

Residency Report by Iris Honderdos & Arno Peeters

September 1 to October 31

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Introduction

We are an artist-couple from The Netherlands and specialize in community-driven art. We zoom in on a group of people with common characteristics, such as being members of one tribe, workers in a company or students in a school. We have been working like this worldwide, since we met in 2003. Iris had already a background in this way of working in Korea and former Yugoslavia. Arno is a sound artist and composer and has a career in media. We never know what we are going to do when we go on our mission and the result can be anything between installation and theater. More on us and our projects you can find [here](#).



Hollantilaiset Arno Peeters ja Iris Honderdos selvittävät millaisia mänttävilppulalaiset ovat juuri tällä hetkellä ja millaista heidän arkensa on. KUVA: ARNO PEETERS

The first month, we have used to get acquainted with our new environment. We talked to journalists, common people in the streets, visiting youth workers and even met a rapping priest. We learned about a lively drug scene in this peaceful Mänttä, but couldn't get hold of people who could tell us more. Even the police did not answer our call, which makes it clear why drugs can be sold without risk ;-)

But also, we found out there was an Open Prison in Vilppula, only 15 minutes drive from the residency. Soon it was clear that we had found a group we wanted to work with.

We had in mind to do Art Based Learning sessions at the Gösta Museum and ideally with the clients of the prison. Art Based Learning (ABL) is a method that uses your imagination in relation to art. It is a very low-key exercise that works for almost anyone and there is no need for knowledge about art. And also important: although it is a very personal experience, there is no need to talk if you don't want to.

To first practice with ABL, but now of course in English, we organized several ABL's in the Peda-Room of Gösta and also gave a presentation in an art class in Mänttä Region Training Center and afterwards did an ABL with students as well.



To jail

After we had tried to contact the prison but got no answer, we decided to simply drive to the gate and see what would happen. We weren't shot at or arrested (as one would expect in many other countries) but got a very warm welcome. We got in touch with director Samuli Laulumaa who soon gave us all the room and cooperation to start working with the prisoners.

We decided we'd first introduce ourselves and gave two presentations in the mess-hall at the center of the beautiful premises. After that we have invited clients to take part in an ABL (again in Gösta) and in the end we gave two trainings with very positive results. We had asked them to reflect on what they had experienced and to possibly write that down, which indeed some of them did.

Next, we invited them to work with us on an artwork, which in the end resulted in 7 inmates actually wanting to work with us.

Now we needed to think about what that would be...

The second month we used to ponder on the right kind of artwork that would appeal to them and at the same time is realistic to make in a relatively short time. Also we needed to take in account the working schedules of the prisoners and of course: their privacy.



We came up with the idea of a birch tree per participant with lifelines in and on the wood and markings for any important moment (good or bad) in the client's life. The prison has fantastic huge work-spaces for metal and wood, so we guessed it would be possible to produce everything right there. Even the birch-trees could be cut on the premises and by the prisoners themselves.





While Iris started spending more and more time working directly with the prisoners, Arno started working on three short films, accompanied by compositions in 5.1 surround.



The first is an impression of all the sounds in both our direct environment, but also inside the residency and the work-space. The other two are based on time-lapses and film footage he had been gathering during all these weeks and show the visitors trailing by to and from the museum and the third shows the changing season in our direct environment. The three movies can be found online [on Vimeo](#).

Also, Arno started working with a young inmate who was into rap and composed his own songs. 'No gangsta rap' he told us, and indeed: all the Finns we saw listening to his lyrics, were deeply touched or impressed. All in all, Arno recorded and produced three tracks with him, and he would perform live during the opening of the artwork, but more on that later.



The Finale was underway, and we needed to think about a proper place to setup the artwork which will be around 3,5m high and should be visible to both clients of the Open Prison and visitors. A proper spot was found near the greenhouse which is just outside the prison ground and open to the public. The greenhouse is popular for its fresh vegetables and beautiful flowers and plants, grown and taken care for by the clients: if you happen to visit that place, ask for Mika, who has been working there for more than 20 years and has helped us tremendously. Please give him our warmest regards!



Due to the privacy we wanted to organize two separate openings: one for the prisoners and one for the general audience and the press.

And our young artist wanted to perform, but only during the public opening, since he felt his songs are too sensitive to be performed for the other inmates; too vulnerable.

And there was more which we learned during the whole process: you would expect that working on an artwork would help clients to get away from their daily duties: a nice creative challenge... But it appeared to us, some of them need their daily routine and anything that disturbs them and especially asking them to reflect on their lives is confusing. There are many forms of imprisonment and one of the most severe one is being locked inside your own mental jail. One of the participants got cold feet during the process and ripped all he did from his tree and later did not show himself anymore. We had asked too much of him and too fast.





The presentation was wonderfully organized with a giant cake, completely in style, made by the inmates that are studying to work in the kitchen:



To be honest, we still had some tweaks we wanted to make to the installation, but we agreed that this is what was possible under the circumstances and, like with many of our artworks, the process is more important to us than the final result. Especially if that work is recognized and understood by the people we worked with.

Also we thought it is important that the visual part was accompanied by the voices of those who participated, so we recorded interviews with them, guided by the wonderful Kirsi Lankinen, a social worker at the prison who had accompanied us during the whole process.

If you visit the artwork, be sure to scan the QR-code, so you can hear the podcast, which is of course in Finnish.



At this point we would like to thank the Serlachius Residency for all the facilities and fantastic support we got, especially from Anita, who catered us to all things we needed, even soundproofing the studio!

The same certainly goes for the Gösta Museum who arranged the Peda Room for us (including strong coffee and excellent cakes) to use for the ABL's and of course the great trust they had in us inviting unusual guests at their museum.

If we ever have the chance, we wouldn't hesitate to drive up to Mänttä again...

Kiitos!

Arno Peeters & Iris Honderdos