

# ENGAGING WITH LANDSCAPE THROUGH ARTMAKING

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In our world the disconnection from nature seems to grow with the day, especially for younger generations. The consequences are dramatic, it results in a wide range of behavioral problems which are so serious that Richard Louv even speaks of a "nature deficit disorder." [1] In my view it is incumbent on us to find new ways in which we can make engaging with our natural environs more attractive. The hypothesis that artmaking can play an important role in this was the starting point for my doctoral research at Aalto University in Finland, which I am about to complete.

Usually, when people think about the combination of art and landscape, they tend to associate the theme more with the resulting artwork than with the artistic process as a mode of relating to, what D.H. Lawrence called, our circumambient universe. I think this has something to do with the way we habitually divide things into boxes, and, added to that, a limited idea of the myriad ways in which we can come to new understandings of nonhuman nature. Science offers us one – albeit indispensable – lens. However, when we rely on it exclusively, we succumb to what William Blake referred to as "one-eyed vision". Art, poetry, imagination and dreams afford a fuller, more complete picture.

Opening of our senses to the natural world is one of the focal points of arts-based environmental education. The challenge thereby, it seems to me, is to overcome our habitual, taken for granted ways of relating to place. In that regard, Paul Cézanne's view on how painting can be a source of inspiration. The French painter was well-aware that he needed to know something about geology, geometry and planes, to ground his artistic process – elementary knowledge for example of the different colours of geological soils, and in the case of the mountain Sainte-Victoire, which he painted so many times, of the structure and forms of the rock formations. However, Cézanne held that it was through the act of painting itself that he attained the clear-sightedness that allowed him to see the interconnectedness of things. More-over, he believed that the feelings the artmaking aroused in him would in their turn affect others at a point of their sensibility: "It gave me a great thrill to realize that. If I can convey that thrill to others through the mysterious effect of my colours, won't they get a richer ... sense of the universal?" One of the

things Cézanne wanted to find out was what is there in common between phenomena as they appeared to him (say, a pine tree) and how they were in reality: "If I were to paint that" he pondered, "wouldn't it be the realization of that part of nature which lies before our eyes, presenting us with a picture? ... Conscious trees!" He felt, that when he painted the landscape, it was expressing itself through him and he became its consciousness. Seeing the world this way one would feel how everything is related to oneself: "I'd like to paint space and time so that they become forms of colour sensibility, since I sometimes imagine colours as great noumenal entities, living ideas, beings of pure reason. With which we can commune. Nature isn't at the surface; it's in depth. Colours are the expression, on this surface, of this depth." [2]

One of the characteristics of the arts-based environmental education (AEE) that I practice is that it encourages participants to be receptive to nature in new and uncommon ways. Its premise is that efforts to learn about our environment can effectively take their starting point in a facilitated artistic activity, usually conducted in groups. We can approach the world afresh through art. Our experience of the place and the landscape in which we find ourselves can be new and different as a result of partaking in artmaking activities that challenge the everyday conceptualization of the world; suddenly we look at a plant, an animal or even a landscape as if we see them for the first time in our life. English author and playwright Eden Phillpotts wrote in 1919 that "the universe is full of magical things patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper." [3] In my research of AEE, I found that the defamiliarizing effect of artmaking can create favourable conditions for participants to move away from merely according to habit (on "autopilot"). The open-ended structure contributes to the creation of a learning arena in which participants potentially experience a sense of wonder and begin to acquire new understandings. In a time when young people especially come less and less outdoors, I suggest that it can be an opening move to cut through the indifference for nature and eco-illiteracy that seems so widespread today. Rather than referring to artmaking as exclusively coming forth from talent, skill or mastery, I want to bring to the fore it's basic meaning as a human activity that consists of deliberately arranging items in a way that

influences and affects one or more of the senses, emotions, and intellect.

In Art Heals, expressive arts therapist Shaun McNiff describes how he facilitates sessions with groups of participants who are encouraged to enter in a conversing mode with the paintings they make. He contends that images generate stories, and that one can enter into an "imaginal dialogue" with them; we can respond to pictures in ways that correspond to what he calls their "spirits." We are caught by surprise through "the infusion of spirit that arrives unexpectedly."<sup>[4]</sup> At that point, the controlling mind relaxes its grip and allows spontaneous expression to form itself into fresh structures. This is how Kandinsky put it: "In a mysterious, puzzling, and mystical way, the true work of art arises "from out of the artist." Once released from him, "it assumes its own independent life, takes on a personality, and becomes a self-sufficient, spiritually breathing subject that also leads a real material life: it is a being ... [and] possesses - like every living being - further creative, active forces."<sup>[5]</sup> For Kandinsky, a "true" work of art leads a full inner life. The word he used for this life-force was *Klang*, spiritual reverberation. McNiff holds that the image of the painting can be brought to life in a way that opens up many new possibilities for interaction. His method requires one to establish an emphatic connection with the expressions of an image. This mode of artistic process is a way of interpreting through an ongoing active imagination, thus accessing the imaginative expression and potential of the artwork we have released in the world.

The distinctive function of works of art, says writer and philosopher Bruce Baugh, is to reorient the experience of the perceiving subject. Peculiarly, the art work itself determines the organization of this experience: "the world of the work of art ... is none other than that of the perceiving subject as transformed by the work. An art work makes this world its own according to the depth and singularity of the transformation it effects."<sup>[6]</sup> A work of art, says Baugh, is something "that exists in order to be perceived". This aspect of "perceivability," to me, alludes to what may be called "latent properties" in the artwork which only manifest themselves to the extent that we are receptive to them. We need a degree of estrangement to be open to the emanations that spring from the artwork that is in front of us. By allowing the artwork to organize our

experience, according to Baugh, it is given "a power over us sufficient to alter our experience of the world from its very foundations". And thus it achieves its epiphany. Crucial for him is that an authentic work of art must have an end that cannot be understood in terms of our own. It resists our every-day understanding of the world. By consequence, experiences of the natural world induced by art may also redefine our conceptualization of nature and the manifestations of life we find there.

I believe Baugh's understanding of how the aesthetic object transforms our experience is meaningful as well for understanding the impact of artmaking as process. As we saw, McNiff provides an illustration of how such transformation is brought about in artmaking, through a dialogue with the nascent artwork, as it matures further and further. Gerhard Richter once conceded that when he is working on a picture, he feels that "something is going to come, which I do not know, which I have been unable to plan, which is better and wiser than I am."<sup>[7]</sup>

In the AEE activities that I facilitate it may occur as well that emerging properties are evoked. It happened poignantly during one recent session of working with clay, in a group activity which I call little-me making. Here, the human body and its organs are thematized in the artmaking. Participants sculpture a miniature version of their own body from clay and do this in a guided fashion with their eyes closed. Step by step I lead them to moulding and assembling the different body parts. The activity centres on the participants' inner environment or, phrased differently, that part of nature that includes the human body, in an effort to overcome a strict dichotomy between inner and outer landscape. At the moment the participants are about to mould their neck and throat, I ask them to reach for a cup of water in front of them, again with the eyes closed. One participant confided to me afterwards that he felt that in the making of a little-me there was an element of "bearing witness". One is amazed, he said, when one at last opens the eyes and actually sees the figure that one has made which, is so to speak, "looking back at you." In other circumstances, he added, his experience of artmaking was much more one of "stepping-back" from time to time from the emerging artwork, to make judgments and, if necessary or desirable, to change or add something along the way.

necessary or desirable, to change or add something along the way. This participant perceived the drinking of the water as a "reverential gesture", a threshold experience before commencing with the formation of the clay head. For him there was a latent meaning in the swallowing of the water which manifested itself to him through the process.

In an interview I had with philosopher and cultural ecologist David Abram, I asked him if he could relate to moments when one is creating for example a painting and at a certain instance one has the sensation that it is looking back at you. One may think that one is the creator, the one in control, but in some sense one perhaps is not. This is how Abram responds:

It's not you! What we create out of ourselves is never just created by ourselves alone. It is always this co-creation with the wider life of the Earth. And so, in some way, it is the otherness that sometimes we find looking back at us from the canvas that we have started dabbing with our pigments, or from the rock or the stone, or from a poem that I've started crafting, or the page. It partakes of the otherness of wild nature itself. It is like another animal staring back at me, and examining me. Or at least it is borne from the interaction between myself and the strange self of the world. (D. Abram, personal communication, November 12, 2010)

In the Western mystery tradition, the concept that perhaps comes closest to this idea of images and narratives acquiring their own integrity, is evocation. The word evoke stems from the Latin *ex* ("out") and *voco* ("call"). For anthropologist Stephen Tyler, evocation is neither presentation nor representation: "It presents no objects and represents none, yet it makes available through absence what can be conceived but not presented.... It overcomes the separation of the sensible and the conceivable, of form and content, of self and other, of language and the world."<sup>[8]</sup>

Coming to the end of these reflections, I want to underscore that one's expectations shouldn't be too high of the impact that an artmaking

session that only lasts a couple of hours may have - for most people it is a rare interval in time that is, as it were, cut out from the rest of their habitual life. It seems to me that arts-based environmental education first and foremost helps bring about the ignition and augmentation of their fascination and curiosity, centred in an increased awareness of their own body and its interactions with the world, and occasionally it may lead to a new and deep experience of one's connection to nature. Starting from this basic, down-to-earth level, may actually be a proper springboard for developing strategies to cope with current ecological issues. After all, the sense of wonder, which can be brought about by the defamiliarizing through art, seems to be an indispensable quality when seeking to refresh one's personal relationship and engagement with the land that nourishes us. Jan van Boeckel

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## Sascha Grierson: The Land: 2013

1. <http://www.soilassociation.org/aboutus/ourhistory>
2. <http://www.permaculture.org.uk/permaculture-association/history>
3. <http://slowfood.com/international/1/about-us>
4. <http://www.soilassociation.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=P3MUIvkGHCs&tqid=116>
5. <http://www.soilassociation.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=whbpEnZUd7A%3d&tqid=1984>

## Tristan Gooley: The Sky

'The Pico de Teide is not situated in the Tropics...' Humboldt, A., p. 36.  
 'air-conditioned, bright canteens ...'; 'tinned minds, tinned breath'. Betjeman, J., 'Slough', *passim*, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire/bigread/bigread\\_betzemanshtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/berkshire/bigread/bigread_betzemanshtml)  
 Charles Darwin also remembers the coldness of the air: Darwin, C., p. 319.  
 'The sky was perfectly delicious, sweet enough...' Muir, J., pp. 188-9.  
 The Navajo Indians see the air as providing awareness, thought and speech: Abram, D., p. 237.  
 'On this hot morning stripped of leaves and tartar...' Van der Post, L., p. 108.  
 Cities, from the ancient Teotihuacan in Mexico to the modern Washington DC: Aveni, A., pp. 129-57.

## Jan Van Boeckle: Engaging with landscape through artmaking

1. Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods. Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. New York: Algonquin Books.
2. Paul Cézanne, as quoted by Joachim Gasquet (1991) in his Joachim Gasquet's Cézanne: A Memoir with Conversations. London: Thames and Hudson, pp. 165-166.
3. Eden Philpotts (1919). *A Shadow Passes*. New York: The MacMillan Company.
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## Iliyana Nedkova: Su Grierson at the Intersection of Art, Land and Politics

1. Please see pages 6-7 for John Brennan's contribution to this artist's book where he argues that our rural environment comprises two types of landscapes - protective (with a conservation agenda) and productive (referring to renewable energy, food production, etc).
2. Please see pages 14-15 for the artist's statement for her work under the same title *Marking Time* (1992-2004) - an impressive photographic suite of 425 works shot in 15 countries - graphically tracing our connection with nature through our habit of marking trees for decoration and disease, destruction and navigation, control and celebration.
3. We should be mindful of what Sven Lüticken in *The Films of De Rijke/De Rooij*. London: ICA, Institute of Contemporary Art (2002) describes as 'a cunning ideological ploy' where painting remains the most privileged medium for large sections of the art world. Invoking the great history of painting is still an effective prestige (and price) enhancing strategy.
4. Please see page 18 for the artist's statement for her work *Slice* (2004) - a precursor of the current publication which reinvents the traditional artist's monograph by revering in the diverse opinions and actions we undertake towards our land and landscape.
5. Menhirs refers to the long standing stones which the nomadic hunters and shepherds of the Paleolithic period erected first and unwittingly established the public art of the open space.
6. In 1917 artist Marcel Duchamp, the grandfather of conceptual art, proposed to appropriate the tallest building in the world at the time as one of his works known as *readymades*. By selecting the Woolworths Building, the neo-gothic landmark on New York's Broadway, Duchamp was revolutionising the concept of art. Not unlike Duchamp, Grierson attributed aesthetic value to pieces of urban architecture, sited in scenic rural location. Ordinary objects are thus elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist and a shift of context.