

Artikkeli III

Lintumäki, A. (2025). Promoting young people's ecosocial participation through socially engaged art and a new materialist approach. *Youth and Globalization*, 7(2), 284–312. <https://doi.org/10.1163/25895745-bja10054>



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Promoting Young People's Ecosocial Participation Through Socially Engaged Art and a New Materialist Approach

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Received 8 November 2025 | Accepted 10 November 2025 |

Published online 19 December 2025

Abstract

Climate change causes eco-anxiety among young people globally. New approaches are needed to address their well-being. This article discusses a socially engaged art process organized by the On the Frontline of the Climate Crisis research project and the Sosped Foundation in Tampere, Finland, during the summer of 2024. The art process utilizes an art-based action research methodology with reflective analysis, grounded in an ecocultural sustainability orientation. The article explores how socially engaged art and a new materialist approach can promote young people's ecosocial participation and support them in expressing and processing their eco-anxiety and other difficult eco-emotions. Observations are made about the development of these activities and their impacts, and the broader potential of socially engaged art is discussed. It is pointed out that intra-action with materials and various forms of participation can support young people in coping with difficult eco-emotions. A trusting environment requires effort from facilitators.

Keywords

eco-anxiety – ecosocial participation – ecocultural sustainability orientation – new materialism – socially engaged art – art-based action research – planetary youth research

1 Introduction

We live in an era of polycrisis, where climate change and other ecological issues are interconnected (Henig and Knight 2023; Lawrence et al. 2024). Several studies have shown that climate change evokes eco-anxiety, ecological grief, and other difficult eco-emotions among young people globally (Clayton et al. 2023a; Dooley et al. 2021; Hickman et al. 2021; Pihkala 2022; Pihkala et al. 2022; Vergunst et al. 2024). These emotions can exacerbate young people's mental health problems, impair their overall functional capacity, and diminish their hope for the future (UNDRR 2023).

From a social sustainability perspective, new approaches are needed to address the well-being of young people. Pihkala (2017) and Värri (2018) emphasize the importance of hope in alleviating eco-anxiety. Young people can foster hope within themselves and among others facing the climate crisis through community-based participation (Pihkala 2017). Societies have the responsibility to take young people's concerns seriously and act to enhance their well-being (Hickman 2020). Promoting young people's participation can support them in this process, as it strengthens their agency (Berg et al. 2024; Bower et al. 2023; Lintumäki and Kurikka 2024; Poikolainen et al. 2023).

Participation is the interaction between individuals, communities, and society where individuals can influence both personal and collective matters (Isola et al. 2017). It also involves a sense of belonging to communities and society, creating the foundation for participation (Salminen et al. 2021). Supporting people in seeing themselves as active participants in society is essential for promoting participation (Nousiainen and Leemann 2023). In this research, I approach participation from a social pedagogical perspective, combining the concepts of belonging and inclusion (Nivala and Rynänen 2024). Additionally, I expand the concept of participation to include ecosocial participation, intertwining the environmental and social realities (Wallin et al. 2024). Ecosocial participation refers to an individual's sense of belonging to the more-than-human world and involves responsible and sustainable action within multispecies communities (Keto et al. 2022).

The process model for understanding young people's eco-anxiety and ecological grief, created by Pihkala (2022), emphasizes the importance of action, distance (including self-care), and grieving in adapting to change and promoting personal climate resilience. From the perspective of a planetary youth research framework, art and education can contribute to this topic (Laine 2023). Promoting young people's participation is a key part of this process.

Art-based research, methods and art education have been widely used to foster young people's participation and to address eco-anxiety and other difficult eco-emotions (Bentz 2020; Berliner and de Casas 2024; Ennis and Tonkin 2018; Jokela et al. 2015; Lehtonen and Pihkala 2021; Tayne et al. 2020; Woodgate et al. 2023). Recently, the ecosocial approach and ecocultural sustainability orientation have begun to appear in research on young people (Foster 2017; Foster et al. 2022; Boutaybi et al. 2024; Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2022; Lasczik et al. 2021; Lintumäki 2023; Rinne et al. 2024; Salonen and Konkka 2015). The significance of these two approaches has particularly surfaced in Finnish art-based research and art education, highlighting the role of art and education in supporting the green transition and progressing toward a more sustainable future (Foster 2017; Huhmarniemi and Jokela 2025; Keto et al. 2022). Ecosocial education is grounded in theoretical thinking, while the ecocultural sustainability orientation draws from practice-based art education and art-based research (Foster et al. 2022; Huhmarniemi and Jokela 2025; Jokela 2016). These approaches are complementary and together support the development and promotion of ecosocial participation. Therefore, I explore their interrelations and relevance to ecosocial participation within the theoretical framework. This research is grounded in an ecocultural sustainability orientation, as it emphasizes the practical and material aspects of art.

In this article, I present a socially engaged art process organized by the On the Frontline of the Climate Crisis research project and the Sosped Foundation in Tampere, Finland, during the summer of 2024. The approach utilized an art-based action research methodology, conducted in collaboration with artist-researcher Aki Lintumäki and senior researcher Jarmo Rinne from the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences, and community coordinator Anna Purola from the Sosped Foundation's Culture House Virta. Furthermore, the project team included art education students Sara Teperi and Fanni Ahtola from the University of Lapland. Thirteen young people participated in the research.

During the research, the group created an installation titled *The Earth's Affliction* (*Maan vaiva*), which critiqued the relationship between humans and nature through the lens of the ecological crisis. The installation was part of *Muutos.art* (*Change.art*) demolition house, open from June 14 to August 30, 2024. The exhibition featured over 50 artworks, and altogether they attracted 25,940 visitors. Research data included documentary photographs of the process, a research diary, participant interviews, and a video recording of a final reflective discussion.

This research article explores the aforementioned process with a focus on the potential of art-based activities to alleviate young people's eco-anxiety and strengthen their ecosocial participation. The research applies the pedagogy of community-based art education (Hiltunen 2009), highlighting practices of socially engaged art (Jokela 2021) and a new materialist approach (Bennett 2010). More specifically, I ask how socially engaged art, and a new materialist approach can promote young people's ecosocial participation and support them in expressing and processing their eco-anxiety and other difficult eco-emotions. I position this research within the framework of planetary youth research (Laine 2023), as it inspires young people to collaboratively develop creative approaches to adapt and cope with the ecological crisis.

This article first outlines the theoretical framework and art-based concepts, then it presents the art-based action research methodology. It continues with analysis and discussion and ends with the conclusion.

2 Theoretical Framework and Art-Based Concepts

Ecosocial participation refers to an individual's perceived relationship with their environment, local social relationships, and opportunities to influence society (Wallin et al. 2024). Keto et al. (2022) describe it as a holistic, embodied, and sensory experience through which individuals can learn to see themselves as responsible and empathetic agents to their environment. This sense of belonging can foster ecological awareness and reduce the importance of ownership by shifting one's focus toward sharing and sustainable development (Salonen and Bardy 2015).

Ecosocial education aims to increase people's understanding of ecosocial participation and promote a sustainable way of life, including respect for nature and other species, prudent use of natural resources, and fostering an ecological economy (Salonen and Bardy 2015). It can create conditions for understanding and improving the interaction between humans and the multispecies world (Keto et al. 2022).

Art can enhance an individual's ecosocial participation by supporting the formation of a holistic, embodied relationship with the world (Keto et al. 2022). Art education can strengthen this process by fostering imagination of a better future and improving the community's understanding of sustainable development (Foster et al. 2022). Essential to reciprocal multispecies interaction is recognizing individual otherness without valuation or control (Keto et al. 2022). Art reveals aspects of the world that cannot be made visible or tangible through other means (Foster et al. 2022).

The pedagogy of community-based art education (Hiltunen 2009) provides a practical perspective for studying young people's ecosocial participation. It intertwines place-based orientation, socially engaged art, and new materialist understandings of matter's agency (Huhmarniemi et al. 2021; Hiltunen 2009; Jokela and Hiltunen 2023). Socially engaged art promotes social change within the community and empowers its members to enhance their participation through an art-based process (Hiltunen 2009; Lacy 1995; Lehtikoinen and Siljamäki 2023). In the art-based new materialist approach, material is regarded as an active agent in the artistic process (Kontturi 2010). This agency can also be understood as an interactive process that, alongside the human body, emphasizes other living organisms (non-human), spaces and places, sensations, experiences, and abstract entities (Fox and Alldred 2019).

Ecocultural sustainability orientation has been developed within art education research at the University of Lapland (Huhmarniemi and Jokela 2020, 2025; Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2021, 2022, 2025b). The orientation has been applied particularly in northern and Arctic regions, where it is connected to the ecosystems, place-based (Jokela 2016; Lippard 1997) art and education, and collective participation in promoting sustainability transformation (Huhmarniemi and Jokela 2025).

Within the ecocultural approach, the human being is seen as holistically connected to the natural environment, the cycle of the seasons, and culture (Huhmarniemi and Jokela 2025; Jokela et al. 2024a). According to Huhmarniemi and Jokela (2025), in this orientation, human life is understood as intra-action (Barad 2007) with all agents involved in culture. While eco-social education emphasizes interaction between humans and other species, it tends to exclude the agency of matter (Latour 2005) and the functional relationship between humans and inanimate matter (Bennett 2010; Keto et al. 2022). This perspective is, however, embedded in an ecocultural approach, where art and community also acknowledge the agency of materiality (Huhmarniemi and Jokela 2025). The ecocultural orientation promotes participation by emphasizing individuals' belonging as part of ecoculture.

The ecocultural sustainability orientation is connected to land-based education (Huhmarniemi and Jokela 2025; Wildcat et al. 2014). It emphasizes decolonial approaches in research and cultural revitalization, which considers the Arctic and northern knowledge system and situated knowing (Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2021, 2022). These approaches contribute to the framework of planetary youth research, which seeks connections with indigenous and decolonial research (Laine 2023).

Art education projects that support ecocultural resilience through place-based and community-driven practices, grounded in local knowledge and

shared resources, can promote sustainable development and the well-being of communities (Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2021). Therefore, I have applied community-based art education in my research, as it can be considered an art-based framework that promotes the individual's ecosocial participation through ecocultural intra-action.

3 Art-Based Action Research

The research is grounded in the art-based action research (ABAR) methodology, which has been developed within ecoculturally oriented art and art education projects at the University of Lapland (Hiltunen 2009; Jokela 2019; Jokela et al. 2015, 2019; Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2018; 2025c). The methodology has also been applied in youth research (Lintumäki 2023; Lintumäki and Korsström-Magga 2023; Lintumäki et al. 2022). ABAR brings together art-based research and a variety of action research approaches, emphasizing participation and an orientation towards social change (Bradbury 2015; Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2018; Leavy 2020). The approach can create ecoculturally based action knowledge from individual and social experiences, as well as phenomena rooted in embodied and tacit knowledge (Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2018, 2022).

In ABAR, participants are considered co-researchers and co-artists, encouraging their active involvement in every stage of the research process (Rinne et al. 2024). Action research should be dialectical and provide a multi-voiced interpretation of the research phenomenon (Heikkinen et al. 2023). The dialectical approach promotes the intersectionality of action research and is the most important measure of objectivity in research (Fine et al. 2021). In this research, adopting a dialectical and multi-voiced perspective entails examining the phenomenon through both the co-researchers' and the researchers' perspectives, actively integrating their voices in the analysis and interpretation of the data. These views resonate well with the framework of planetary youth research (Laine 2023).

According to Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018), ABAR is a cyclical process divided into four phases (Figure 1). In the first phase, the researcher explores the phenomenon, plans art-based action with the research group, and defines the aim and task of the research (Jokela 2021). The second and third phases often overlap. They involve artistic work and the creation of research data (Jokela 2019). In the fourth phase, the research data is analyzed, and the results are reported as development suggestions for the next research project (Jokela 2021; Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2018).

Art-Based Action Research (ABAR) Process			
Research Phases	Researcher's Role	Co-Researchers' Role	Process of Reflective Analysis
Research Organization	Formulates the research aim and questions. Schedules the project and identifies project partners and their roles. Begins taking notes and documentary photographs, continuing this throughout the process.	Comment on the research aim and questions. Share thoughts, expectations, and interests regarding the project	Preliminary identification of participants' interests and meanings, with initial observations of emerging emotional and meaning structures that inform subsequent phases.
Collaborative Planning	Facilitates planning, introduces artistic methods, and gathers participants' ideas.	Participate in planning and selecting artistic methods. Bring forward their ideas and needs.	Critical reflection on shared goals and methods. Expression of expectations, motivation, and possible concerns.
Art-based Action	Facilitates the artistic process and supports participants in their artistic work. Conducts interviews with participants.	Participate in artistic work and express their views and emotions. Contribute content to the artwork, and research data.	Observation and documentation of emotions and meanings during the process, with continuous reflection and interpretation of emerging themes.
Collaborative Reflection, Evaluation, and Reporting	Compiles the reflection data for reflective discussion. Facilitates the discussion. Writes an interpretative research article based on the process.	Share experiences and reflect on the process.	Deep analysis and co-construction of meanings, including synthesis of reflection analysis and relating interpretations to the research aims and context.

FIGURE 1 This research applied the ABAR model developed by Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2018; 2025c), through which the co-researchers' voices were expressed in organizing, planning, artistic work, the final artwork, and reflective discussion.
IMAGE: AKI LINTUMÄKI, 2025.

In ABAR, the method of analysis is reflective analysis, and it is conducted throughout the research process, bringing a developmental perspective to the research (Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2018). The researcher typically gathers reflective data at the end of the artistic process, which serves as the creative basis for the feedback discussion, where the data are interpreted together with co-researchers (Brinton Lykes and Scheib 2015; Jokela 2019). The reflective data present the artworks and recall the process. The reflective analysis method aims for a holistic interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon (Heikkinen et al. 2023; Jokela 2019). It can be described as a cyclical process (Figure 2). The analysis is grounded in the reflection and interpretation of the data collected with the co-researchers, as the researcher examines the artistic process through action, experiences, and observations (Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2018). The researcher also considers the co-researchers' experiences and reflective interpretations of the research process in relation to the research context and theoretical framework (Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2025a). The co-researchers' role is essential, as they are the key experts in the process. At the final stage of the analysis, the researcher first groups and then systematically categorizes their own interpretations and the co-researchers' reflections in relation to the theoretical framework, and synthesizes these into interpretations (Leavy 2022). These interpretations form

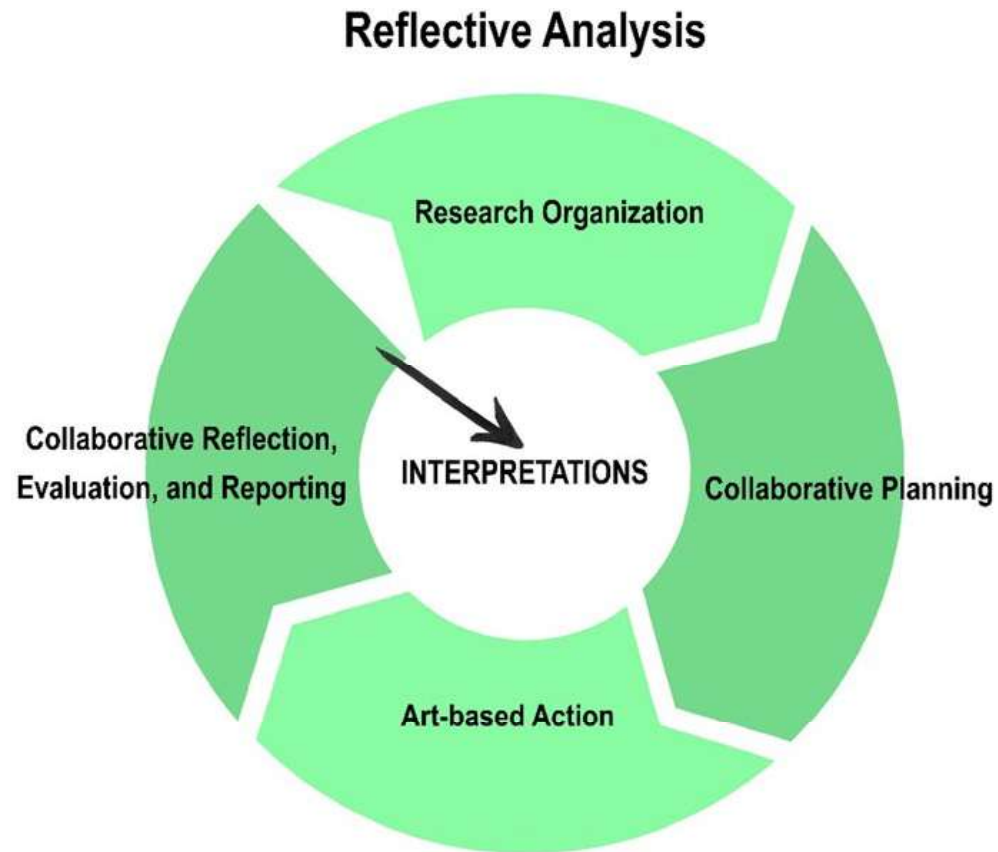


FIGURE 2 In the ABAR process, researchers and co-researchers develop interpretations collaboratively through reflective analysis.
IMAGE: AKI LINTUMÄKI, 2025.

the results of the research. In this research, the reflective data consist of my research diary and 200 documentary photographs, selected from a larger collection taken by the researchers during the research process (Appendix A). The photographs were not a primary object of analysis in this research, but taking and engaging with them supported the research process in multiple ways. The photographs made it easier to recall the moments and atmospheres of the artistic process. They complemented the information produced by the field notes (Pink 2015). The data also include eight participant interviews and a video recording of the final reflective discussion conducted at the end of the process. The participants' comments were collected either during the research process or in the final reflective discussion, and their context is clarified in the analysis.

The research team conducted the research between April and June 2024. Our artistic process consisted of four planning meetings and four construction days. Before the first meeting, I had reserved a space for the installation at the Muutos.art demolition house and planned the artwork's construction schedule



FIGURE 3 AND 4 The Muutos.art exhibition was constructed in an old office building.
PHOTOS: AKI LINTUMÄKI, 2024.

with the producer. I photographed and measured the space with Jarmo Rinne and the students. The demolition house's production schedules and artistic requirements influenced our research planning and implementation of the art process. Muutos.art explored the relationship between humans and the environment through sustainable development (Figures 3 and 4).

At the end of the artistic process, the researchers and the young people completed a 25-square-meter site-specific (Kwon 2002) installation titled *The Earth's Affliction* (*Maan vaiva*), which addressed the impacts of the climate crisis. The installation was created using recycled materials, consisting of three parts. The first part was a decaying sea filled with trash and pollutants. The second part was a melting iceberg, which also highlighted animal suffering. The third part was a forest made up of living plants, inanimate materials, and a video artwork presenting real deforestation. It was possible to move inside the artwork. The installation was presented on June 13 at the invitation opening of the Muutos.art project, which the group attended. The demolition house, located near the city center of Tampere, was open to the public from June 14 to August 30, 2024. According to Huhmarniemi and Jokela (2025), ecoculture can be recognized in cultures that live close to nature, such as Finnish culture. This perspective is reflected in the installation, which focused on identifying and raising awareness of global and local ecological challenges. Ecoculture is also connected to urban environments and places.

In ABAR and socially engaged art processes, artists and researchers often adopt multiple roles (Ansio et al. 2018; Jokela et al. 2015). In this research, the overlapping phases of the ABAR model (Figure 1) shaped these roles in practice.

Academic researchers guided the overall process, while the young people and students participated as co-researchers. I worked as the artistic director and researcher throughout the project. In addition, I facilitated the young people, conducted participatory observation, and worked as a photographer. Jarmo Rinne documented the process and conducted research interviews. He was also the primary material coordinator. Sara Teperi and Fanni Ahtola worked as artists and art educators in the project. Anna Purola, from Culture House Virta, recruited the young people for the project and worked as a facilitator for them throughout the art process. Additionally, Anna created the production plan with me. At the end of the research, the researchers organized a reflective discussion for the participants. The research involved young people aged 18–28 from Culture House Virta who were interested in art and had experienced difficult eco-emotions, as expressed during the planning phase. The participants represented different genders and diverse social backgrounds, spanning a broad age range. Young people cannot be considered a homogeneous group (Butti 2025), and various studies (Clayton et al. 2023b; Thomas et al. 2022; Veijonaho et al. 2023) have shown that different age groups experience the climate crisis in distinct ways. The group's diversity brought multiple perspectives to the artistic work and shared interpretations during the process. Research ethics were observed throughout the process. All participants gave informed consent. The research complied with the ethical guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) (Keiski et al. 2023). Participant anonymity and confidentiality were ensured.

4 Analysis and Discussion

In action research, situations are described as narratively progressing and goal-oriented to enable their interpretation (Heikkinen and Kaukko 2023). In this section, I describe and analyze the art-based process. The analysis focuses particularly on the planning and implementation of the artistic process and the reflections shared by the participants afterwards.

4.1 *Starting the Work*

On April 24, 2024, the researchers met the young people for the first time at Culture House Virta. During this meeting, we negotiated the research project's aim, the Muutos.art demolition house project requirements, and the young people's artistic and social ambitions. Facilitating a socially engaged art process requires the artist to possess empathy, sensitivity, and the ability to listen to participants (Hiltunen 2009). In promoting ecosocial participation, it is also important to make visible the participants' needs connected to local ways of

living (Wallin et al. 2024). One of the young people later reflected on our facilitation, “You just knew how to act appropriately at the Culture House.”

The researchers introduced the research and its aims to the participants and facilitated a brainstorming workshop, where the team asked them to create collages focusing on the installation’s theme, space, and materials. At this phase of the process, it was important to inspire the young people to express their opinions and emotions about the climate crisis from various perspectives, fostering a personal connection to the theme. This method is effective for understanding complex phenomena (Lintumäki 2023; Lintumäki and Kurikka 2024). In socially engaged art, the artist’s role is to create a context that fosters dialogue among participants and supports collaborative and creative participation (Kester 2004; Jokela et al. 2024). We also applied a personal approach to material planning, as the Muutos.art project required us to use as much recycled material as possible. My strong impression is that the method clarified the participants’ understanding of the project’s theme and materials. For example, some of them became highly excited about collecting materials. It was also evident that they were very motivated. One participant commented: “I have really strong feelings about it [the theme], and it affects me deeply.” In fact, all participants expressed concern about the climate crisis. They had experienced difficult eco-emotions, and some had also experienced eco-anxiety.

Based on my notes and the young people’s comments, I interpret that the researchers established the framework for an inspiring artistic process through socially engaged art and a new materialist approach in the first meeting. During the meeting, the researchers helped to foster the participants’ connection to the theme and materials of the installation, respected their views, and supported the promotion of their ecosocial participation. There were many examples of highly positive feedback. One of the participants said, “I was really excited, thinking this was a fantastic opportunity.” Another noted, “You took everyone’s ideas seriously.” A third added, “It was incredible that everyone’s ideas got to shine.” While some critical opinions may have remained unspoken, these comments resonate with the importance of listening to and amplifying young people’s voices, which is essential for promoting their participation and making their eco-emotions visible (Pihkala 2017; THL 2023).

4.2 *Planning the Installation*

We started the next meeting by reviewing the installation’s floor plan (Figure 5). The students had created it based on the young people’s collages and ideas. They wanted to create an artwork that takes a direct stand on climate change through dystopian horror scenarios. During this meeting, we

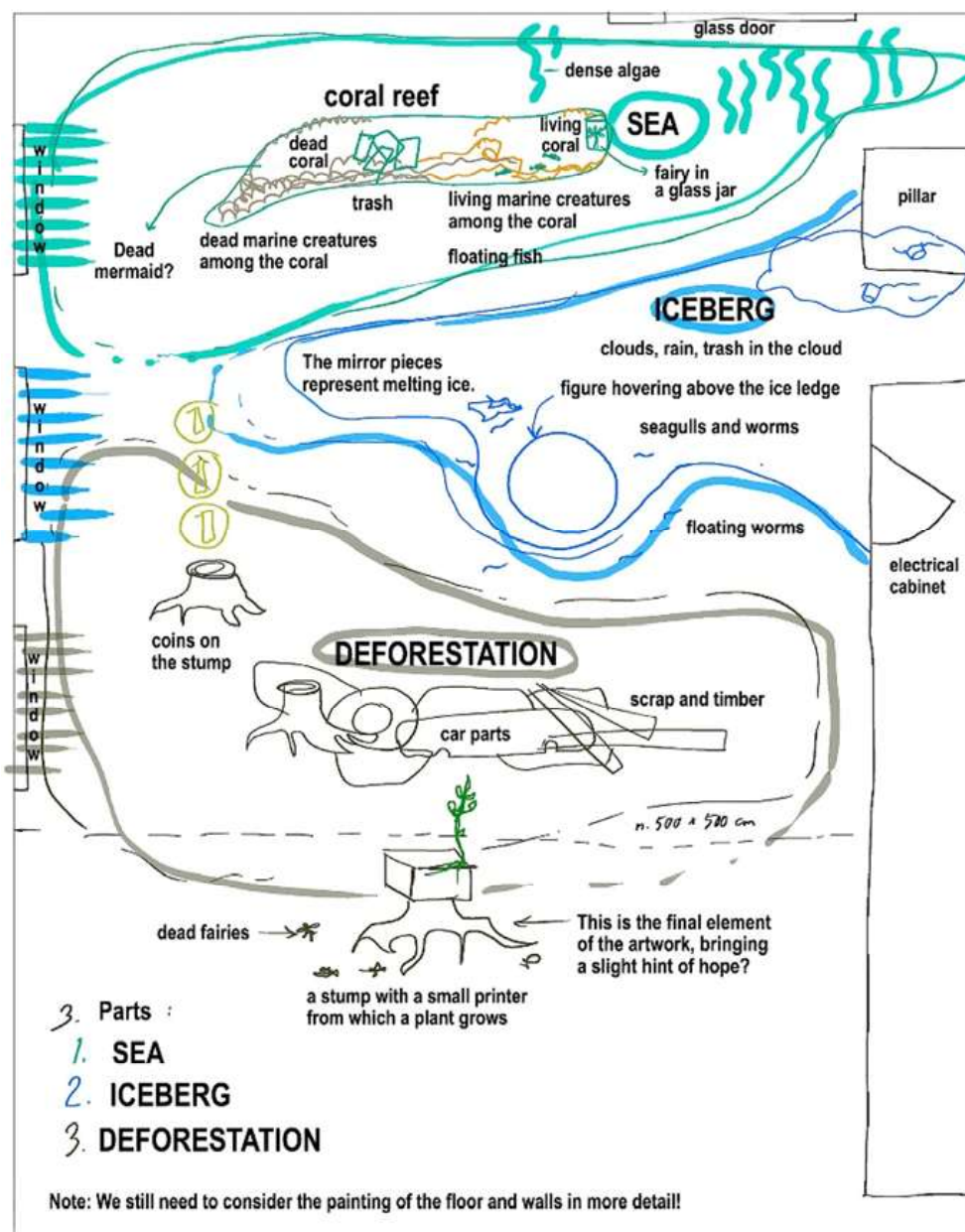


FIGURE 5 The young people's ideas were taken seriously during the installation planning.
PHOTO: SARA TEPERI AND AKI LINTUMÄKI, 2024.

decided the installation would consist of three parts. We also outlined a plan for collecting the materials. According to Huhmarniemi and Jokela (2020), in the northern ecocultural sustainability orientation, materials themselves carry local knowledge, which the artist can incorporate into the process. The materials and their selection also contribute to the artwork's storytelling

(Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2021). This approach shares similarities with psychotherapy practices in the use of symbolic objects (Katsi et al. 2024), which allow imaginative engagement with eco-emotions. Based on these views, the researchers decided that the participants would select materials personally meaningful to them, guiding our artistic work. One of the young people reflected on this decision, “I felt like I was actually contributing to this project, and I was a part of it. It was an empowering experience for me.” This comment highlighted how promoting ecosocial participation can support the recognition of a person’s community, its connections, and participation in the world (Keto et al. 2022). These relationships can be strengthened through socially engaged art, which creates a space for dialogue, community building, and participation (Lacy 1995; Helguera 2011). After this meeting, the researchers began receiving enthusiastic messages and questions from the young people about material choices via email and WhatsApp. I interpreted that the planning meeting deepened the young people’s connection to ecosocial participation, which was supported by socially engaged art practice and a new materialist approach.

We held the next planning meetings on consecutive days. During these sessions, we refined the artistic plan, collected materials for the installation, and explored the space where the artwork was to be built. The researchers aimed to make the relationship between space and materials more tangible for the young people within the artistic process (Figure 6). This method has been used in ecocultural place-based education and socially engaged art to illustrate the experiential relationship between people and place, as well as to promote individuals’ participation in their communities and local environments (Hiltunen 2009; Jokela and Hiltunen 2014; Jokela and Huhmarniemi 2025b; Lippard 1997). The young people felt their understanding of the project deepened during the meeting. One commented, “When we visited there and saw the space, and started looking at the materials, it immediately made the whole thing clearer.” Another agreed, “Once the actual measurements became clear, the work naturally became much easier to understand.” A third added, “Visiting the recycling center was also a good thing. Being there in person and getting to choose the materials really helped.”

According to Foster et al. (2022), art creates connections between humans and realities beyond the self, thereby strengthening individuals’ ecosocial participation. Based on the young people’s comments, I interpret that the socially engaged art strategy and a new materialist approach supported this process in collaboration with them during the meeting. Moreover, it initiated an intra-action (Barad 2007) within the group, in which human agency became entangled with space, non-human agents, and materials.



FIGURE 6 The search for recycled materials was a challenging and interesting process.
PHOTO: AKI LINTUMÄKI, 2024.

4.3 *Constructing the Installation*

We constructed the installations over four days during the first two weeks of June 2024. In artistic practice, the researchers applied a place-based socially engaged art approach rooted in a northern ecocultural sustainability orientation, where humans are seen as bodily and functionally entangled in ecocultural intra-actions, as part of a multispecies and material community (Barad 2007, 2011; Hiltunen 2009, 2024; Huhmarniemi and Jokela 2025; Jokela and Hiltunen 2024b). According to Nivala and Rynänen (2024), participation occurs in the relationship between the individual and the community when the individual experiences themselves as being and acting as part of the community. This approach aimed to deepen the young people's sense of participation towards ecosocial participation by fostering their communication with materials (Figure 7). This was also reflected in the young people's experiences. One participant commented, "When you have the material right in front of you, and I'm more of a spontaneous than a planning person, it often leads to new uses for materials that were originally intended for something



FIGURE 7 The young people participated actively in constructing the installation.
PHOTO: AKI LINTUMÄKI, 2024.

else.” Another said, “The material itself always gives ideas, that’s a fact in this kind of art thing, and it helps expand its intended use. The material greatly supported my participation.” A third participant described, “Due to time constraints, we followed the lead of the materials, but I still experienced it as very symbiotic and harmonious. It was a reciprocal relationship.” Ingold (2013) describes this relationship as a growth process, where a person engages with active materials, creating something new and learning from them. These young people’s reflections also resonate with Bennett’s (2010) view of material vitality, where materials can act and influence independently of humans. Overall, I observed that the participants felt the materials supported their participation during the artistic process.

The researchers fostered the young people’s personal connection to the materials from the very first meeting, facilitating their ability to connect their thinking to broader phenomena through this engagement (Figure 8). While constructing the installation, one participant brought stumps and small birches from their backyard, where a clear-cut area had been harvested. They also filmed footage from the area, which I edited into a video artwork as part of the installation. The participant commented, “The materials made it personal for me and added more meaning to it.” Through the materials, they expressed their difficult eco-emotions about the forest felling. The participant’s actions and comments revealed traits of planetary citizenship, which



FIGURE 8 The young people expressed their views on climate change through the materials.
PHOTO: AKI LINTUMÄKI, 2024.

Salonen et al. (2024) describe as a position that transcends human–nature boundaries and combines temporal, local, and ethical orientations in which individuals consider the consequences of their actions. Strengthening young people's participational connections to their environment and other species can enhance their engagement with the world and raise awareness of the need to act for nature and slow climate change (THL 2023). The previous example illustrates how socially engaged art helped the young people express their thoughts and emotions about the climate crisis through the destruction of their local environment.

Based on the participants' comments and my observations, I interpret that during the construction days, socially engaged art and a new materialist approach deepened the young people's personal connection to the materials and enabled intra-action between them and the materials. This supported them in expressing and processing their difficult eco-emotions and thereby promoted their ecosocial participation.

4.4 *Feelings and Reactions*

The young people were genuinely proud of themselves at the invitation opening of the Muutos.art demolition houses exhibition. One commented, "It

still hasn't really sunk in for me that we've actually created this massive installation together." Otherwise, they were quiet and partly confused by the big achievement and positive attention they received. According to Jokela (2019), ABAR emphasizes the evocativeness of art, aiming to evoke participants and the audience to social thinking and action. I interpreted the young people's silence as an indication of their evocativeness at the exhibition opening (Figures 9 and 10). This perspective aligns with the social change orientation of socially engaged art (Lacy 1995; Lehtikoinen and Siljamäki 2023). Participants could not share their feelings until a reflective discussion the following week.

During the reflective discussion, the participants described the installation as a form of activism that helped them express and process their eco-anxiety and other difficult eco-emotions. One of them commented, "In my opinion, this kind of collective action, especially in the context of activism, brings hope because activism is often a solitary activity." Another added, "The sense of community is essential, and the feeling that you're not fighting alone adds strength and endurance for continuing the struggle. It always brings hope." These reflections illustrate the positive significance of collective action in channeling difficult eco-emotions and fostering hope within their community (Schwartz et al. 2022). The participants' comments also suggest that art-based activities can become a form of activism for some individuals, creating space for empowerment and social emancipation (Hiltunen 2009). All the participants believed that the installation had the power to influence others and a wider society. One of them commented, "This really shows through art what we are aiming for, because in my opinion, for some people, words just don't get through." According to Nivala and Rynnänen (2013), promoting participation is not about encouraging obedience and compliance, but rather supporting individuals to grow into actors who can ask critical questions and courageously resist injustice.

During the discussion, many participants noted that the socially engaged art process had strengthened their self-esteem. One of them reflected, "It gave me a new kind of confidence in my work and skills." Another added, "It helped me make sense of my identity." A third concluded, "I now have a very clear vision, you always have to go big and take risks. Go big or go home." These comments reflect ecosocial participation, where a holistic experience of the self and one's environment is intertwined with critical social awareness, a sense of sustainable responsibility, and an expanding capacity for empathy on a planetary scale (Keto et al. 2022).

At the end of the discussion, the young people strongly emphasized that the facilitators' active role was essential to the project's success. Socially

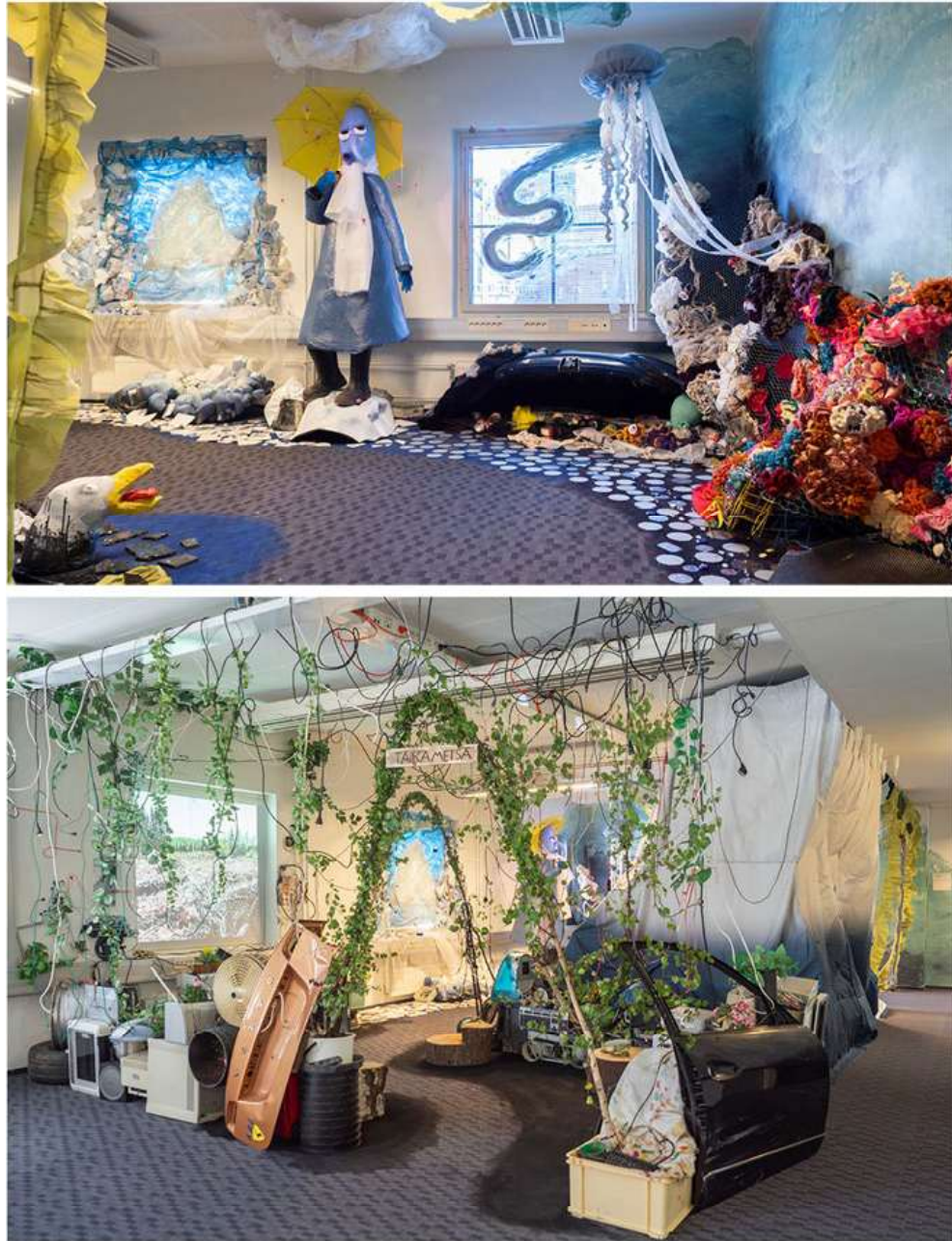


FIGURE 9 AND 10 The young people's installation received a lot of positive feedback from the audience.

PHOTOS: AKI LINTUMÄKI, 2024.

engaged art requires an artist to have an exploratory and curious mindset that supports participants' creativity and commitment to the project, notes Lehtikoinen and Siljamäki (2023). According to Huhmarniemi and Jokela

(2025), in art-based practices and art education grounded in an ecocultural sustainability orientation, the relationships and roles between the facilitator and group members are not predetermined but emerge through intra-action with the activity, place, community, and ecoculture. Based on the young people's feedback, the researchers managed to facilitate artistic work to make them feel equal and safe throughout the process. Several participants' comments support this observation. One of them noted, "Looking from the planning phase to the final outcome, I think the process was incredibly good. It went really seamlessly." Another added, "I had an experience of doing things together." I acknowledge that the previous interpretation would benefit from further research and possibly external evaluation. However, this process demonstrated that the researcher must have both artistic and production skills to complete the project on schedule. In addition, they must be sensitive to the young people and capable of guiding them as equal members within a professional artistic community.

5 Conclusion

In this research, an installation titled *The Earth's Affliction* (Maan vaiva) was created as part of the Muutos.art demolition house exhibition. Thirteen young people participated in the research. The researchers applied the pedagogy of community-based art education as the artistic approach of the process, emphasizing practices of socially engaged art and a new materialist approach. The research was conducted within the planetary youth research framework (Laine 2023) and was based on the methodology of art-based action research (ABAR).

The research was grounded in an ecocultural sustainability orientation and aimed to develop art-based activities that alleviate young people's eco-anxiety and strengthen their ecosocial participation. In this article, I asked how socially engaged art and a new materialist approach can promote young people's ecosocial participation and support them in expressing and processing their eco-anxiety and other difficult eco-emotions.

The reflective analysis of this research is based on interpretations of the art-based process. In the first meeting, the researchers established the framework for a potentially inspiring artistic process through socially engaged art and a new materialist approach. During the meeting, they helped to foster the participants' connection to the theme and materials of the installation, respected their views, and thereby supported the promotion of their ecosocial participation. In the subsequent planning meetings, the researchers promoted

the young people's ecosocial participation by fostering their personal connection to the materials through material choices and by familiarizing them with the space where the artwork was to be built. The construction of the installation deepened the young people's connection to the materials and enabled intra-action between them and the materials. In my interpretation, this new materialist approach supported the participants in expressing and processing their eco-anxiety and other difficult eco-emotions and thereby promoted their ecosocial participation. I also interpreted that socially engaged art can strengthen young people's self-esteem and encourage collective climate action. Furthermore, the researcher of the artistic process must possess the professional skills to create an equal, safe, and trusting environment that fosters hope and promotes young people's artistic expression.

In this article, I have explored the great potential of ecocultural sustainability-oriented socially engaged art and a new materialist approach. I argue that it is essential to further develop art-based co-research practices that empower young people to actively participate in building a more sustainable future. With over twenty years of experience in artistic work and especially socially engaged art, I entered academic research only a few years ago, which has brought new perspectives to my work. The process of writing this paper has also been a significant learning experience for me. For example, in future research, I intend to document more systematically many aspects of the ABAR process. In particular, the role of documentary photographs in shaping both the process and the analysis will require further attention. Much also remains open regarding how the participants' diverse backgrounds influenced their experiences and the impacts of the process. In future work, it would also be very interesting to analyze this kind of process with the help of Pihkala's Process Model of Eco-anxiety and Grief (2022). It seems that the ABAR process can enable participants to simultaneously engage with many dimensions of the Process Model: action, engagement with difficult eco-emotions such as grief and anger, and having a safe space to collectively experience care. Overall, I point out that amplifying young people's voices and addressing the ecological crisis through art and activism can enhance their hope and may strengthen their climate resilience. In this process, the facilitator acts as a central driver of the artistic work, guiding participants' creative and reflective activities. Broader and more intersectional research is necessary to deepen the understanding of how to support young people's well-being. Art may enhance young people's pride in their ecoculture and strengthen their experience of ecosocial participation.

Acknowledgements

The On the Frontline of the Climate Crisis research project is coordinated by Juvenia Youth Research and Development Unit at the South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences and the Degree Programme in Art Education at the University of Lapland. The project, funded by the Kone Foundation, studies and develops young people's climate activism and climate citizenship from 2022 to 2025. This research is part of Aki Lintumäki's doctoral thesis at the University of Lapland.

The Sosped Foundation is a Finnish non-governmental welfare organization that provides peer support and experiential knowledge-based services for individuals facing challenging life situations. Culture House Virta, located in Tampere, is one of the Sosped Foundation's operational units. I express my sincere gratitude to the young artists of Virta and community coordinator Anna Purola. I also wish to express my gratitude to the Upeart team and Muutos.art production for the fantastic opportunity to participate in the exhibition.

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Appendix A

The Use of Photographs in the Research and Analysis

During the research, 3,145 documentary photographs were taken, of which 200 were selected as reflective data. At the beginning, the research team agreed that the researchers would take photographs, allowing the co-researchers to focus on artistic work. The photographs supported the reflective analysis and made visible the experiential, affective, material, and spatial dimensions of the process. They were not analyzed as a separate visual dataset but were used to complement and deepen the reflective analysis. The researchers and co-researchers also examined the photographs together. The photographs deepened the discussion about the experiences and meanings of the process. The researchers used the photographs in data analysis alongside the research diary, interviews, and reflective discussions.