthetic enhancement, it brought a "visual added value" to nature. It was art that made nature more like art. "In my environmental art, I want the audience to notice a landscape," Valkeapää says. "In my mind, artists need to be sensitive. Normally landscapes do not need art. Artists may need the landscape."

As part of a cultural exchange, she also constructed The Prairie Garden with two other artists—Kathryn Vigesaa-Lipke, from Vermont, and Ines Diederich, from Germany—on the lawn of the Griggs County Courthouse in Cooperstown, North Dakota, in 2000. The work, still blooming, was commissioned by the state arts council and a local gallery, and commemorates the area's first settlers. At that time, Valkeapää exhibited her work in the United States for the first time in several North Dakota museums and galleries, mostly documentation of previous stone installations.

What significance do stones, and working with stones, have to her? "That is too deep—that is something which needs to be in art without saying it," she answers.

These days, Valkeapää questions the idea of creating art in (Lapland) nature and the landscape altogether. With her husband Oula, she is living, as she says, "in a wilderness as part of a traditional Lappish (Sámi) lifestyle," in a wood-heated home, and helping to herd the family reindeer. "The lifestyle is a full-time life," she adds. "Only the daily routine exists." (Reindeer are semi-domesticated and roam freely on large fenced tracts of co-operatively owned land. They are calved in spring, earmarked, grazed, and then located, separated, and rounded up each winter, by ATV or snowmobile, for slaughter. Yes, you can find a wide variety of poro products and dishes at stores and restaurants.)

Valkeapää has also had her hands full of more urgent issues, like fighting—with the help of the Sámi Parliament of Finland and Finnish Association for Nature Conservation (or, SLL)—a road building company that had begun poisoning vegetation in order to forge a 30-mile road through their land and co-operative grazing area. Problem is, herbivorous reindeer feed on the shrubs, along with lichens and moss. "The earth here is one of the cleanest in Europe," she says. "I couldn't help being active."

Oula is the nephew of Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943-2001), the renowned Sámi joik singer, poet, and artist whose works, as Leena writes, "incorporate the Sámi traditions and northern landscape as an inherent part of his artistic production." Finding parallels to her own production—artwork incorporated into the cultural landscape from which it emerges—Leena began researching Nils-Aslak's poems for her doctoral studies (she spends part of the year in Helsinki). "My topics are wind, fire, time, reindeer, and human beings…and how the Samí live 'with' and 'in' nature," she says. Ongoing works involve text, video, photography, and ethnographic materials.

As University of Tromsø (Norway) Sámi studies scholar Harald Gaski has written of Nils-Aslak: "[He] did not write about nature, he wrote nature—someone who lives so close to nature as he did the greatest part of his life has no need to describe, he mediates directly." (11)

"In the Sámi tradition it has value to live without making any marks," Leena comments. "Here the landscape seems empty and clean, even though it has a long history. People know the thoroughfares and home places of their relatives, but in the landscape there are no monuments. I am interested in that tradition."

NOTES

1.) Kastner, Jeffrey and Brian Wallis, Eds. Land and Environmental Art (Phaidon Press: London and New York, 1998), preface.

2.) Grande, John. Balance: Art and Nature (Black Rose Books: Montreal, Canada, 2004).
3.) See: Ritva Kovalainen and Sanni Seppo, Tree People, Hiilinielu tuotanto (Helsinki, Finland) and Miellotar (Hämeenlinna, Finland),1997 (first ed.); 2006. (Roderick Fletcher, translator.)

4.) Jokela, Timo. "Close to Nature: Marks of the Forest," essay, Apr. 1, 2007. (Sent to author.)

5.) Jokela, Timo. "Wanderer in the Landscape: Reflections on the Relationship between Art and the Northern Environment," from Coutts, Glenn and Timo Jokela, Eds. Art, Community and Environment: Educational Perspectives (Intellect Books: Bristol, UK, 2010).

6.) Valkonen, Jarno. "Lapland Equals Nature." Framework: The Finnish Art Review, Focus: Lapland (special section). Helsinki, Finland, 1/2004.

7.) See: Lippard, Lucy. Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory (Pantheon Books: New York, 1983).

8.) Pennanen, Jukka and Klemetti Näkkäläjärvi, Eds. Siidastallan: From Lapp Communities to Modern Sámi Life (Inari Sámi Museum: Inari, Finland, 2002).

9.) Leena Valkeapää, e-mail interviews, March 2008—May 2010.

10.) Reinikka, Satu. Environmental Art Works in Turku: 14 Objects in the Cityscape, 1994-2000, (Wäinö Aaltonen Museum of Art, Turku, 2001).

11.) http://www.utexas.edu/courses/sami/diehtu/siida/reindeer/valk.htm

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