

Sustainability Portraits: Intra-action Between Identities and Ecocultures in the Arctic

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In this chapter, we describe what Sustainability Portraits means from the perspective of art education as well as its connection to the New Genre Arctic Art Education (AAE) initiative (Jokela & Hiltunen, 2024; Jokela et al., 2024). The activities of Sustainability Portraits were initially intended to promote the goals of AAE through photography among young people in Northern and Arctic communities. However, Sustainability Portraits is not limited solely to photographs; the extensive digital arsenal of contemporary art is at its disposal, and among Indigenous peoples as well as many non-Indigenous groups in the North, handcrafted objects are seen as powerful identity symbols and ‘cultural self-portraits’. (Huhmarniemi & Jokela, 2020a). In another way, expressing oneself through objects such as accessories and clothes is also typical of our prevailing globalised culture.

Sustainability Portraits can be viewed more broadly as a depiction of culture as well as of

the relationships of individuals and communities to their own culture and environment: the ecoculture in which they live. In this sense, Sustainability Portraits aligns with the AAE agenda, as it focuses on social engagement activities and, specifically, on depicting peoples’ lives in the Arctic amidst rapid changes. This reveals how various forms of portrait in contemporary art can promote sustainable practices in the Arctic during the age of climate crisis.

The Many Forms of Portrait in Contemporary Art

Portraiture has a long history in the visual arts. It is generally defined to be an artistic representation of a person that aims to convey the subject’s appearance, personality, mood or status. Portraits can be created using various techniques, such as painting, drawing, photography and sculpture, but they typically emphasise the likeness of the subject, often focusing on facial features. In

simplified terms, it may be said that a person’s portrait has signified value, wealth or status, but when artists have depicted the less fortunate, the portrait has carried a message of acknowledging their worth. In the Northern and Arctic regions, portraits have often been associated with ethnography: the need to depict the peoples and ethnic groups of the North (Figure 1.).

In self-portraits, by contrast, artists depict themselves, aiming to express their own perception of their identity. In addition to capturing physical appearance, self-portraits often convey the artist’s identity, emotions or thoughts, offering the viewer a window into the artist’s inner world. Artists have used self-portraits to explore themes such as self-analysis, personal growth and societal roles with very different emphases. For example, Reidar Särestöniemi, an artist working in Finnish Lapland, painted lyrical and vividly colourful animal figures, identifying to endangered nature in his self-portraits (Ilvas, 2000), while his contemporary Kalervo Palsa depicted himself as distressed, often with a noose around his neck (Aarnio, 2002). Both addressed the sentiments typical of the Arctic (Figure 2.).

Portrait photography was initially seen as a direct extension of the tradition and conventions of the visual arts, but a significant shift occurred when advancements in photographic technology democratised the medium, making portraits—including self-portraits—accessible to almost everyone (Figure 3.). With the advent of digital photography and the ubiquitous camera phone, the selfie culture emerged. In the North, this is marked by Northern landscape ‘trophies’, a kind of ‘I am here’ self-portrait in scenic places in nature (Isomursu & Jokela, 2023).



Figure 1. Juho Kyyhkynen (1875–1909) depicted the people of Lapland in his paintings around the turn of the century, portraying the Sámi in the midst of nature with ethnographic precision in the descriptions of clothing and environment. The paintings are like educational posters, which he also created featuring the Sámi people. *Kota* (1909), oil painting, 65,5 x 51,5 cm. Finnish National Gallery / Hannu Pakanen.

Portraits and self-portraits are central to the widely recognised practice of therapeutic photography (Gibson, 2018, 2023) and especially to empowering photography, an approach that seeks to elevate, inspire and enhance the self-esteem and self-respect of the subject or the viewer (Savolainen, 2009). This approach is founded on the belief that photographs allow individuals to express themselves freely, outside societal norms and expectations. This can be particularly impactful for marginalised or otherwise disadvantaged communities and

their members. When working with girls and young women, this method is often associated with body positivity. Empowering photography is seen as promoting diverse representations of bodies as well as challenging traditional beauty standards and stereotypes related to ethnicity, gender and abilities. Empowering photography also emphasises the power of storytelling. These photographs often tell compelling stories that inspire others, whether they relate to personal triumph, activism or messages of self-love and acceptance (Figures 4.,9.). With its connections to photo therapy, empowering photography is often linked to individuals and personal matters, but it can also be social or political, deriving its impact from the sense that the subject feels seen and celebrated while encouraging the viewer to reflect on their own identity, agency and empowerment (Savolainen, 2009).

Empowering photography draws from photographic therapy, which uses photographs and the process of photography as an element of therapeutic work. Photo therapy employs images to explore, express and understand emotions, thoughts and experiences. This can occur through the patient's own photos or as part of photography projects guided by therapists. The goal of photo therapy is to support self-exploration, identity building and mental well-being. Images can bring forth memories, process traumatic experiences, explore relationships or strengthen a positive self-image. Viewing and analysing photos offers a visual channel through which difficult topics can be approached safely. Photo therapy can be helpful for many groups, including children, youth, adults and the elderly, and is particularly effective for those who struggle to verbalise their emotions and experiences (Gibson,



Figure 3. Selfie at Djupvatnet, Norway. Photo: Esa Pekka Isomursu, 2019.



Figure 2. Exhibition posters in the museum shop illustrate the different ways artists use self-portraits in their art. Left: Reidar Särestöniemi's oil painting *Kielto ja kaipaus* [Prohibition and Longing], 1967. Right: Kalervo Palsa's painting *Omakuva* [Self-Portrait], 1968.

2018, 2023). Both photographic therapy and empowering photography approaches have been applied to art, art education and creative tourism with an emphasis on community alongside individual work (Jokela et. al., 2020).

Digital technology has blurred the line between traditional photography and film/video and has democratised the sharing of their results. Video portraits are videos that focus on the portrayal of a subject, usually a person, in much the same way as traditional photographic portraits. Rather than being a still image, a video portrait shows a moving subject, allowing for the expression of dynamic embodies expressions, actions and the

surrounding environment. Video portraits are often used to express personality, emotions or an atmosphere that might not be conveyed in a static photograph as well as portraying cultural and ethnical identities.

As an example the *Stories for Climate Justice program*, produced by the Alaska Native Filmmakers Intensive, showcased films by young Indigenous filmmakers who explore how they witness and respond to the impacts of climate change on their homelands and communities. Each filmmaker addresses the connection between their personal history, the issues affecting their communities, and the intergenerational ties to place as they reflect



Figure 4. Mirja Hiltunen's community portrait series *Kävelykerroksia* [Walking Layers] (2017) is created by the artist, as photo-installation, but its individual components—photographs taken during hiking—can be seen as empowering photographs. Details from the series, Photo: Minna Saastamoinen, 2017 (left). Mirja Hiltunen, 2017 (right).

on their relationship with Alaska's lands and waters (Figure 5.) (Jokela & Salganek, 2023).

Combined with the social, political and environmental aims of empowering photography, video portraits and self-portraits offer an excellent tool to convey moods, emotions, thoughts and statements, which can be enhanced by the addition of sound. This format has gained popularity in social media, documentaries and



Figure 5. By centering Indigenous voices and intergenerational knowledge shared through oral history, short films could present an alternative to dominant narratives of climate change typically shown in mainstream media. Still from *My Someday*, shortfilm (2021) by Shak'shaani Éesh / Konrad Frank.

art projects, creating more captivating and humanised depictions of individuals. Video portraits are commonly featured in contemporary visual art installations, multimedia projects and projections (Figure 6.) (Lintumäki, 2023).

In our Sustainability Portraits project, which is implemented by not only art educators but also design and crafts educators, we also ask: How can a portrait be more than just an image? Can it be tangible and object-like as well? The answer, of course, is found in sculptural portraits, which have an even longer tradition than painted portraits in Western art. However, only contemporary visual art forms, such as installations, bring a new dimension to portraits. For a long time, time-space art, performances and installations have been characterised by the combination of diverse media, such as digital audio-visual components and physical-material objects, spaces and lighting.

Importantly, New Genre Arctic Art has broken away from the traditional, dualistic Western



Figure 6. The video installation made by young people from Finland, *Minun Paikkani – Mun Baiki – My Place*, was on display on a huge outdoor screen when Finland's main broadcasting company, YLE, organized Aurora - the Future Event a summit where experts and policy makers discussed climate change. The installation, through photos, videos and text, told about the young people's favorite places, and what they would like to keep in them. Photo: Aki Lintumäki, 2022.

legacy of separating art and craft. According to Härkönen et al. (2018) and Huhmarniemi and Jokela (2020), many artists from the region have incorporated traditional craft techniques into contemporary artistic expression. These collage-like works of contemporary art, which cross the boundaries between visual art, media and craft, can be viewed as self-portraits of the artists or portraits of groups, reflecting on individual, group or cultural identities in the North and the Arctic.

Public artworks have always contributed to the identity of places and the self-images of cities. Art that combines visual arts, crafts, and landscape architecture, while connecting northern eco-cultures and identities, plays a significant role when discussing revitalization, resilience, and sustainability in rural communities in the North. This kind of artwork can be seen as a self-portrait of the community, like Timo Jokela's art project *Ounas – Our Free River*. The foundation of the piece is the villagers' relationship, intra-action, with the key element of their ecoculture—the river—through which the village's identity has been formed. The implementation of the project together with the villagers and the river can also be seen as a revitalization that enhances resilience, the ability to act in situations of change. The villagers participated in many ways in creating the artwork: sharing stories, using their skills during its construction, and celebrating the result. (Figure 7).

Sustainability Portraits in the Context of Art Education

In general discussions on sustainability, it may be observed that Sustainability Portraits are multimedia visual presentations of a kind that

highlights the actions and achievements of individuals, groups or communities in relation to sustainability. It is easy to assume that the purpose of these portraits is to showcase how people contribute to environmental and societal well-being, often with the goal of inspiring or educating others about sustainable practices. In the context of economic thinking, this brings to mind corporate and organisational promotional videos and perhaps even so-called greenwashing. In the context of Arctic arts education, however, sustainability requires closer examination.

Education for sustainable development, sustainability education and education for sustainability transition have become established educational goals. The 2030 Agenda, adopted by United Nations (UN) member states in 2015, guides educational measures to promote sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). This action plan is international and politically binding on member states globally. It encompasses 17 broad Sustainable Development Goals, each with subgoals. These goals are closely interconnected, and one cannot be achieved at the expense of another. Their realisation requires active participation from governments, decision-makers and individual citizens. The Nordic countries share a consensus on sustainability goals as reflected in, for instance, the teacher guides of the Finnish National Agency for Education (OPH), which define sustainable development as a 'continuous, globally, regionally, and locally guided societal change that aims to ensure good living conditions for present and future generations' (OPH, n.d.).

These sustainability goals demand rethinking and reforming visual arts education and



Figure 7. Timo Jokela's artwork *The Ounas – Our Free River* designed and erected with the villagers is a portrait of the river and the village. The visual elements of the art piece, old photos, gears relate to the living with the river and texts inside the 'memory box', the stories told during the process and celebrations, refers to many meaningful aspects of the local ecoculture and traditions. The artwork as sustainability portrait is a statement in support of preserving the river's cleanliness in the face of threats from mining activities. Photos: Timo Jokela, 2024.

artist training. Proposals for more culturally sustainable approaches to arts education have emerged (Härkönen, 2021), with a focus on community and justice (Garber, 2004; Hiltunen, 2009; Jokela & Hiltunen, 2023). These research themes are included in UN policies and the Sustainable Development Goals outlined by UNESCO (2017). The 2030 Agenda has also been reviewed in international assessments of the state of arts education (Wagner et al., 2021).

It is important to note that while sustainability and sustainable development are interconnected concepts, they also differ. Sustainability refers to the ability of ecosystems, organisations or societies to function in a balanced and healthy state. Ecological, economic, social and cultural sustainabilities emphasise different perspectives. While sustainability can be viewed as a principle, sustainable development is its application in the context of human development and well-being.

The concepts and the discourse on sustainability and sustainable development have been critically examined in the Arctic context (Tennberg et al., 2019). In Arctic research, sustainability is often associated with the preservation of fragile ecosystems and communities, particularly those of Indigenous peoples (Gad et al., 2019). Sustainability may be linked to preservation goals, which, in turn, could imply freezing cultural change and diversity. As a result, the goal of sustainability could imply a future vision in which people cannot continue to pursue livelihoods that depend on the use of natural resources in their native lands. The concept of sustainable development, meanwhile, faces challenges in relation to Western dualistic thinking and belief in development. In the Arctic, the exploitation of natural resources

and wind energy in the name of sustainable development—‘green energy’—has drawn strong criticism, particularly from Indigenous communities and researchers (Kårtveit, 2021).

When examining sustainability from the perspective of art education, special attention should be paid to the young people in the region. Youth living in the Northern and Arctic regions encounter specific challenges related to the rapid changes occurring in the area. They experience the impacts of climate change more directly than their southern counterparts, as their environment is changing rapidly due to global warming and the colonial exploitation of natural resources, often tied to green economic strategies (Rinne et al., 2024). Youth have also been found to suffer from environmental and climate anxiety (Pihkala, 2022), which in turn facing the need for supporting well-being and faith for the future. This requires examining AAE and Sustainability Portrait activities from the perspective of resilience. However, resilience should not be understood as passive adaptation but rather as activities supporting young people’s capacity for action and self-direction to express their opinions and feelings when managing the current changes in the region (figure 8).

Ecosocial Civilisation and Ecocultural Sustainability

Huhmarniemi and Jokela (in press) have analysed the discourse surrounding sustainability orientation in arts education and identified two approaches that are particularly relevant in the context of Arctic sustainability education. One is the widely recognised concept of ecosocial civilisation in Western countries. The second, strongly linked to AAE, is ecocultural



Figure 8. Young people perform their ‘climate portraits’, thought and emotions, to international audience at the opening of Arctic Spirit congress in Korundi Art Museum. Solastalgia performance was facilitated by art education student Kanerva Kivistö and Sara Teperi. Photo: Aki Lintumäki, 2023.

sustainability as highlighted in the University of Lapland (UoL) and Arctic Sustainable Art and Design (ASAD) Thematic Network of University of the Arctic.

According to a survey by Huhmarniemi and Jokela (in press), an ecosocial civilization is generally defined by the connection and intertwining of social and ecological issues. The goals of ecosocial education include responsibility, compassion, global citizenship, moderation in consumption, community, interspecies interaction and the ability to imagine alternative futures. The general recommendations for art education derived from theories of ecosocial civilization emphasise multi-sensory experiences, community, embodiment, creativity and the process-oriented nature of art.

According to Huhmarniemi and Jokela (in press), all these objectives are also included in ecocultural sustainability and its related education, but they manifest with slightly different emphases. The authors argue that the main difference is that ecosocial civilization emphasises an educational-philosophical and planetary perspective, which weakly guides practical action in the specific conditions of the North and Arctic, whereas art education focusing on ecocultural sustainability has been developed with strong place-specific and situational connections to the unique conditions of the North (Huhmarniemi et al., 2021).

According Huhmarniemi and Jokela (in press) and Jokela and Hiltunen (2024), ecocultural sustainability is particularly relevant in visual arts education in Northern and Arctic regions, where

communities' lives are closely and intergenerationally tied to ecosystems through livelihoods and practices such as fishing, reindeer herding, berry picking and other cultural endeavours in which humans are connected to a multi-species community and environment. This approach has links to the land-based learning trend recognised in Indigenous cultural pedagogy (Wildcat et al., 2014). However, ecoculture can be recognised in all cultures that live in close proximity to nature as in the Nordic cultures in general.

Ecocultural sustainability emerges from the continuity of culture and a simultaneous assessment of the sustainability of traditions from different perspectives. The intentional renewal of ecocultural traditions to align with current values, research and conditions aims to achieve sustainability. This ecocultural sustainability involves both the continuity and evolution of values and practices in adapting to the changing environment and society. The ecocultural aspect is closely connected to mental well-being in the North, and there is evidence that disconnection from culture, tradition and local history can lead to apathy among individuals and communities. Ecocultural connectedness supports a sense of responsibility and the meaningfulness of one's actions as required by the sustainability transition. Ecocultural thinking in art education is local and planetary at the same time and both personal nature connectiveness and cultural activism can be practiced and expressed simultaneously by means of art (Jokela et. al, 2020).

Northern Ecocultures and the Four Pillars for Sustainability Portraits

When outlining the concept of Sustainability Portraits and its art-based activities, it is important to

closely examine how the four pillars—ecological, social, cultural and economic sustainability—intertwine with the lives of Northern and Arctic peoples. In Sustainability Portraits, art education is strongly connected to identities, which in turn can be approached from the perspectives of the four sustainability pillars.

First, from a Northern ecological perspective, ecocultural identity plays a significant role in shaping attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability transformation. People who understand and sense ecoculture as part of their identity often have a stronger motivation to act in ecologically friendly ways and to support sustainability initiatives. With this in mind, it is justified to link Sustainability Portrait activities to ecosystems and seasonal circles of the Northern nature. In that way, participants can create images and presentations highlighting the co-formation, intra-action, between the self, one's community and Northern ecocultures.

Second, social identity describes individuals' feeling of belonging to certain groups and communities. This relates to group dynamics, by which communities can shape sustainable practices and share common values. Communities with strong identities and social cohesion are better equipped to commit to shared sustainability goals, such as environmental protection, social justice, economic stability and, finally, sustainability transformation. This justifies designing Sustainability Portrait activities so that they are processes, with continuous connection to local communities, and are open to performative participation in many ways.

Third, cultural identity is in turn seen to reflect people's understanding of themselves and their communities as well as the values that

guide their behaviour and way of life. When sustainability is understood as individuals' and communities' ability to act, the sustainable solutions are often tied to cultural practises, values and identities. Recognising the entanglement of identity and ecoculture in sustainability efforts can enhance the acceptance of new solutions and their long-term impacts. The significance of the cultural aspect becomes increasingly emphasised when Sustainability Portraits are connected to both material; objects, clothes, building and spiritual stories and narrative and other elements important for peoples identities in the North and the Arctic.

Finally, individuals' and communities' economic identities influence how they approach sustainability. Art education is seen as an important component of sustainable transformation that aims to replace a nature-exploitative economy. Sustainability portraits created by means of con-

temporary art could play a role in demonstrating the potential of an ecoculture-based creative economy in the Arctic region (Jokela et al., 2022).

We see that sustainability portraits created by means of contemporary art have a diverse potential for achieving all four elements of sustainability. Sustainability Portraits offers a special channel for integrating sustainability objectives into the goals of education and promoting young people's well-being, both in educational institutions and directly in communities. ●

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Figure 9. The starting point for the museum pedagogical workshop was Reidar Särestöniemi's self-portraits, in which artist identifies himself with the forest, nature, and animals. In the workshop, *Be the Nature* self-portraits were created in the forest. Participant identifying herself as a guardian of the forest (left). Photo: Maria Huhmarniemi, 2020. Participant in of cut forest (right). Photo: Tanja Mäkitalo, 2020.

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IN PRACTICE