

## I will dye my hair for this - Failure in participatory art or emergent turn in play?

Vou mudar a cor do meu cabelo por causa disso - Fracasso na arte participativa ou reviravolta emergente no jogo?

Me teñiré el cabello por esto. ¿Fracaso en el arte participativo o un giro emergente en el juego?

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This visual essay presents an art-based playful intervention into place that did not go quite as planned. I, as a play designer, had planned a participatory light installation in the heritage surroundings as a serene and calm component of a small festival next to Raasepori castle ruins in Finland. I had prepared a designerly intervention (Sumartojo & Pink 2019) that sought to shift the ways one can feel in a specific locality and make the atmosphere. As Sumartojo & Pink suggest, the role of design is to create interventions that make possible the circumstances through which particular types of atmosphere might emerge, but alone it cannot predetermine or predict exactly what these atmospheres will be experientially (Sumartojo & Pink 2019, 95). I was dressed in an illuminated cape and had dyed my hair into bright turquoise colour in order to generate a mystical moment and an illusion that it actually could be the ghost of the river Raasepori who was distributing the lights. I aimed for tranquil ambience enabling introverted play: participants gazing quietly as the floating lights form shapes in the dawdlingly moving water, some just quietly directing them with provided sticks coated with fluorescent paint. As this circle of my art-based action research (Jokela 2019) shows, sometimes the outcome takes quite an alternative path than intended.

The Lights on Raasepori festival was part of European Union Interreg funded project which sought to find new audiences for eight ruined heritage sites in Finland and in Estonia. The project wanted to improve the visitor experience with both infrastructure improvements as well as bring new insight to these merely forgotten destinations. As a part of offering a new perception of the places a series of light festivals were organised. As all the sites in this project are remote and peripheral and therefore hard to reach, the organizing project partners (Humak University of Applied Sciences and Metsähallitus, state-owned enterprise which manages the site) expected up to 400 participants for this festival held in Raasepori, in the Southern Coastal area of Finland. As it started, more and more people started appearing and in the end it was estimated that the number of the audience was up to 4000-5000. The participants were mostly locals from surrounding areas (of which many said they had not visited the heritage area in decades) but the festival attracted attendants even from Helsinki, the capital area, approximately 100 km away.

The original aim for the activity I had planned was to reveal the narrative layer of the surrounding of the castle ruins of Raasepori and thus enable a novel, empathy-based relationship with the location. The main imaginary character of this endeavor was the

ghost of the river Raasepori who was leading participants in building floating participatory light art. As Mason (2018) suggests, affinities are charged with the energies of fascination, wondering and discordance (p. 54) and that was just what I wanted to create with this collaboration with people in a place of ruined castle surroundings and the enchanting atmosphere of dusking August night. As Matarasso (2019) states, the emergence of participatory art is still an unwritten chapter in the history of art (p.128).

In the planning phase, the aim was to create a serene, calm and peaceful atmosphere. As an artist I had an assumption of how the participants of this co-created art would behave, but as the visuals below tell, the 'homo ludens' (Huizinga 1949) took in and the shift in atmosphere happened. I had envisioned a slow-tempo side corner scene of a desolate festival, but in reality I was suddenly tightly squeezed with a huge crowd. Eager hands were ripping the lights from me. First, people followed my instructions and launched the lights into the river as intended. But suddenly it all reversed. Participants seemed to desire a more active, dynamic and playful atmosphere. The thing that triggered this might have been the distributed objects, the round floating lights that slowly changed color. As an object, they were smooth to touch, cute to look at and had almost some pet-like characteristic. The objects themselves invited participants into toy play. Like Heljakka (2013) proposes, people can play "with" or "at" the objects and relationships of the world, but they may also be "in" play. Play occurs in many different settings and involves many different kinds of objects. Or as Roos & Said (2016) suggest, objects by virtue of having a particular material instantiation and being accessible through all senses allow us to draw on many aspects of tap into our emotions and make us feel differently. This might explain why this playful emergence occurred. As Fink, Saine & Saine (1968) put it sharply, "play is finite creativity in the magic dimension of illusion" (p.28) and that magic dimension of the place was just the thing we were pursuing for. It just happened slightly differently than expected. The participants did not want to obey the action plan given, but allowed the tiny objects to lead them into corporal play.

The objective was to generate tactic and latent knowledge (Sanders & Stappers 2012, 67) and insights of the place by allowing participants to feel something touching and encourage their imagination. Based on thoughts of Mason (2018) I wanted to focus on sensations to take us beyond that somewhat limiting frame. This intertwines with the thoughts of Salami (2020) about sensuous knowledge of how when something is sensuous, it affects not only your senses but your entire being and potentially transforms your deepest thought patterns by affecting you entirely (p.14).

This is supported by the manifesto of Abramovic (2020) how we should trust the body more than the mind (p.111). So, I had no other choice than let the bodily sensations of the crowds alter the course of events and let the magic of play emerge. So, in the end, it seems that this art-based intervention got even more valuable after a kind of failure. As Schrag (2020) puts it: failures are vital for artists; they are the cracks that let in the light: they are opportunities!

As the overall aim of the project and this event was to offer opportunities for novel perception of place this playful, emergent turn seems most serendipitous. As I wanted to shake the dignified, stiff - and boring - notion of a heritage site, my original idea was actually only halfway there. Targeting for pious and poetical mood was not courageous and alternative enough: the participants were braver and relied on their bodily knowledge: the play objects felt too lovely to be cast into the cold stream. Fishing and swimming the lights out of the river, throwing them high towards the dark sky and to others and petting them like small creatures was rebellious and boisterous enough to factually make the playful turn happen in perception of this heritage place. The participants co-constructed the event and I was happy to see my role turn into facilitator and let the participatory art happen. The participants took the course of events into their own hands and created an even more playfully versatile piece of art than intended. My emotions rollercoasted from being optimistic to scared, from frustrated to disappointed and ending up into joy and admiration in how many ways these objects can be played with.

Afterwards, even years later, the participants have been asking when something similar will happen again. The atmosphere and emotions experienced during the event seem to have created lasting memories, empathy and attachment. It seems that now this heritage site has new friends with art-based play-escorted ties to it.

# Lights on Raasepori!

26.8.2017

*Suomi  
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AS A PART OF LIGHTS ON! PROJECT (FUNDED BY THE EU'S INTERREG CENTRAL BALTIC PROGRAMME) WHICH SOUGHT NEW WAYS TO BRING THE FORGOTTEN PAST ALIVE IN RUINED CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES, A LIGHT ART FESTIVAL WAS BEING ORGANISED IN AUGUST 2017 IN RAASEPORI, FINLAND.

ONE OF THE MANY ACTIVITIES OF THAT EVENT WAS A PARTICIPATORY STORY-BASED FLOATING LIGHT INSTALLATION.

IN THE PROGRAM THE PARTICIPANTS WERE INVITED TO THIS ACTIVITY LIKE THIS: "COME AND GET YOUR OWN FLOATING LIGHT FROM THE SPIRIT AND OF THE RAASEPORI RIVER - AND PLACE IT IN THE RIVER ALONG WITH YOUR NARRATIVES AND EXPERIENCES AT RAASEPORI CASTLE. LET IT FLOAT AND BECOME PART OF THE WEAVE OF STORIES FORMED ON THE CURRENT."

THIS VISUAL ESSAY REVEALS HOW THINGS FAILED, OR EMERGED.



EUROPEISKA UNIONEN  
Europeiska regionala utvecklingsfonden

**Interreg**  
Central Baltic





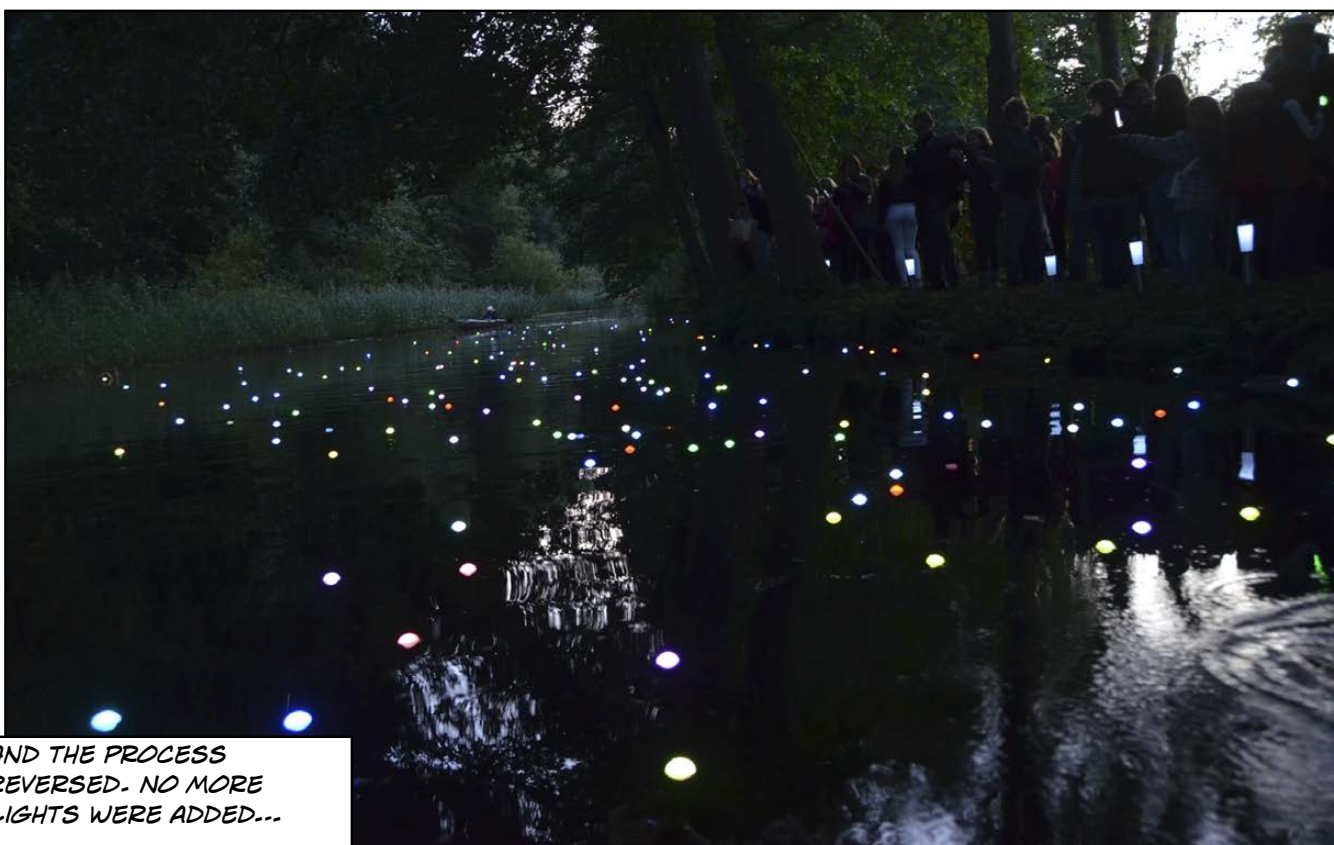
THE ORIGINAL IDEA WAS THIS. A PERSON, THE AUTHOR OF THIS VISUAL ESSAY, WAS BEING DRESSED UP AS A GHOST OF THE RIVER RAASEPORI. THIS CHARACTER - WITH AN ILLUMINATED CAPE AND HAIR DYED IN TURQUOISE - IS DISTRIBUTING FLOATING LIGHTS AND PARTICIPANTS PLACE THEM INTO THE RIVER IN ORDER TO FORM A COLLECTIVE LIGHT ART WHERE THE SLOW MOVEMENT OF THE STREAM CONSTANTLY CHANGES THE COMPOSITION.



THE BEGINNING OF THE PARTICIPATORY LIGHT ART INSTALLATION STARTED VERY WELL AND PARTICIPANTS WERE ADMIRING THE EVOLUTION OF THE PIECE OF ART AND STIRRING IT UP WITH FLUORESCENT PAINTED STICKS GLIMMERING IN THE DUSKING NIGHT. MEANWHILE THE GHOST STARTED TO BE IN TROUBLE BECAUSE OF BEING TOO POPULAR. SHE WAS SURROUNDED BY OVER-ENTHUSIASTIC PARTICIPANTS. EVEN IN THE COOL NIGHT YOU COULD FEEL THE WARMTH OF THE TIGHTLY PACKED CROWD. ALL THE RESERVED 1000 LIGHTS RAN OUT AND MANY WERE LEFT DISAPPOINTEDLY EMPTY HANDED.



SOON AFTER BEGINNING THE FORMATION OF THE FLOATING LIGHT ART INSTALLATION, THE PARTICIPANTS NOTICED THAT THESE LIGHTS WERE ACTUALLY QUITE LOVELY AND CUTE WHEN HELD IN HAND. THEY STARTED PLAYING WITH THEM IN VARIOUS WAYS: PETTING THEM GENTLY, PUTTING THEM INTO THEIR MOUTHS AND LETTING THE LIGHT TRANSLUDE THROUGH THE CHEEK, FLINGING THEM TO EACH OTHER, HAVING TWO OF THEM FOR OVER THEIR EYES.



AND THE PROCESS REVERSED. NO MORE LIGHTS WERE ADDED...





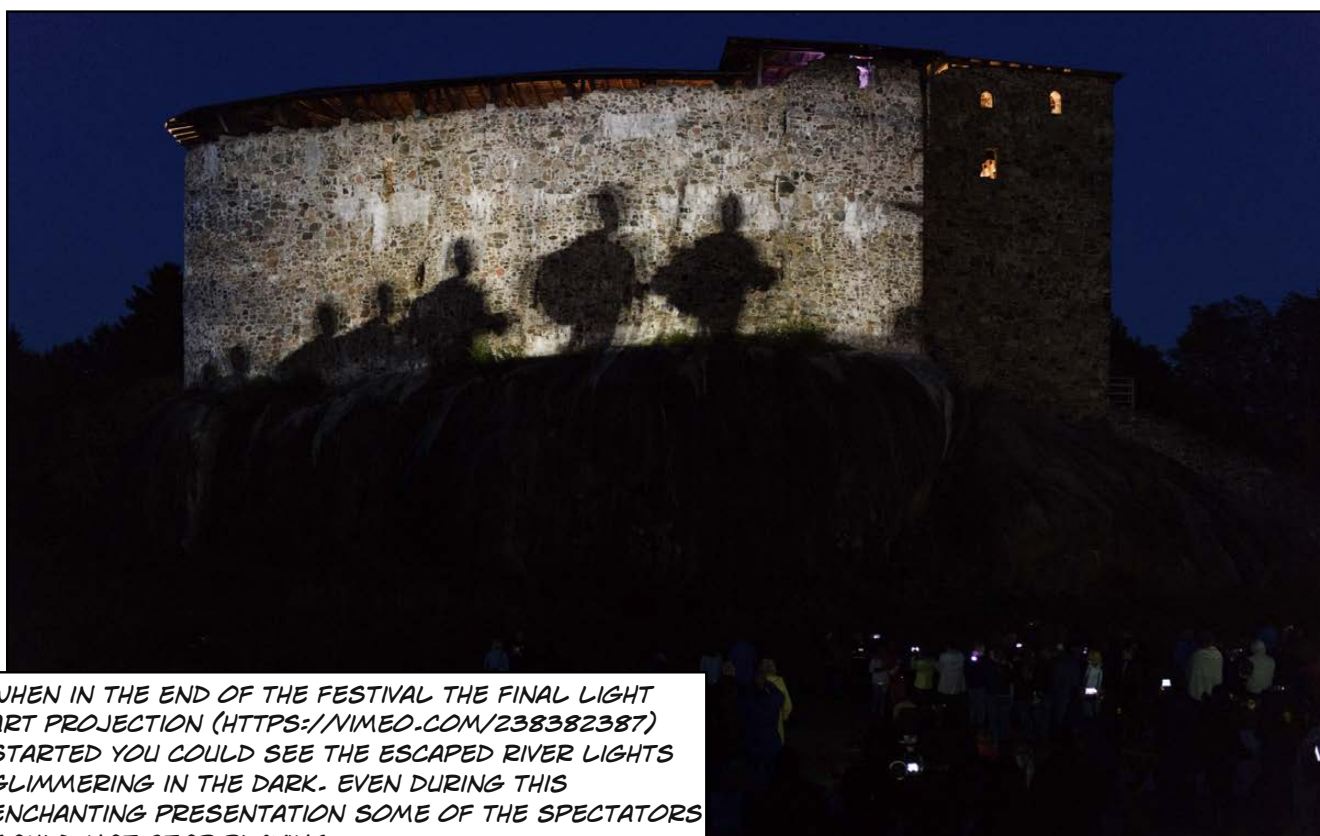
...BUT INSTEAD THE PARTICIPANTS STARTED FISHING THEM OUT OF THE RIVER. SOME EVEN SWAM IN THE CHILLY RIVER TO CATCH THEM AND REALLY NERVED THE SECURITY GUARDS OUT.



INSTEAD OF BUILDING UP INTO A LIGHT ART IN THE RIVER ALL THE RESERVED OVER 1000 LIGHTS WERE SPREAD AROUND THE HERITAGE AREA IN THE HANDS OF THE PARTICIPANTS.



PARTICIPANTS SEEMED TO REALLY ENJOY HAVING THE LIGHTS AND PLAYED WITH THEM IN VARIOUS WAYS, THROWING, CATCHING AND DRAWING LIGHT SHAPES WITH RAPID MOVEMENT IN THE DARKENING DUSK.



WHEN IN THE END OF THE FESTIVAL THE FINAL LIGHT ART PROJECTION ([HTTPS://VIMEO.COM/238382387](https://vimeo.com/238382387)) STARTED YOU COULD SEE THE ESCAPED RIVER LIGHTS GLIMMERING IN THE DARK. EVEN DURING THIS ENCHANTING PRESENTATION SOME OF THE SPECTATORS COULD NOT STOP PLAYING.





WAS IT A FAILURE OF PARTICIPATORY ART AS THINGS DID NOT GO AS PLANNED? OR WAS THE ACTUAL SPIRIT OF THE RIVER RAASEPORI THAT JUST GUIDED THE PROCESS IN AN UNEXPECTED WAY? DID SOMETHING MORE MAGICAL THAN OUR EYES WITNESSED JUST HAPPEN?

#### Imagens Images

Images 3, 7, 9 & 10: photography Ilkka Nissilä

Images 4, 5, 6, 8, 11: photography Venla Luostarinen

Image 1: Light painting Kirsi MacKenzie, photography Sari Vahersalmi

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