

Chapter 12

Inviting the unforeseen: a dialogue about art, learning and sustainability

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Abstract

To effectively grasp and address sustainability challenges, this chapter argues that we need to expand our predominantly logocentric and linear ways of knowing with more presentational, embodied and sensory means. The chapter traces an exploration of this position through a dialogue between four academic, artistic practitioners. It proposes the integration of art in (learning) processes for sustainability as a means to hold ambiguity, embrace the unknown and move ahead despite uncertainty. Art is introduced as a process that inherently and purposefully accepts and deploys (rather than minimizes) the latter elements. The authors subsequently touch upon a range of features of artistic processes that foster the emergence of these qualities: i.e. imagination, connection, embodiment and estrangement. Some of which might inspire educators, academics, decision-makers and activist to adopt a more aesthetic, connective mode of experiencing, thinking and doing, thereby generating conditions that allow for active, connective and imaginative *making* instead of routinely adopting the ready-made.

Introduction

Do you always require a detailed map and well-defined destination before you start walking? Or can you allow yourself to venture into unfamiliar territory without knowing exactly where you are going? Can our society deal with things being grey, rather than black or white? Do we need to be absolutely certain about what is true before we can start taking actions, or can we move ahead despite uncertainty? Where do we start if we don't know the end?

Before the unfamiliarity, magnitude and complexity of today's environmental and social challenges there seem to be no instant recipes and ready-made solutions. The origin and exact nature of these challenges, as well as what the most appropriate response might be, are engulfed in controversy. Moreover, the assumptions, worldviews and mechanisms on which we base our formulae and solutions appear to be the main instigators of the problems we are trying to solve, and are thus of

little use. Grasping and addressing these sustainability challenges thus involves processes that hinge on high levels of ambiguity, open-endedness and uncertainty.

Coping with – let alone maximizing – such dynamic and elusive processes, however, is not something the dominating (Western) societal structure is familiar with. Our formal education is largely based on the transmission of neatly packed bodies of knowledge, presented as unambiguous truths (Orr 2004). Our minds are predisposed to follow engrained patterns of thinking and immediately reduce dissonance (De Bono 1990). Problem solving strategies largely depend on the use of binary, linear and causal ways of thinking. Though these conventional approaches are undeniably useful, our (compulsive) tendency and capacity to reduce uncertainty seems to have become a stumbling block in the light of today's challenges. It induces an unceasing urge to plan an outcome when the end product cannot be predetermined.

As a way to break out of this catch-22, this chapter proposes to expand our predominantly cerebral, logocentric way of knowing with presentational, embodied and sensory means. It calls for an *aesthetic response*. The authors advocate the integration of art into the way we come to know about and be in this world, thus re-inventing the way we explore sustainability issues and design and realize responses.

Conversation

This position has been explored through a dialogical process between four academic, artistic practitioners that understand and use art in different ways to generate transformative processes in communities of mostly informal learners. Natalia had one-to-one conversations with Jan, Misha and Shelley. The conversations revolved around the following questions: *From the position of a citizen, artist and educator, what are key elements in a (learning) process that facilitates transitions towards sustainability in today's society? How do we understand art and what is the role of art within such processes? And what does this mean for the way we shape and conduct learning?* The conversation with each individual took place with Natalia being the connector: juxtaposing and highlighting recurring themes, exploring overlaps and contradictions between and through the conversation.

In contrast to much academic/formal writing, a conversation usually does not follow a linear pattern, with a clear introduction and definite conclusions and recommendations at the end; instead it spirals in and out of focus, with its substance hidden between the lines. To embody some of the ideas that we are proposing, and to retain the exploratory, dynamic quality of a dialogue in which knowledge is plastic, polysemous and created collaboratively, we chose to present

this chapter as a conversation. The following writing is therefore an imaginal account of our dialogues: an interpretation of the separated conversations as if they happened concurrently. Continue reading as if *you have just stumbled upon us talking. You pause and listen. You stand in the doorway for a while, and as the conversation carries on you silently slip in and take a seat.*

Jan: To me a main feature of open-endedness in an artistic process is that you invite participants to deal with, and dwell in, uncertainty a little longer, juggling between different possibilities. Much of our society (education, media, politics) forces people to choose from an either-or, yes-no, a binary way of relating to the world. In art you can allow yourself to live a little longer with contradictions: one viewpoint does not necessarily exclude another. Open-endedness constitutes a notion that there are several choices available, and you are not forced to immediately choose between one or the other.

Natalia: Today's societal challenges are increasingly interconnected and complex. Consequently, our notion of the existence of a single and definite answer to a problem seems to have become obsolete. Things do not have one simple cause, nor do they happen in an orderly causal fashion. Instead, phenomena – like climate change – have multiple interrelated origins that often happen simultaneously. The interconnected nature of our world leads to a situation in which many more people are involved in a single issue; each of them perceiving it from a different background, discipline or belief system. In the past issues were often taken to be quite one-dimensional, whereas in a 'post-normal' world there is, what Funtowich and Ravetz (1993) refer to as a 'plurality of legitimate perspectives'. So instead of trying to minimize ambiguity, we should find a praxis that can hold it.

Jan: American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald once said: 'The test of first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function' (1936, p. 41). He gives the example of a person who is able to see that things are hopeless and yet he or she is determined to make them otherwise.

Natalia: Do you see the role of art as something similar?

Jan: One way of looking at art is that it always tries to move away from ossification. As soon as something has been fixed, in the sense of 'this is it', an artistic answer could be: 'Isn't the opposite true as well?' It is a way of questioning whatever is taken for granted, and *allowing* oneself to ask these opposing questions. Asking them can be very frightening.

Natalia: Representing or capturing issues more 'artfully' could help us to accept some of the ambiguity that surrounds today's challenges. Seeley and Reason called this 'pluralised knowing', which allows 'multiple interpretations to proliferate, without collapsing meaning down to one 'right' answer or meaning' (2008, p. 36). Where a lot of today's thinking and learning wedges knowledge into linear, boxed structures, art is inherently less reductive and allows both maker and viewer to grasp a more complex constellation of knowledge. In a theatre piece for example we can represent and understand things that happen simultaneously, in relation to each other and from various angles, whereas a written scholarly text tends to communicate information consecutively: one line at the time.

Misha: An other aspect of open-endedness is the unknown. This is something an artist deals with constantly. I attempt to make work that is open-ended, to follow the direction and energy of the group that I am working with.

Natalia: How do you ensure this quality of open-endedness is part of the process?

Misha: If a process isn't open-ended enough it immediately shuts itself down, and people don't engage with it. If you impose too many restrictions, or ask questions that contain prescribed answers or directions, those things will immediately close off communication – you will know because people become disinterested.

In my project *way from home* I created an online interactive interface, mapping walks based on conversations with refugees and asylum seekers about home (Myers 2008). 'Home' seems a straightforward concept. But rather than taking a shared understanding for granted, the starting point for *way from home* was finding out *how* people understand and conceive of this notion of 'home'. In asking a refugee or asylum seeker about home, the assumption often is that home is somewhere else. By keeping the question open – 'If I ask you to locate a place that you consider home, where would that be?' – multiple understandings of home were expressed. In some cases, this notion was inexpressible as some participants were unable to identify anywhere in the world that for them was home.

Sustainability, as a concept and depending on the way one approaches it, can be a block to open-endedness, because there may already be an assumption about what it is. In reality though, it means different things to different people. Creating open-ended processes is about being aware of habits, prejudices and desires that shut dialogue down.

Shelley: In all my teaching and artistic practice one of the main strategies is to avoid thinking about the end product at the start of a process. If you want to make an image then do not begin by thinking about something that necessarily has four

edges and hangs on a wall. Taking away an assumption of the type of outcome allows for other, new, more appropriate directions to evolve. This does not mean that you remove the impulse or motivating question altogether; you keep close to your fascination without foreclosing what the outcome might be.

Natalia: How does that relate to learning for sustainability?

Shelley: Over the past centuries we have generated different ways of finding solutions to problems. The predominant approach in today's society is to sit down and work out an answer rationally: to compute answers based on existing assumptions. But if the societal challenges are as new and unfamiliar as they are today, and if current conditions force us to radically review the assumptions that feed our calculations, then – as Einstein said – we cannot generate answers with the same consciousness that created the problems. We must find new ways of seeing and thinking and we have to open up new ways of dealing with problems. This is why we need to move away from predefining an end-product, otherwise these outcomes will be generated by the old logic that we are trying to let go.

Natalia: What other ways do you propose of moving towards a solution?

Shelley: My *social sculpture* practice emphasizes the development of new capacities and 'new organs of perception' that enable us to see what needs to be done and to explore ways to do this. Joseph Beuys, the artist who introduced the idea of social sculpture, proposed that we come into a permanent conversation with ourselves and with each other about how a viable future *could* look. We need to develop the arenas and conditions for a creative and multidimensional way of enquiring, where people can together explore and imagine 'utopias' as starting points for transformation without closing down on them.

Natalia: So, changes towards a more sustainable world start with the conception of a potential: a positive mental picture of the future that feeds the transformative process without fixing it?

Shelley: Yes. The core of my practice – irrespective of the outer form – has to do with people becoming aware of their capacity to imagine and of the enormous potential of this capacity. We all have an *inner space* where we can picture things. In this space we can see not only our memories, but also perceive images of the present as well as projections of the future. Try it. Create a mental image of something that happened yesterday. It is there. Now create a picture of the future – what your town would look if all the green were to be removed – it is there as well. It is a space without walls, without divisions. This means we can look at all these different images simultaneously, which enables us to *see what we see*. In other

words, we can also observe *how* we perceive the images. We can mentally revolve them, look at them from another angle, becoming conscious of our perspectives. And if we don't like what we see we can decide to do something about this.

Natalia: And the capacity to imagine and create is what makes us all artists... this encapsulates what Joseph Beuys said, doesn't it? ... that 'every human being is an artist, a freedom being, called to participate in transforming and reshaping the conditions, thinking and structures that shape and inform our lives.' I think such an understanding lies at the base of any learning-based process towards sustainability. We are all creators of our lives and environments (to a certain degree at least), which calls on our responsibility to do so *aesthetically*. However, I do struggle with the gap that seems to exist between having this awareness and a vision of the future on one hand, and the actual action, the realization of the image, on the other. How can someone, say, an educator, make sure that people develop an active stance towards change?

Shelley: Perhaps the answer to that question lies in the word 'aesthetically'. This is derived from the Greek word for sentient, perceiving, conscious, as opposed to anaesthetic or numb. Understanding aesthetics as such – that what enlivens and connects us – and by (re)introducing aesthetics as a core quality in our education, politics and society at large, we might start to find ways to overcome the unproductive polarization between thinking and action.

Jan: I agree that a sensorial awareness of our environment is key. I think that part of the problem of people not taking an active responsibility for their environment lies in the fact that we are to a large extent disconnected from, or untouched by, our surroundings. This detachment is generated and intensified by two features of today's society. First of all, a lot of our information comes through filters that are created by others, like television or computer screens. We generate our knowledge through these filters, and seem to have less and less *direct* experience of our world: a sensory understanding in which our own body engages with the subject that we are learning about. We increasingly only have a 'secondary experience' of the world (Louv 2005).

The second factor feeding our disengagement is that we live in what has been called *The Age of Interrupt*: we are constantly being interrupted in whatever we are doing (Friedman 2006). Consequently, we have become more and more skilled in chopping up our awareness. We are confronted with such manifold stimuli

that we lend the world around us a 'continuous partial attention,' meaning that, motivated by a desire not to miss anything, we are constantly scanning for new opportunities in any given moment (Stone 2006). Again, this leads to a feeble and shallow connection with our environment. To have a deep sensory experience – one that touches us viscerally and has a lasting impact – is more often than not interrupted before it can actually happen.

I think there is a correlation between having a direct, deep experience of our world and an attitude of caring. One is more likely to care about/for something when one has a direct experience of it.

Natalia: So, how does art come into this?

Jan: Well, if we are so out of touch with the world, alienated, then one can also assume that it is not so easy to *re-connect*. My experience is that if you bring children or adults into a natural environment and they are in this mode of continuous partial attention, waiting for the next interruption to happen at any moment, then 'nature' is very out of tune with their expectations of that situation...

Natalia: It's boring and slow...

Jan: Art can help us to move to a more sensorial focus and experience of our environment. One that helps us, for example, to get away from the fear of being in silence and alone; to pay attention to the world around us, to be only *receptive*.

Someone who practices this is Joseph Cornell with his concept of *flow learning* (Cornell 1998). To give an example: you ask participants to make a sound map. They listen and draw the sounds they hear around them on a map, amplifying their auditory experience of the environment. The artistic element, if you will, is that you provide a framing that helps people to be more focused on aspects of being in that place.

Misha: The way you emphasise the perceptual experience of our surroundings, relates to a form of performance that I describe as *conversive wayfinding* (Myers 2010). These are guided walks or 'walk works' that facilitate or generate a convivial way of interacting with and knowing a place, through narratives, audio recordings, voices of performers and/or interaction of walkers with one another. The embodied experience of participants and the production of *place-based knowledge* are integral to the artwork. The participant becomes a percipient: a locus of place and knowledge production through their skilful, embodied, sensorial engagement with the environment (Myers 2008).

Natalia: In this artistic practice, the work aims to awaken the sensory experience of the participants?

Jan: Hang on ... are you not, by using this mediated form, creating yet another filter through which we distance ourselves from our environment?

Misha: It depends. With current technological innovation, media are becoming more physical and responsive, or *pervasive*. There are ways in which technology can enhance, expand or accentuate particular experiences. This is different from you just taking a walk in a place. Your perception of a place may bring into focus layers of detail or information that are otherwise invisible or unavailable. For example, when I walked through London with Platform's (2007) *And While London Burns*⁸ I started to understand how phenomena in the environment that I normally take for granted are implicated in actions and events that are determining the future of the planet. The medium is not necessarily creating a further separation from the environment; instead it can enhance perceptual awareness and foster interaction.

Natalia: I think you have to see technology as an instrument or method to reinforce or add onto a learning experience. It helps you to create a process that allows percepts to learn for sustainability in a more embodied, connective and therefore – supposedly – more effective way. It's just about taking care, that...

Shelley: I have to disagree with the way you talk about art as a means. It instrumentalizes 'art' and in doing so one misses the true transformative potential that art can have for the shaping of a viable future. A potential that doesn't regard art as a mere catalyst and tool for *doing a job*, but one that is based on an aesthetic, connective *mode* of experiencing, thinking and being.

Natalia: Yes I agree: it is important that we see art as more than just an aid to communicate certain ideas about our environment. We also want to go beyond the idea of wheeling 'the artist' into a setting – say a group of politicians – who then does 'something creative' while the others watch. It's about all of us becoming a bit more artful, integrating an artistic approach into educational and political structures.

Shelley: Having said that, I can see something in both your perspectives on finding ways to refocus or redirect people's attention to their environment. Theatre director Bertolt Brecht used the term *Verfremdung* or *making strange*. He had

⁸ *And While London Burns* is an operatic audio-walk through London's financial district. By listening to a narrative through headphones while walking, one experiences the consequences of climate change through the eyes of a financial worker.

problems with theatre that is such a realistic recreation of reality that it turns the audience into complacent, passive spectators. This also bears a connection to the way we experience the world through media such as television. Here, the realism of the transferred message gives the audience the impression that they have experienced 'it' already; that there is nothing left for them to do. So, Brecht sought to disrupt this illusion. He challenged the receiver's comfortable distance to and habitual perception of the world, 'by stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them' (Brecht, quoted by Brooker 1994, p. 191).

Beuys' phrase *scratching on the imagination* has a similar intention. How do we make people sufficiently curious, to begin an internal movement that might lead to action: the beginning of a change process. How can we bring awe and wonderment back into the way we see the world around us? In social sculpture we call such forms and processes *instruments of consciousness*: means that activate and open up new doorways into familiar or taken-for-granted territory. We need to activate the artist in everyone one of us. This will inspire our capacity to *see* and *re-see*, to wonder and connect.

Jan: I work with a similar practice that I call *wrong-tracking*. Through education and upbringing we have been taught concepts of the world. If I ask people to paint the forest in front of them, they more often than not resort to their 'autopilot'. They do not really look at what is in front of them, but fall back on what they have done time and again before – probably since the age of six – and paint some sort of stereotypical trees. By wrong tracking I deliberately try to pull them away from their normal way of doing things, for example, by inviting participants to paint whatever is in front of them as 'wrong' as possible. In this process of *estrangement* you are dramatically drawn out of your habitual way of behaving, and being in this liminal space allows for certain things to happen that normally would not happen. Subsequently, there is more likelihood for transformative experiences to occur.

Natalia: How does that relate to learning for sustainability?

Jan: Henry David Thoreau in the mid-nineteenth century described how he was continuously struggling to meet nature in its elementary directness, unmediated by conventions, concepts, and scientific knowledge. To really understand something, he believed one continuously had to approach it as if it were completely strange. 'If you would make acquaintance with the ferns you must forget your botany. You must get rid of what is commonly called knowledge of them' (Thoreau, quoted in Shepard 1961, p. 210, Van Boeckel 2006). Equally, many educators are primarily occupied with transmitting scientific or logocentric knowledge of the world to

their pupils. In this one-way transmission something of a true connection, an exploratory attitude and true seeing of the world is lost.

Instead I would say we should constantly feed our curiosity for new sensory perception. This to me is artistic in itself: finding ways of nourishing and intensifying one's inquisitiveness about life, being, nature, and learning.

Misha: A lot of the walking practices that I described earlier cover similar kinds of re-orientation. They stimulate percipients to walk without necessarily knowing where they are going, without a destination in mind. This potentially interrupts habitual routes and ways of walking. It re-orientates them and helps them to discover places that went unnoticed before or to see them in a new way.

This relates back to the embodied process of which we were talking earlier. Instead of sitting and talking – or like Shelley said 'computing answers' – you try to find other ways to deal with an issue. I always think 'how can I DO something with these ideas, how can I immediately get working on a problem?'

Natalia: So an embodied activity can be a way to ignite an open-ended process? To start and see in which direction participants are pulled?

Misha: Yes, this was what we did in *way from home*. Instead of just talking about homesickness, emplacement and other issues facing refugees, we walked and talked. It was an embodied process of thinking through something that was meaningful to the group of people I was working with. And the issues we discussed became localised and experienced in ways that were both poetic and grounded in the practical detail of the world around us.

In my work I try to find creative or *oblique* ways of exploring and expressing ideas around particular issues; to enable multiple and contradictory ideas to coexist without consensus or mediated representation.

Natalia: Thinking over what has emerged in this conversation, the elements that we have discussed – ambiguity, open-endedness, imagination, connection, embodied learning, estrangement – what would you say are other ways that art can feed into learning for sustainability?

Misha: I have to say that whenever you say 'sustainability' I have a hard time really understanding what it is. I wonder what it means to people? Each time I think of the concept I want to open it up to look beyond the existing interpretations and preconceptions, which allow it to be easily manipulated and appropriated.

Natalia: I don't really know what it means ... Isn't that the virtue and vice of this concept? If you pre-define it, it will lose its open-ended, dynamic, interactive character, but leaving it too open and vague will confuse and discourage people.

Jan: And on top of that, the problems that relate to 'sustainability' have become abstract and remote. Take climate change: thanks to scientific means we can register the phenomenon, but this doesn't mean that we are able to fully grasp its scope and incorporate its meaning. Its symptoms are difficult to perceive directly. They manifest erratically, over a long time span, somewhere else and in the future.

Natalia: So paradoxically, in spite of, or as a consequence of, the interconnected nature of today's world we seem to *disengage* ourselves. In order to handle its complexity we seem to either discard sustainability as too vague and abstract or keep on talking about it as if it is something 'out there', not directly related to our person, our life. Approaching sustainable development artfully or aesthetically might help educators and politicians to find metaphors and processes that translate the concept into something that is embodied, tangible, connective and engaging.

Jan: Peter London said that the difference between an artist and a scientist is that the scientist asks: 'What is this?' whereas the artist adds: 'and what is it *to me*?' (P. London, personal communications), through which you yourself become part of the question. He also said that all people tend to be afraid of the new, the unknown. 'But' he added, 'an artist – including 'an artful person', to move away from *the* artist – is probably just as frightened as anybody else, but he or she decides to move on, *nonetheless*.'

Natalia: Rebecca Solnit similarly articulates: 'It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from' (Solnit 2006, p. 5). Then she says: 'To calculate on the unforeseen is perhaps exactly the paradoxical operation that life most requires of us' (*ibid.*, p. 6). This lies at the core of the relation between art and generating transitions to a more sustainable world. Art can help us to dwell in uncertainty, providing an elastic map that invites the unforeseen and stimulates active, connective and imaginative *making* instead of routinely adopting the ready-made.

We've come full circle. Let's stop here. For the moment.

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