

Anthony Schrag

FINISH WHAT YOU START... (KEN LEIKKIIN RYHTYY, SE LEIKIN KESTÄKÖÖN) – Exploring Place Through play

On May 26th, 2018, the Lights On! project delivered a new experiment exploring the heritage sites of the islands of Vallisaari and Kuninkaansaari, just outside Helsinki. The project was developed in collaboration between Nina Luostarinen (Lights On!/Humak) and Anthony Schrag (Queen Margaret University), and developed around their shared interest in 'Play' and 'Place Relationships'. The collaboration was highly productive, and often felt more like fun than work, which replicated in the project itself.

The concept for this piece emerged from the site itself: the islands have a military history, and played an instrumental role in the Swedish and Russian invasions of Finland. The sites were therefore linked to conflict between groups of people. The term 'conflict' can often have negative connotations, but for Schrag, the concept is part of his participatory practice and he is interested in 'productive conflict' - when conflict becomes useful.

As social philosopher Levinas (1989) suggested, as social creatures, humans can only ever learn about themselves by engaging with others. This engagement with someone different from oneself can sometimes be difficult; but it can also be fun and it can also build social relations, as well as relationships to place, which aligned with Luostarinen's research.

The project was therefore set up as a way to put people in relationship with 'others' who might be different from them, and used the military history of the islands to inspire the game and to link it back to place. A 'war' between the two islands was proposed, inviting participants to invade their opposite island.

Referring to childhood games such as 'capture the flag' and more formalised games (such as Soccer where one team 'invades' another's territory), the play was designed for adults as a way to give them a new experience with the islands. The methodology of 'play' was chosen to encourage adults to explore places like we do when we are children: with joy, excitement and bravery. In this way, it was hoped that this contemporary game could speak to and relate back to the historical and cultural contexts, thereby giving participants a fun and deeper connection to place.

The game was designed in two parts: in the morning, participants were divided into two teams, with each team being assigned an island and invited to develop a micro-nation, with its own manifesto and identity. They also designed three 'flags' to represent their island. In the afternoon session, teams explored their island and found places to plant and hang their flags. This process, in itself, was useful as it gave participants a new way to engage with the place: 80% of the participants had never been to the site before, and for that 20% who had been before, all said the game gave them a new insight to the islands that they had not experienced.

After the flags had been placed, the game started, and each team tried to invade their opposing island and steal their flags. This process, too, gave the participants a different relationship to the site: "I was able to see hidden paths and looked at maps differently because we needed some strategic thinking. It was more holistic experience that way;" and "I saw the surroundings with different eyes;" and "I saw some areas/location which I would have missed as a normal visitor." The game gave them a new context to explore place in a way that reflected its history.

The methodology of play was important, and along with 'conflict' because both Luostarinen and Schrag are interested in how adults play, and what conditions allow them to be liberated, joyful and brave, like when we are children. The bright sunny day and beautiful weather, no doubt, helped the adults get in a good mood, but the game itself proved to be a sufficient context to give permission for adults to play and explore the islands as they may have done when they were children. Another participant said: "I'm 51. I was hesitant to come as I had thought I had lost the ability to play...but I was so happy to find that I can still play. It's not just for young people! We are all winners today." She had mud stains on her jeans, and a big smile.

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*Anthony Schrag is a practising artist and researcher who has worked nationally and internationally. He is also a lecturer in Cultural Management at Queen Margaret University (Edinburgh) and is a member of the Centre for Communication, Cultural and Media Studies as well as an associate member of the Centre for Person Centred Care.*

*He works in participatory manner, and central to his practice is a discussion about the place of art in a social context. He is interested in role of (productive) conflict in the relationship between artists, institutions and the public.*

*He has been the recipient of numerous awards including The Hope Scot Trust, Creative Scotland, British Council, the Dewar Arts Award, the 2011 Standpoint Futures: Public residency award, as well as a Henry Moore Artist Fellowship. In 2015, he walked 2638 km from the north of Scotland to the Venice Biennale to explore the place of participatory artworks within the public realm.*

*The artist Nathalie De Brie once referred to his practice as 'Fearless'. The writer Marjorie Celona once said: 'Anthony, you have a lot of ideas. Not all of them are good.'*