

Introduction: Creating Sustainability Portraits in the Arctic

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It is summer in Bodø. The sun shines, and around midnight it sets into the ocean for a few minutes before rising again, making sunset and sunrise a continuous spectacle. The ocean looks like glass, stretching out to the horizon and beyond, mirroring the sky in the pale blue atmosphere. Everything is calm. In the late afternoon, a fresh wind blows in from the sea. We sit outside in restaurants, enjoying the sunshine until the wind arrives, playfully sending napkins fluttering down the street. Blankets appear, people move indoors and half-empty wine glasses are left on tables in the breeze. Some go home, others move on and some head to our exhibition of *New Genre Art in the Arctic*, including *Sustainability Portraits*.

The exhibition is high up in Bodø Culture House, in a long, wide hall with large windows facing the sun. It's warm here, bathed in sunlight, and there's a warmth in the portraits that gaze back at us as part of the exhibition. We see them, and they see us. That's how it feels. There is warmth in this human encounter between portraits and audience, where the boundary

between who is who blurs, much like the Arctic, where the sea and sky merge on the horizon, where heaven and earth intertwine. The portraits serve as meeting places, where we are seen as the ones who see—a double witness, a witness to witnessing. A shared gaze sees us together, both seeing and being seen.

Many in the audience said that seeing these portraits felt like coming home, being recognised, belonging, being part of a community. The portraits reach out to us and draw us into a community of shared responsibility for our landscapes, our rivers, all living things and each other in a sustainable Arctic, where heaven and earth will continue to meet in years to come, granting freedom to future generations in the eternal turn of time.

This is the essence of *Sustainability Portraits*: a collective endeavour to build community and shape our shared world. Through the lens of art, we envision and articulate a sustainable realm where we honour each other's presence, celebrate diversity, live in peaceful coexistence

and engage in stewardship for our environment. Together, we craft an Arctic where these cherished values flourish and take root.

Bell hooks (2010) once wrote that nurturing our imaginations is one of the most profound acts of resistance against oppression. Community art and aesthetic expressions not only liberate our minds but also open doors to reflection, wonder and visions that transcend environmental and social injustices, colonising narratives and inequality by opening for social resilience and sustainability.

Imagination is the key to unlocking our full human potential, allowing us to co-create our world through art. It frees our social minds and enables us to engage with the present and future, unshackling us from dominant discourses of otherness and exploitation. Through art, we craft freedom, and in a startling double loop, we create the freedom to create, to imagine, to express ourselves freely.

Art connects us to the landscape, to materiality, to each other and to time itself. In art, we find our existence; we transcend the immediate, broaden our perspectives and journey into new realms, guided by indignation, inspiration, wonder and amazement. In the journey, we show who we are. We present ourselves as the journey; the journey is a portrait of us, of who we are and where we are on the move to. It is a portrait of us, people in the Arctic, people today, people building our present and future right now, in this very moment.

The book in your hands is the culmination of an extraordinary journey—an immersive exploration of sustainability through *Sustainability Portraits*. This unique venture weaves together

art, place and social responsibility to support sustainable development in the Arctic. Collaborative efforts between the Arctic University's Arctic Sustainable Art and Design network and the Children in the Arctic thematic networks have invigorated the project, funded by the Nordic Council of Ministers' Nordic Arctic Co-operation Programme, represented by the Nordic Institute in Greenland.

This project is part of a larger, pioneering initiative known as *New Genre Arctic Art Education (AAE)* (Jokela & Hiltunen, 2024; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2022; Jokela et al., 2024). Arctic Sustainable Art and Design network researchers, including Jokela et al. (2021), have expanded upon Suzanne Lacy's (1995) concept of 'new genre public art', which describes participatory, political and aesthetic events that resonate with the public. AAE takes this further by mobilising activism and artivism to overcome current challenges and support cultural and social strengths in the face of climate change. The strengths emerge from a diversity of cultural and social values and practices, encompassing the rights of Indigenous peoples, the rights of children and the Nordic values of equality, freedom and peaceful coexistence. AAE initiative is at the heart of these strengths as artists and art educators engage with local communities to foster a broader understanding of the Arctic through participatory and socially engaged art. In this movement, art educators play a crucial role in revitalising Arctic ecoculture, decolonising art and engaging art in promoting self-determination and building an inclusive Arctic culture of values (Jokela & Hiltunen, 2024; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2022; Berliner & Enghoff, 2019; Berliner & de Casas, 2024). Art education plays a critical role in shaping sustainable societies in the Arctic.

Sustainable Portraits project and its framework the AAE initiative is enriched by the collaboration of disciplines from two UArctic thematic networks. Within the Arctic Sustainable Art and Design network, partners have explored how art and design education can address local eco-cultures, cultural identity, and environmental politics. The aim is to promote cultural resilience and sustainability through art-based actions, empowering communities and revitalising cultures across the circumpolar North.

Children in the Arctic thematic network focusses on the psychosocial aspects of living in the Arctic, particularly for educationally and economically disadvantaged youth. While many children and young people thrive, a considerable number face social and mental challenges, experience feelings of being marginalised and suffer from low self-esteem, depression and loneliness. Relative poverty also plays a crucial role as it encompasses income disparities and unequal access to societal benefits, demonstrating that young people have varying levels of access to citizenship and thus, unequally distributed access to civil and social rights.

Despite these current challenges, there is a vibrant culture in the Arctic, characterised by high levels of commitment and creativity. A self-determined culture is emerging, rooted in the strengths of living cultures, including competences, mutual respect, security, trust and social support. Our project, *Sustainability Portraits*, includes both the challenges and the strengths and contribute to the development of viable cultures, enhancing social resilience and sustainability at the community level through psychosocial and aesthetic community art activities for children and young people.

The *Sustainability Portraits* began as an ambitious journey, focussed on engaging children and young people in the sustainable development of the Arctic through art and aesthetic processes. The goal was clear: to foster dialogue, participation and research-based knowledge on how art and education can pave the way for a sustainable future in the North.

During workshops, partners from Finland, Sweden, Norway and Greenland came together to use art as a medium to address the shared responsibility of ensuring sustainability in the Arctic. This involved stewardship of the planet, people, prosperity and partnerships. Each workshop culminated in a vibrant community event and exhibition, showcasing the participants' works locally and at universities, as well as in joint exhibitions in Umeå, Karasjok, Bodø and Rovaniemi.

Together with young participants from partnership locations, we embarked on a mission to use art and aesthetic expressions to create environmental, social and cultural self-portraits. These sustainability portraits focussed on expressing the 'environmental me/us', the 'cultural me/us', the 'social me/us' and the 'livelihood me/us'. The central question was this: who are we in this world, and how can we contribute to shaping the present and future of the Arctic?

This shared journey encouraged participants to reflect on their place in history, their locality, family, community and environment. Each participant created a self-portrait that highlighted connections to other people, the land, the sea, living nature and ultimately, the Arctic. It was a profound exploration of identity and contributions to sustainability,

emphasising our agencies as active and responsible members of our local communities and society. The key focus is on connectedness—how young people position themselves within the larger picture and how they can impact their livelihoods and their social, cultural and environmental contexts. Through artistic expression, we forged innovative ways to engage with the material world and to create new imagery of life in the Arctic. The art project opened doors for all young people to engage in expressions that were visual, engaging, playful and full of visions of a sustainable future.

This publication is divided into three parts. The first section delves into the project's foundations. Peter Berliner and Elena de Casas draw connections between the portraits and psychosocial well-being in relation to nature in Arctic areas. Timo Jokela and Mirja Hiltunen reflect on the use of portraits, self-portraits, photography and video in art. They examine the empowering potential of photography and the ways expanded contemporary art forms can create portraits that connect to ecocultural sustainability, thus supporting the sustainability transformation in the North and Arctic regions.

The second part showcases a collection of snapshots illustrating how artists, art educators, researchers and students have crafted sustainability portraits using various methods and emphases—from drawings to photos, videos, short films, digital installations and even AI. These visual essays highlight different facets of contemporary art and the technological possibilities for creating individual, collective and community-based sustainability portraits.

Peter Berliner, Elena de Casas and Sanne Broberg describe in their visual essay the sustainability portrait workshops for young people at Sámi Centre for Contemporary Art (Sámi Daiddaguoovddas) at Karasjok. There, portraits were made of the participants and of the local river with different media to connect identities, place and ecocultural issues. In their second visual essay Berliner and de Casas introduce how Sustainability Portraits are created with teachers in Greenland.

The sustainability portraits were explored in university courses in art and craft teacher education. Sara Rylander has taken students to learn digital drawing with self-portraits to dive into identity, belonging and cultural representations. Lotta Lundstedt challenged her students to create expressions of identity with clothing, while Annamari Manninen encouraged her students to try out AI image generation to create future imagery. These student groups shared their portraits across university borders to broaden perspectives. Arctic art and art education students Md Faysal Amin, Ville Lahtinen and Inka Matilainen developed in the project a portrait photography course for young people in preparatory education in Rovaniemi to promote well-being and teach new skills with art-based activities surrounding Arctic identities.

The sustainability portraits workshops also connected younger school pupils from Norway, Sweden and Finland. Karin Stoll, Wenche Sørmo and Mette Gårdvik present workshop activities with small island school pupils, including photography and postcard making. Annamari Manninen and Sara Rylander open the process of sustainability portrait postcard workshops that connected Norwegian pupils

to their peers in Finland and Sweden. Art education students Anniina Pennanen, Virve Pietilä and Kuutti Terävä describe then how the children’s postcards were exhibited at the Arctic Congress in Bodö and the exhibition visitors were invited to make their own Arctic Greetings -postcards in an open workshop. The congress visitors also participated in the collaborative video artwork “My Arctic is...” creating another kind of collective sustainability portrait. Sade Lylykoski explains how Vikajärvi school pupils continued after the postcards the portrayal of sustainable local lifestyles by creating short films under the guidance of art education students. This publication also presents examples from another project, *On the Frontline of the Climate Crisis*, that also involves young people processing the issues of a sustainable future with art-based activities and brings the created artworks to different events. Researcher Aki Lintumäki discusses the video art project portraying participants’ important places that was presented at the Aurora Future Event. Art education students Kanerva Kivistö and Sara Teperi created a performance and media artwork of climate emotions with a group of high school students for the Arctic Spirit Conference. In the last visual essay, artist and art educator Suvi Autio gives an example of a personal art project that interlays her self-portrait into a portrait of the forest to reflect relationships with nature.

In the third part, the authors summarise the results of *Sustainability Portraits*. Throughout the process, the project was monitored, reflected upon and evaluated using art-based action research methods. The core results and learning outcomes are presented in this publication to support their implementation and integration into the curricula

of participating universities, as well as in the joint education programmes of UArctic.

We wish you inspiring moments with this publication. May this reading experience be a journey that inspires and supports the development of your own sustainability portrait, both as an individual and as an expert in your field. ●

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CONCEPTUAL BASIS