

Reconstructing in/with the house

A familiar conversation

MIINA KAARTINEN, MICHAELA CASKOVÁ, TIINA ARJUKKA HIRVONEN,
SALLAMARI RANTALA & SANNA RITVANEN

Mustarinda Association is a group of artists and researchers whose goal is to promote ecological reconstructions within society, a diversity of naturecultures, and connections between art and science. Reaching towards a post-fossil culture, Mustarinda works in/through/with contemporary art, boundary-crossing research, practical experimentation, communication, education, and events. Its activities are rooted in the Mustarinda house, located by an old-growth forest in Hyryn-salmi, Kainuu. The house has versatile spaces for artist and researcher residencies, and also hosts exhibitions and various events. Mustarinda house group is an ensemble of active members of the association who carry the collective responsibility of maintaining the house and its activities. What follows is an edited excerpt of a text-based conversation between some house group members who've cared for and with the house between 2015 and the present. In summer 2022, this group discussed reconstruction and social reproduction within the house; the constructed division between theory and practice; the extractive aspects of conventional research; and a rethinking of how knowledge production happens.¹

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MK: Dear all, welcome to chat about our house-keeping experiences in Mustarinda! Our abstract was approved for the feminist special issue of *Tiede & edistys* research journal, so let's move forward. The text's format is a more "free" research

article (not formal and peer-reviewed). Theoretically and methodologically, the article will be a group autoethnography, which means we are researching our own experiences and connecting them to surrounding culture (e.g. Tienari & Kiriakos 2020; Rannikko & Rannikko 2021). It will of course be feminist, with a healthy dose of post-humanism (e.g. Lummaa & Rojola 2014; Åsberg & Braidotti 2018).

SMR: Super interesting!

SR: I love this!

MK: Let's start with a little bit of background about the invitation to make this article. I first volunteered at Mustarinda house in January 2018. After that, I've had many discussions with different members of the collective, and tried to read everything I can about the work that has been and is being done, in and by Mustarinda. From somewhat mysterious collective histories, I have noticed a gap or division between theoretical work and physical labour in the association. The division has been also gendered: "educated men doing the theoretical stuff and others working at the house". I use scare quotes, because the sentence is not a simple fact, but a discourse, a way of thinking or speaking that is present. This practice and discourse establishes the patriarchal power structures that we need to dismantle if we aim

for a truly just and equitable ecological transition. Theoretically speaking, a gap between practice and theory is also not the most fruitful approach for dealing with ecological themes. For the past couple of years I have been super inspired by feminist post-humanities discussions, among other things, and one of the main lines of thought is: we need to find *new* unknown ways of thinking and being in these troubled times, characterised by multiple eco-social crises. This means that we also need to make unexpected collaborations and compositions, and think beyond conventional hierarchies and binaries. (Eg. Bozalek & Pease 2020; Åsberg & Braidotti 2018.)

Another reason to discuss this openly is that as housekeepers, I feel we all have important knowledges to share with the (academic) world about connecting art and science; promoting ecosocial education and culture; and doing the hands-on work of ecological reconstruction with others and within communities. There has been research done about Mustarinda's activities (latest e.g. Kaukio 2022; Salmenniemi et al. 2022), and some by Mustarinda members (e.g. Järvensivu 2017). I've learned our activities are also referred to in many university courses. However, academic research in/about Mustarinda has rarely emerged directly from the bodily experiences of the people doing the housework. This situation creates an illusion, as if the house's required physical and social labour would not *in itself* prompt knowledge production or an intellectual dimension. Using situated bodily labour simply as data also raises ethical questions about the power structures around knowledge production, and whether researching postdisciplinary communities like Mustarinda using conventional methodologies is actually an extractivist process (see nikolic 2020). Put bluntly, I think housekeepers of the world should be able to write their own stories, and include these stories in their own lists of achievements. Reflecting on a long history of developing artistic practice in dialogue with Mustarinda, mirko nikolic's essay in volume 7 of Mustarinda magazine states:

In extraction empires,
 academia is partially involved in digging,
 art is too,
 experts and specialists are expected to take
 from those who offer their skill or wisdom
 and run away with a so-called
 'discovery' or 'data'
 inscribed in hard drives, cameras,
 recorders
 largely without due reciprocity and mutuality
 with the carriers of knowledge,
 to then insert the 'findings' into the circuits
 of globalising art and education
 thus circumscribing properties of
 the subject
 through an enclosure into
 ownership.
 Intellectual property is perhaps the most
 pervasive modality of fencing in of
 the living and the nonliving,
 it sharply splits the over-developed from the
 under-developed,
 centre from periphery, north from the south
 through paywalls, prototypes, codes, litigation
 and weaponry.
 Knowledges are collective bodies, fragile as
 the fleshly ones
 they cannot bear these violent operations
 of cutting and transporting,
 propertying and enclosure lead
 to epistemicide
 bullet holes through the collective memory.
 (nikolic 2020)

What do you think? *Sana on vapaa*, word is free.

SR: I just had a conversation where this dichotomy was implemented in curatorial work, in a context related to festival producing. And I tried to explain that to me it is all the same, that the so-called expert work I am doing while doing curatorial work highly relies on the practical producing work I do. I can't do one without the other, since they are just different formats and mediums, different ways of producing knowledges. I think my conversation partner didn't quite understand me, and I tried to explain that maybe this way of thinking comes from Mustarinda.

TH: Wow, this is somehow such a thought- and emotion-provoking start.

SR: And I think it's important that the gendered divisions between the different ways of working and producing knowledges in the Mustarinda context is said out loud.

MK: I have noticed the same, that it is difficult to explain this "practice-theory" to someone who thinks of this division very conventionally. Often it takes me a while to understand that the person I'm talking to really doesn't get what I'm saying. It feels like I'm speaking some kind of alien language to them... quite a big change in thinking can happen when working in Mustarinda!

TH: Thank you Miina for beginning this chat! Even if it's problematic to use this sort of sentence "educated men doing theoretical stuff", it's still important to say things as they have been, otherwise we can't move on. Of course, that sentence is a bit exaggerated, as others have also been thinking theoretically, but it has not been visible that we are so many kinds [of people] and theoretical and conceptual thinking also happens with practical work. I think unconventional and unexpected collaborations definitely already happen, and it's super important to learn and verbalise them also.

SMR: What do you think is the difficult part about understanding this practice-theory thing? That practice is nothing more than doing? In the art field, I'm used to concepts like "thinking by drawing/sculpting etc." and amidst these concepts, practice is intellectually taken seriously.

TH: Also, the practical work has been divided somewhat so that men are guided towards repair/construction, and other genders to the care work, and I think this is also one problematic thing that should shift, because the care work is often less visible and less valued.

SMR: When I think of how knowledges are produced within Mustarinda practice-theory, I have a

feeling it's somehow connected to different ways of thinking time. Understanding-by-doing can be a very meandering road through various affecting factors like physics, social situations, skills etc. I was thinking that daily practices as knowledge production does not look very logical or determined; the processes can be just so slow. Of course, all kinds of paths produce knowledges, like academic paths are also very time-related, ambiguous, and lively...

TH: I agree that researching communities from the outside is an extractivist practice, and this has been discussed in many minority-groups when people want to research their situation, which then becomes academic achievement (for the researcher). But the benefit to the actual minority group can be very marginal, if any. Or often the opposite, that they need to work for free for the researcher. I'm *not* comparing us at Mustarinda to any minority group, but just thinking about this pattern. But then again, I think our best achievement is not that something will be credited to us as individuals or Mustarindanians, but that our ecological practices actually spread, and people start shifting their own practices because of that. We shouldn't try to own them in that way, and act as gatekeepers. I think we can't get rid of these hierarchies of "important theoretical work" and "not so fine, dirty practical work" without rethinking it—trying to communicate it like Sanna said—and embracing both embodied and practical knowing as equally important.

SR: I think for many in Mustarinda and other similar grassroots spaces, our ways of thinking are self-evident, but for those used to more binary and siloed ways of thinking and doing, it seems to be sometimes veeeeeery hard to adopt. It has a lot to do with power structures and hierarchies, and what is viewed as more valuable.

SMR: To me, this theory and practice division is about the hierarchical position between rational thinking and other ways of thinking. I mean that logics and reason are placed on top, often at the expense of other ways of understanding and

perceiving reality. I understand that certain levels of rationality and logic are useful in communication, but I doubt and refuse to think it's the only way.

MK: While not comparing Mustarinda to minority groups, there are other related unequal power dimensions, such as money, which are problematic. We are constantly in the midst of a critical practice-research process that is based heavily on volunteer work. We don't have the resources to—on top of everything else—gather data, write, and publish, so that we could make our work more “real science” and prove its importance to the (science) funders. While we're struggling with resources, it doesn't feel right that someone comes from outside to study Mustarinda work and turns it into “research findings” and into money (because in the end, that is the meaning of a CV, proving your worth in the capitalist system). If we wouldn't be in such a precarious situation as a group, it would be different to spread these knowledges for free.

SR: Sometimes I wish I had more ability to read, experience, do not-so-practical stuff. That I wouldn't sink so deep in practical problem solving, and would have more persistence to understand and listen to those who don't do as I do. Sometimes I feel my practice is missing something, I don't know, poetics or sensitivity. We've had such a strong rise of practical maintenance work in Mustarinda, that sometimes the airiness and floatiness gets lost. I think it has a lot to do with resources, that we've just had to focus on that kind of work to keep the boat afloat.

MC: I can relate to all previous sentiments. I totally agree with problematising how “important research is based on volunteer work”—it doesn't feel right that someone else capitalises on volunteer labour. I also agree with Tiina's point about “researching communities from the outside as extractivist”. It seems like a conflict at first, but I feel quite vibrantly that maybe what hasn't been said is that we are of course doing a lot of thinking within Mustarinda, but due to the residency

rhythms, there is hardly time to sit down and articulate processes together. When visitors come to the house and write a whole theory about Mustarinda in such a “fast food time”, it's like someone is inventing a story about you without you. Of course, at the same time, I think it is very valuable that different topics are looked at from the outside, from different perspectives.

MK: It's also interesting to think what “theory” even is. We all are applying different kinds of theories to our work all the time, even if they are non-academic ones: they can be based in practice, in experience, our life histories, and so on. So, this division into practice vs. theory is just another power structure, part of patriarchy.

TH: What creates inequality and annoyance is exactly the starting point of the conversation—between the need to do practical work, and the reality that the boat needs to be kept afloat like Sanna said, and theoretical work. While someone (usually a non-male care worker) keeps the boat afloat, this frees up time for someone else to be the voice of the thinking behind the systems that the care-workers keep afloat.

SMR: I was also referring to theory as rational. I mean, all things considered, rational thoughts are always valued more than everyday poetics and impulses.

MK: I agree there is theory to be found in the everyday. Sara Ahmed (2017) writes:

The personal is theoretical. Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract something is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life. (Ahmed 2017, 10.)

TH: I remember a conversation that happened a couple of times, a few years ago, when there was an idea that we should hire a cleaner so everyone could focus on “more important things”. To me, it felt like part of the special feeling and atmos-

phere would be lost if we hired someone to do this care work; also, it would be about giving up connections between universal and individual care somehow—

MK: This has a lot to do with scaling and standardising, capitalism basically. Having an outside cleaner means applying an old-school organisation theory—Taylorism—to the house-life, like it would become a factory in which all tasks are divided so that the machine can work as efficiently as possible. I mean, it's not just any old house to clean, it is Mustarinda, and cleaning is part of keeping a material connection to the house, which has an agency of its own. We are working *with* the house.

SMR: I love thinking about cleaning from some kind of new materialist perspective, a way of getting to understand materials around you—communicating with them by choosing caring cleaning tools, little spiders escaping, and bread crumbs running around. But the house is big for sure, and these poetics and cleaning philosophies don't get the space they deserve.

TH: Cleaning is like petting the house as a beloved entity, and then you also see how the house is doing, where are the holes, what needs more care, what has been neglected, who has collected sticks, branches, beard lichen this time, time to find the lost part/sock/shoe/screw. And it's a time to organise your thoughts, and reflect.

MK: Thank you everyone for sharing these super inspiring thoughts and comments! I agree that making this text together is one way of communicating the work we do. I feel the difficulty of describing Mustarinda's multidimensional work is connected to the multi- or trans- or postdisciplinary nature of it. When society does not yet recognise this kind of work, we need to operate in many languages and forums at the same time, which means a lot of conversation, time, patience, and trust. Different kinds of resources are needed from our group, in order for this to work. If everyone spoke the same language right away, we would not be multidisciplinary...but it's so tricky!

I think Michaela's line about "fast food time" is accurate when we think about outsiders researching our work. One comment from a researcher who was visiting the house once was that many collectives or NGOs face similar kinds of problems like Mustarinda. So even if something might feel unique, it can actually be quite a universal experience. When I first heard it, I was like "hmm, that's interesting, good that they are researching this and making it visible". But now that I'm returning to the quote, I'm actually thinking: wow, this really is the problem of science! I mean, how to standardise and categorise embodied knowledges that can't be put into clear boxes? I think Mustarinda housework as experiential and personal work escapes categories. I'm not saying it cannot and should not be researched by someone who has not done it, but I am saying that in the context of ecological transition and collective ecological work, using conventional "objective" methodologies might actually be quite pointless.

Maybe we could return to what Sallamari and Tiina were saying, about housework from a new materialist perspective. I think it's one topic which we know so much about. It would be super interesting to hear what housework practices have been, or are most important to you, and why? Have you noticed that some specific part of housework has become important for you as an artist (or human/animal in general)? You can also just share a memory of "petting the house".

This is not exactly about housework, but about material connections—how the house and its objects carry cultural meanings: the collective wardrobe. When I've been housekeeping, it's usually only casually mentioned to the guests that "you can wear all the clothes you find from the laundry room or the downstairs cabin". Then some folks really get into wearing those, and the first time it was so shocking to see someone else wearing "Michaela's jacket!" Then later on, getting used to this feeling that a stranger looks familiar because I know well (through my skin) the piece of clothing they wear. The collective wardrobe is one of those subtle and repetitive things that start to unfold only after spending more time and living everyday life at the house. Some-

how it's transformative I feel, not only because everything is old and has some holes and stains, but because of the communality aspect. I think it's the same kind of "ecological way of life" experiment, like the garden or energy systems, but just less clear and less planned.

SR: I think it's amazing how much people use those shared clothes instead of their own!

TH: And it happens so often that people actually want to buy some of those clothes, or swap them for something, like they start to feel those items fit them so well, even if they would in reality be some fuzzy and holey old piece that one would never buy from the flea market. Is it that there is so much value in using the shared clothes cupboard, that items become somehow special. Or maybe it's the new materialist calling of those clothes?

MK: Something like that! Somehow these clothes give the possibility to be part of the house, the community. They are like "mökkivaatteet" (summer cottage clothes), but with this peculiar dimension of first time residents not having any personal connection to them. For example, at our summer place, part of the cottage clothes concept for me means to always return to the same worn out funny stuff that I know has belonged to dad or someone important. So, what is the narrative appeal of this odd material in Mustarinda's laundry room? It must be connected to poetry or magic... Makes me think of a new book by Jarmo Valkonen (2022) whose title translates to *Thinking with the cottage*.

TH: That is an interesting book! When I saw it, I thought that this sort of thinking-with-the-house (that-which-we-pet) would be great to elaborate upon. Now we do it! When I think about what kind of housework I find most important, I realise it's very hard to say, because the shifting nature of the work is what's so interesting to me (and also like I said earlier, the challenge). But there are some "themes" I could recognise now. As there is so much digital work in every job I do, all the

things where you can see the effect of your and/or common touches are rewarding: planting, cleaning, folding sheets, organising, hunting second hand tools for the house, etc. These are bodily practices that clearly make a physical difference to the house. Secondly, I enjoy when a new sort of understanding or skill is learned: e.g. how to fix something that's broken, woodwork, construction work, cultural knowledges learned in conversations or through observing habits, or learning about biological/more-than-human systems around the hill, and so on.

Then one theme seems to be housework around human and more-than-human connection and multispecies care, which I feel like I have missed a lot in my life before Mustarinda. There are so many aspects of living with different organisms there, the most obvious things being: taking care of Miksi-dog and the sheep; taking care of plants in the garden; and taking care of the forest in many ways, like joining activism (and so many others which I don't even realise now), composting and learning how to live with its organisms, and so on. This is not one-way care, but observing more-than-human processes is some sort of "big time care" which they give back in return, and it strengthens the feeling of being (literally) supported by this non-human life, and a belongingness in this world. There is a sense of letting myself belong and letting myself be cared for. It makes me feel like I should care back.

The last aspect I can think of now is human social care work. I cannot yet really verbalise it fully, but I have come to think that it's perhaps one of the reasons I've not felt like I'm missing out on conventional family life, because these human needs are met in Mustarinda life. I remember one time when I had done food shopping for four or five people for a week, and I didn't have energy to think about my own food or needs anymore, so I just bought something very fast and not so nice, so that I could go quickly home to Mustarinda to rest. And it hit me then, that this is perhaps the closest I've ever felt to being like a parent of a big family—hungry and tired in a food shop, and putting my own needs last. Only the crying kids are missing. That made me think

about the other aspects of care I'm giving and receiving, when in the house. Even the food shop was not the most nurturing example, there are so many elements in housekeeping and collective work that people look for in the so-called nuclear family, and it's generally supported in our culture as the best or only provider of them. But they can be lived through in different constellations of "family", whether it's permanent, temporary, genetic, friends, non-human etc. So many of what I consider to be basic human longings—for connection, care, closeness, conversation partners, daily decision making partners etc.—are met through life at the house. These are very transformative and important aspects to bring up in our work and thinking.

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MSC MIINA KAARTINEN is a doctoral researcher at the Tampere University.

MFA & M.ED MICHAELA CASKOVÁ is an active member of Mustarinda.

MA TIINA ARJUKKA HIRVONEN is an active member of Mustarinda.

MA SALLAMARI RANTALA is an active member of Mustarinda.

BA SANNA RITVANEN is an active member of Mustarinda.

NOTES

- 1 Mustarinda actives who took part in this conversation are: **MK**: Miina Kaartinen (she/her), **MC**: Michaela Casková (she/her), **TH**: Tiina Arjukka Hirvonen (she/her), **SMR**: Sallamari Rantala (she/her), **SR**: Sanna Ritvanen (they/them).
- 2 www.mustarinda.fi

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