

# DI2020: How Enni-Kukka Tuomala plans to start the empathy revolution with a balloon

 By [Angie White](#)

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Finnish empathy designer and artist Enni-Kukka Tuomala received a standing ovation at Design Indaba after her inspiring presentation on empathy as the most radical emotion. Tuomala challenged every person, designer and creator to become a catalyst for empathy, asking: "What if designs were created for empathy?"



Enni-Kukka Tuomala

## Be radically empathetic

Tuomala believes in channelling empathy for radical change, explaining that although humans are pre-programmed to empathise more with those similar to us, we can reprogram ourselves. She goes on to explain that empathy as an emotion is very specific to the context you are in, and power and stress reduce our sense of empathy towards others.

Empathy is often seen as an abstract and intangible emotion. Tuomala's approach aims to transform empathy from an individual feeling to a practical and powerful collective tool for positive social change. "We are experiencing the biggest movement of people than ever before, but still societies are struggling to connect," she explains.



Design thinking and empathy generation

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According to Tuomala, our systems are not designed for empathy but for segregation – these influence social needs like

education and social care. “We need to fight ‘the globalisation of indifference’. Design can foster empathy in the large-scale reform of politics, healthcare, education,” she says. Tuomala says the goal is to move away from ‘us and them mentality’, explaining that in a time when we need more empathy than ever before, we are feeling less and less empathetic with a nearly 50% decline in empathy over the last 30 years - This is problematic as empathy reduces conflict.

## What if politics was designed empathetically?

Since 2018, Tuomala has collaborated with the Finnish parliament to bring empathy and empathy gesture into politics. Working with six members of parliament from five different political parties, she has created empathy tools for the political decision-making process to redesign interactions and dialogue at the heart of power creating a more equal, human and empathetic way of doing politics.

Tuomala comments that the lack of empathy at the heart of power in politics is not an anomaly, because power can block the ability to feel empathy. She comments that doctors even compare the effects of power on the structure of the brain shown on scans to that of traumatic brain damage – The same is true of stress.



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This brings Tuomala to her next point: If parliament is the microcosm of society, what does it tell us about our culture? She elaborates that parliament has remained largely unchanged throughout history, with politicians gathering in the same room at the same table to discuss critical issues every day – a design that is effectively created to encourage further conflict.

In an attempt to increase empathy and encourage engagement in the political landscape, Tuomala designed a project utilising balloons, as she wanted to use something that would increase laughter, joy and silliness. This created a very unconventional setting of politicians blowing up and playing with balloons in parliament!

## Can balloons become the symbol of change?

Tuomala believes in creating tools to bring about changes through the use of colour, engagement, role play, and creating new, open ways to communicate how you feel – this, in turn, creates transparency and enhances the process of empathy creation. Essentially, political culture is made up of all of us and our abilities to empathise with each other, she says.

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one of 2019-20 highlights: . i am currently exhibiting my ongoing work EMPATIA ELE: EMPATHY TOOLS FOR POLITICS from the finnish parliament at the DESIGNS FOR DIFFERENT FUTURES show @philamuseum the exhibition explores the visionary and sometimes controversial designs that promise to transform how we live, eat, heal, travel, and even love, in any number of possible futures. . i am absolutely thrilled to have my work in the show. it's a real honour to be featured alongside such talented + boundary pushing designers and designs curated by the visionary @michellemillarfisher @maitexublp and their brilliant teams. . the show is still on until march 8th. GO SEE IT if you're in philadelphia and let me know what you think! you can find my work in the FUTURES THERAPY LAB. . . . #designsfordifferentfutures #empatiaele #empathytoolsforpolitics #designforempathy #politics #empathy #art #design #exhibition #philadelphia #eduskunta #parliament #finland

*A post shared by [opening eyes . hearts . minds.](#) (@akin.kollektiv) on Feb 12, 2020 at 12:02am PST*

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## What if society was designed for empathy?

In 2019, Tuomala implemented her Campaign for Empathy in Newham, London. The campaign was set against the backdrop of Brexit uncertainty and extended themes from politicians to bridge the growing divides between communities.

By placing vinyls and empathetic challenges in a public and office space, the campaign concentrated on exploring the distances between the power (local decision-makers) and the people (local residents), fostering safe spaces of mutual understanding, connection and conversation through empathy.

Tuomala's work is currently exhibited at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the show 'Designs for Different Futures' until March 2020. She recently installed her first permanent empathy artwork in London and is about to extend the Campaign for Empathy to Cambridge, as a part of the Open House Residency at Kettle's Yard in 2020-21.

## Can a balloon start the empathy revolution?

Ending off her presentation, Tuomala asked the audience to do the following (something that can be practiced by anyone anywhere):

1. Close your eyes and take a very deep breath in through the nose and out through the mouth.
2. Take a moment to just breathe and centre yourself, and start sensing how you're feeling.
3. Identify what emotions you are bringing into the space you are in, what you are offering up to the people in your space, what emotions you are bringing into shared space.
4. Identify the emotions that could be creating bridges, barriers or distance between you and others - Really feel the emotions that you feel in this distance - the ones that can hinder you from connecting with people.
5. Take a balloon (in this case literally), blow the balloon up and fill it with all the emotion that is stopping you from connecting with others.
6. Whenever you feel stifled imagine this balloon and letting it go (at this point the audience let all their balloons go).

“ Can a balloon start the empathy revolution? The audience is about to find out! [#Designindaba #DI2020](#)

[pic.twitter.com/Fang67qyCU](https://pic.twitter.com/Fang67qyCU)— Design Indaba (@designindaba) [February 28, 2020](#) ”

So, Tuomala asks; "Can a balloon start the empathy revolution?"

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