

Art and the Environment - An Art-based Approach to Environmental Education

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In the beginning of my lecture I need to say a few words about my background. I work as a lecturer in an art teacher training unit where a course in Environmental Education has been an obligatory part of studies already for 30 years. The emphasis of the course has differed during the years.

Initially the ideas were the consequence of our first awakening to environmental threats. Then we became very interested in documenting and defending culturally valuable built environments. Later on ecophilosophy and the example of some environmental artists at home and abroad have inspired our work with art education students as well as with pupils at schools. Ecological consciousness combined with personal experiences, and with the sense of ethical and aesthetic qualities form the basis of our methodology. However, the priority art and design is not in the first place preservation, criticism or being just sensible.

It means creating: producing something of quality which is new and meaningful, whether it be objects, art works curricula or ideas or life style. Evaluation of this artistic production must be done with sharp ecological criticism, but the criticism itself does not create anything. The pleasure and enjoyment of creating is one of the main strengths and advantages of art based environmental education. However, I need to emphasize that artistic production often concerns producing images, visions and qualifications of immaterial things.

As educators, we all are challenged by the environmental imperatives of today. As an art teacher, I try to meet these challenges with the strategies and methods derived from the experience and knowledge of the abundant art and art education world. Lately, I have as an artist

and as a teacher found it more and more important to go back to the very basics of the process and skill of perception. How do we perceive? How do we receive the messages of the environment both the green as well as the built one? How do our students perceive, what are their collective experiences of their own environment? What affects or defines ways of seeing and experiencing? We are culturally dependent and programmed by our past which has led our culture to its current troubles. To see differently would mean that we acted differently.

Certainly it has been said many times that there is something fundamentally harmful in our western perceptions of nature. The way we separate ourselves from it, seeing it as an object and thus feeling allowed to abuse it, controlling it for our selfish needs is evident. It is most obvious that these attitudes and behaviour prevent us from hearing and seeing, from receiving with sensitivity, preventing us from being humble and respectful. It seems to me that so many people of our culture have because of commercial manipulation, - stress, noise, competition and so on - lost the simple but marvellous skill of enjoying the pleasures of seeing, moving and hearing, either alone or together with other people. Because of this, more and more artificial needs and material satisfactions are produced, mostly at nature's expense. Shopping, eating and dangerous addictions have people in their lethal grip.

What do I do as an art teacher? I can answer for myself individually but what can I say about environmentally oriented teachers of other subjects? Not much. But since art touches the heart and it is the speech of the soul, as James Hillman the great American psychologist says,

without artistic flavour, education is often cold, dry and leaves most young people unmoved. Maybe the best teachers of history are good at the art of story telling, or good teachers of chemistry may give moving aesthetic presentations in the laboratory. I know a biology teacher who opens young eyes to nature inside the city by showing the students his exceptional and marvellous photographs. A teacher of ecology would probably get his messages through better by adding adventure, drama or humour to his repertoire. A pastor I know has found it most rewarding to arrange carefully relaxed situations for teenagers to spend some time in a natural surrounding, simply to experience aesthetic pleasure and peace in solitude. He believes that beneficial and give depth to later discussions about views and meanings of life.

Artistic flavour comes from both delicate and rough beauty, from surprises, adventures, experiences through one's senses, humour, awe, inner movement of the heart and soul. Much flavour is not called art but is an aesthetic and spiritual quality of everyday life that can be enjoyed without burdening the environment. Art is a meaningful condensation of images, flavours and relations. So when I say art in this context I believe that everybody knows already that I do not mean certain western traditions requiring huge artist egos, the lonely geniuses of past and present, but all of us. Everybody is an artist as Joseph Beuys, a famous and very creative environmental artist has said, along with many others.

What do I do as an environmentalist and as an art teacher? To put it rather simply: I try to support fresh perception, the nearby, personal enjoyment and pleasure of perceiving the world from the heart. To achieve that, it is necessary to stop, be quiet, have time and feel psychologically secure in order to perceive the unknown, the sometimes wild and unexpected. At times conscious training of the senses, decoding the stereotype, is needed. I aim at an openness to sensitivity, new and personal ways to articulate and share one's environmental experiences which might be beautiful, disgusting, peaceful or threatening. I support and facilitate the conversation with the environment.

There are many ways to initiate a work from the stillness and quiet. For example the simple task of shaping or constructing something which tells about you and your presence, but is humble and in harmony with the surroundings and the atmosphere of it. ... Fragility itself can be the message, or the changing light caught into your sculpture.

We believe that sensitivity to the environment can be developed by artistic activities which emphasize the special qualities and values of every material used. They can be appreciated by touching, feeling and shaping, and also by studying the lifespan of materials and products.

The aim is certainly not to recommend a return to a primitive life style. But it is a way to remind us of basic realities and processes so hidden and easily forgotten in our modern way of life.

Get your clay from the earth and learn primitive ways to model and produce ceramics in a self made kiln. Weave a ribbon. Build a hut and stay there overnight. Make felt of sheep wool, cook pinecones in order to dye cloth, gouge out a boat or canoe. Build a traditional wooden fence. These are not necessary survival skills of today, but they are a real and energizing aesthetic method for recognizing the premises of life. The art camp lasts only for some days, but the learning results last much longer. These experiences alone do not lead to a new, more conscious lifestyle, but they can certainly build a foundation.

Recycling is nowadays accepted as a rational, sensible and necessary activity and our responsibility. However, the idea of recycling often seems somewhat boring and does not normally have aesthetic attraction. I think recycling can be much more than just a necessity. A part of it can be an inspiring play; art with materials and objects. These pictures are from a recycling fair where art education students had their workshop. Making new clothes from old ones, vases and drinking glasses from empty bottles, a new kind of a rocking chair from old chairs, textiles from rags and paper scraps and a hammock from old blue jeans. - The rationality or material profit of this project was probably not great, but creating and recycling at the same time is a very sustainable and joyful concept. This

recycling-creating combination also has fascinating symbolic and spiritual connotations.

Thus far I have been talking about materials and objects. How about pictorial expression, inner and outer images? Landscape painting as such is probably not environmental education. But it can be if it is done with environmental consciousness, understanding the interrelation of the visual processes, by which I mean biological as well as cultural processes. The painting process itself can also be study of environmental processes. The students spent many hours in the woods painting not what they saw but how they felt the processes of growth and change: the energy and interrelation.

Another totally different example of pictorial studies ... To find something often overlooked, to show it to others in an installation and then return it back where found is one of the creative ways to celebrate humble beauty and gifts of nature.

An artistic study of the environment may sometimes have an ironic flavour as in these two pictures.

This study of a leaf is a study of life forces and at the same has a tragical connection to the painter's life. She has recently learned that she has a very serious illness, and told me how the fresh, new, healthy green life of spring feels somehow so deeply unbearable. These two pictures are, among other things, good reminders of the fact that not only in this kind of situation but also elsewhere we are continually projecting ourselves into an outer reality. The way we see and experience our environment is deeply connected with our inner images and structures.

Here the students of the upper secondary level are doing their environmental art. They were asked to create their own symbols for the earth. Primitive art as well as the processes of earth were studied and then visualized in personal ways. They also had to take the factual environment, the park and the buildings and other paintings into consideration. One good question at the end of the project was "How is my individual creation connected to the whole?" Is it obtrusive or in a good dialogue.

To identify oneself or role play with the studied phenomenon is an established way to get to know it. How do you feel as a rock or as a moss? How do you feel and what do you say as a

building? This building says through a secondary school student. "The hem of my skirt is fluttering and you just peep". "My face looks dead but there is some life inside", says this house. "KB and JR did not respect me and I don't respect them", "I am young and beautiful with no dust on my shoulders".

All these examples have mainly been basic exercises. This photo reflects more developed artistic products of environmental education. It is an interesting publication of a student who first studied walking as art. What is it to experience a city by walking? How do you see and experience as a walker? How does the rhythm of walking affect your way of seeing and feeling and smelling and hearing? She walked around the shoreline of Helsinki and studied it phenomenologically. She also documented her walk in many more or less artistic ways. Then she connected social and historical studies of the changes in Helsinki's shoreline to her project and designed a handy pack of guiding cards for those who want to do their own walk.

One pedagogical theme in my series of slides is the ritual, or ceremony. Like the previous project of walking cards, the environmental ritual or performance can be an integrating and holistic process. Planning and shaping it may include personal feelings and experiences, as well as ecological knowledge and decisions which are analogical to our decisions in every day life situations. In a ritual, a problem can be shared, as well as joy and celebration. An artistic form experienced together can be a condensation of good energy.

The last section of this presentation consists of 30 selected photos taken by me and my students. They introduce a pedagogical strategy taking students away from their everyday urban environment to a Carelian village behind the Russian border. It is not further than 120 kilometres away from Finland but people there are still living in a most beautiful natural economy environment. Although I don't believe that the solution to ecological challenges is to go backwards, I am sure that we have a lot to learn from the people and the milieu of these old villages. As they speak Carelian language which is very close to Finnish we have no difficulty in talking with them. It is a positive cultural shock to

my students: the earthy and humble, yet high quality aesthetics of the village and life style fills them with awe. As the students say themselves, they come back changed. - These last slides will be presented without vocal descriptions but with music. The music is old orthodox chants that were totally forbidden during the Soviet rule but are now coming back. □