Jan van Boeckel with students of EKA in Lahemaa national park, March 2017

Interview with Jan van Boeckel

Anneli Porri

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Anneli Porri is Lecturer at the Department of Art Education at the Estonian Academy of Arts.

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Let's start with a map of the current situation of education today amidst of rapid change in the world as we knew it. What are the main tensions for you if you'd describe what education today is and what it would be (in a perfect world)?

Well, it is difficult for me, within the space of this interview, even to try to present a comprehensive map of the current situation in education. The world is indeed changing very fast. My impression is that much of the education that we have today is not responding adequately to the challenges. In my opinion, we ought to prepare pupils and students better for what it means to face radical uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity. The environmental challenges, particularly the climate crisis, present us with so-called wicked problems, of which it is doubtful if they can be solved, for as soon as we address one problem, a new related problem pops up elsewhere. Much of our education today is still based on knowledge transfer, and on what Gert Biesta has termed "the learning economy": the duty rather than the right to learn. Standardized tests and

preparing the learner for the market place. In a more perfect world, as you term it, students would seek education on basis of their curiosity, their wish to acquire knowledge and wisdom, their desire to search for truth rather than to see their education as a temporary station in their building of a career. If education is valued only on basis of its output, for example the number of students that gain their degree in the shortest time possible and in the most efficient manner, then we as educators are not helping them in the best way we could to acquire and strengthen the kind of competencies that they will need to navigate the future, the "postnormal" times that are coming.

In your field of enquiry there are three large topics: art making, ecology and sustainability in education, and teaching practices. In your personal practice, they are entangled and almost inseparable. How do you design your research to keep the strengths and virtues from those areas with you?

Yes these themes are intricately connected for me. I see it as a triangle: between education, art, and ecology/environment. By moving oneself along the sides of this triangle, it is inevitable that one sooner or later engages with themes related to the concern for sustainability. In my view, we need much more inter- and even transdisciplinary research as many issues are indeed fundamentally related. My own art making and teaching feeds my efforts to remain versatile and to keep both my thinking and practice afresh.

Another aspect here is the value of aesthetics. Originally, in old Greece, aesthesis meant to perceive the world through the senses. I think that art practice can be a great way to evoke sensorial impressions and to work with them. Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa coined this beautiful notion, "to think with our hands". That can be extended to the rest of the body. We are not only mind and brain, there is more than only "*cogito ergo sum*". In deep aesthetic experience, said the American philosopher John Dewey, the perceiver and the perceived are one, there is no distinction of self and object. The two are so fully integrated that each disappears. Why is this so important? I think because one way to look at the ecological crisis we are facing today is to see it as essentially an aesthetic crisis. The big problem is that we may turn numb toward the world; the discouraging news of disaster after disaster hardly seems to impact us anymore. To some extent we have effectively become *an*-esthetized. And if we really want to do something about the problems that we are faced with, exactly the *opposite* ought to happen, I think. We should become *more* sensitive, we must somehow increase our level of care. For we tend to defend only those things that we really have strong feelings about.

Related to this is the link between aesthetics, as relating to the world through the senses, and beauty. Gregory Bateson's special way of looking at beauty was that he equated it with "being sensitive to the pattern that connects": to have an eye and ear for the larger context, the relationships *between* phenomena.

There is also a more philosophical aspect of beauty that I find relevant here, its quality in the moral domain. I am thinking here of the contrast between so-called moral acts and beautiful acts. When one performs a moral act one does it because the ethical law or a moral sense of duty prescribes that this is the desired behaviour, and then one does it, but reluctantly. A beautiful act is an act that is also ethically the "just" thing to do. The difference with a moral act is that you do it on basis of what your inner voice tells you to do: what is the appropriate kind of behaviour that the situation calls for? Nobody has to raise his or her finger to tell you how you should behave. You perform the desirable action with joy, even if it is difficult, because it runs *parallel* with your inclinations, with what you want to do. It was Immanuel Kant who made this distinction, and the Norwegian environmental philosopher Arne Naess was very much inspired by this. He said that the environmental movement would do well if it promoted beautiful acts rather than moral acts, because the effect goes deeper and lasts longer.

To me, artistic practice can be a great way to encourage people to perform beautiful acts, especially

when we are looking for new ways to connect them to nature. Artmaking could arouse people to pay more attention to this inner voice, that it indeed may feel the most proper thing to do, to care deeply and selflessly for the environment.

You held an open lecture at EKA about education in the age of climate fear and deep uncertainty. Your central term was open-ended arts-based practice. What is that and why do we need that in today's unstable world?

Open-ended arts-based practice is indeed key for me. What it basically means is that, at the beginning of an artful activity, you intentionally leave it open where it is going to lead – both you and other participants. To me, such an approach has value in many different ways. Most importantly perhaps, in that open-ended approaches push you and participants to move beyond routine, away from a tendency to opt for giving the "socially desired" answer, or the path of least resistance, so to speak. In a radical open artful process you cannot easily fall back on your "autopilot mode". What do I mean by autopilot? Well, let me give this example: if you ask a child at the preschool level to draw a tree, often the tree that it will sketch will have a lot of personal character. It may not look like a tree in its details and its overall shape, but there may be some distinct features recognizable such as a few identifiable blades. However, more or less by the time it reaches the age of seven, this child, and almost all people, start to draw trees by making two parallel lines that are filled up with brown colour. And on top of this comes a simple cloud form that they fill up with uniform green. That is the stereotypical tree that they then may well repeat during the rest of their life – their, what I would call, "autopilot tree". It is the kind of tree that one "can get away with": if you draw such a tree, you may feel that you are "safe". Everybody will recognize it as a tree. And then, when the same child or adult is asked at some point to make a drawing of the actual forest that happens to be in front of them, these autopilot trees show up again. Even though the bark of the trees is not always brown, still many people automatically put that colour there.

So, in short, art practice to me is first and foremost about learning to perceive the world "with fresh eyes". Not repeating what you already know, but really paying attention. And when the outcome remains unknown, especially in more opened-ended art teaching and practice, the practitioner is left no choice but to improvise, probing his or her way forward in the moment. Einstein is said to have stated that we can't solve our problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them. In other words, in order to address them adequately, we have to 'jump' a level.

To me open-ended approaches in art education – and not only there, but in many other fields of education as well – provide a kind of training to be able to hold out with the major challenges that are coming our way, and which are not so easily solved. The poet John Keats called it "negative capability": to be able to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."

In 2006 you were part of the British Educational Research Association's enquiry about potential and challenges of developing STEAM education. This is one on the most thorough analysis about adding arts to the "strong subjects". The most important part of the work is underlining the idea of creative teaching practices. What would be the effective solution for incorporating arts into teaching?

As I see it, art could be an integral part of science teaching, not as "the icing on the cake", or as some fun element added to education, but as a feature that can be thoroughly meaningful *in itself*. STEAM education is about giving a place for the Arts in teaching Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. Thus far, the arts and the "hard sciences" have indeed been, for the most part, two wholly different cultures. In practice, if we look around us, we start to see more and more forms of cooperation between art and science

coming about. I think this is an important development. There is not only one frame of correct answers. Art can bring in a larger, more comprehensive picture. In education, however, it is vital that the different fields and subjects are lend equal weight, including the arts. Art has intrinsic value, it should not need an instrumental justification in (science) education. Educational philosopher Gert Biesta once pointedly asked: "where is the research that shows that mathematics will make you a better musician or doing physics will make you a better dancer?" Almost without exception people approach this the other way round: for example they may want to try to heighten the status of art by valuing it as an attribute to building a career in *another* field which is regarded as something less vague and supposedly more serious. At any rate a field that would have a higher social status.

People often say that art helps you to think out of the box. To me, this is only half of the story. Indeed this is a great value of artistic research and expression, to go beyond the boundaries. But it can equally be said that art is about thinking *within* the box: to work *with* the resistance, the blockages, the boredom, the frustration at times. Igor Stravinsky said that the more constraints one imposes, the more "one frees oneself of the claims that shackle the spirit." Indeed, a stringent limitation, when appreciated differently, can turn into an enabling constraint. We can learn to work *with* our mistakes, rather than to discard them too soon. With all the new borders (mental and physical) that the climate crisis now introduces into our lives ever more prominently, I believe that artful practice in teaching can bring another meaningful contribution here to the ongoing conversation.