

Time and a Place's Spirit

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Environmental education at the Hämeenlinna School of Visual Art for children and young people has become known for its holistic environmental projects. Its operating principles consist of an intensive period of working outdoors for many days, strong experiences, and stimuli derived from archaeology. The traces left in different places by humans from bygone centuries, as well as the working methods and usage of old materials, have equally given subject matter to pedagogical activities. The art instructors' gradual initiation to old methods of building, working different materials and making objects has made it possible for children to experiment with the processing of leather, wool, stone, bone, wood, roots, clay, etc. They have, among other things, been involved in building and living in an iron-age house and countless huts, gouging punts out of aspen trunks, roasting bandits) lamb in the embers of a fire, making dishes, tools, hunting and fishing equipment, taking part in ceremonies and inventing rituals which have to do with work, the offerings of nature and the cycle of time.

"I consider it important that children get a grasp of where different materials come from, where from they have originated", Pekka Lehtimäki, the head teacher of the art school, tells us. "It is something that we have been alienated from in modern times. The fact that a child can see and experience, through his other own activities, what can be obtained from one tree or lamb presents them with a relationship towards materials and the ecosystem completely different from the one produced by the dominant consumer culture. Even the fact that all natural materials smell of something is

significant; an interesting and even astounding observation to a child, whose normal environment might be dominated by a somewhat clinical, odorless ideal.

"The starting point of our activities is, however, always the experience of a place, its history, and nature. Moreover, it is not primarily historical or natural-historical information obtained from books, but rises from the deepening of one's own sensations and experiences. For example, at the village of Lusi last summer we wanted the children to experience the beach the way it is now, to sense and enjoy it, and to make discoveries of their own. Naturally, as we continued, more knowledge-centered factors arose; for instance, what a certain bank on the shore told us about the settlement there long ago, or why European white elms thrived in this specific place. Such information was gained from somewhere else, but the important thing was that the children got acquainted with these surroundings at leisure, on their own terms. The archaeological, ethnographical, historical or natural-historical information put their mental images and imagination into action or gave them direction. At this particular shore, it was exciting to know that long ago, at this precise place, there actually was a route, following which you could reach even the distant Gulf of Finland. This provided subject matter for many tales. At some point, a couple of years ago, 'real information', or scientific information, started to become a constraint in the planning process and projects of us teachers. There was stress over what is trustworthy historical information and how closely we were confined to it. Our co-operation with representatives of scientific

knowledge only increased this pressure. It seemed like they thought that they were in possession of the knowledge, and our duty was to adopt it and convey it to the children, illustrated, but somehow readymade. We did not feel comfortable in this role, and even dared to doubt the knowledge of the scholars. One could speak of a kind of crisis between scientific and artistic knowledge which we personally experienced. It was clear that our pedagogical thinking was in danger of becoming somehow petrified, Now we have started to feel free to trust that a certain spirit is most important, not the precise, scientifically valid details. For example, we feel that it is quite an acceptable and practical method to imagine, together with the children, what a person might have felt a long time ago and how this person might have experienced his or her existence and surroundings. As we convey information from the past, as background for our work or to relish it, we do not at any point state or give the impression that we are dealing with the one and only correct truth. At all time the issue is that of adapting old things, inventing solutions and exploring how we can achieve different things, what we are experiencing, what we can do with our own hands, what kind of social relationships are formed and how we relate to this new (and old!) experience.

"When you encounter the surroundings in this way through your own senses and experiences, and when this kind of information from the past is involved, it begins to become rather clear that you cannot treat a place or specific environment just in any way you please. You have to listen to it and ask for its permission. Previously I myself did not question some of my own doings, my activities in this respect. Somehow, the important thing was just to do something, accomplish something interesting and solve technical problems. Now, for example, we have at our use a drawing of a bronze age house, or the remains of it, discovered in Nakkila. In the future, when we build something on the basis of this find, we will, indeed, comply to its form, etc. However, the spirit of the building location will obtain crucial importance. The place must be sensed,

experienced and studied. The discovery of spirit may reveal itself for instance in the final form of the house and the choice for the roof's material. The material must be found nearby.

"The most significant new, liberating pedagogical element in our projects is a working method which adapts drama. We began developing it last summer. We invited an actor-director from a theatre to join us, and together we searched for an appropriate role with which to work with children in projects such as these, involving time and the environment. For example, I became a blacksmith and began to look in myself for everything related to being a blacksmith: the character, movements and other things. When I worked with the children I acted from the basis of this role. All the other teachers also searched for an appropriate role for themselves with the help of the director. This has brought a new spirit and enjoyment to our entire activity, and the children are evidently satisfied with the outcome. Now, in the winter, when I am at the school of visual art and meet some of the children who took part in the summer project, they still like to remind me of my status as a blacksmith."

Pekka Lehtimäki's description raises the issue of the importance of material based on knowledge as an aid for environmental education. At the same time it is an example in which, according to the instructor, the burden of information begins to stiffen one's own artistic and pedagogical activity, using the qualifiers 'scientifically correct' and 'scientifically incorrect'. It may be difficult to move in the zone between science and art, but it is also rewarding. Perhaps it is exactly within this territory that the renewal of both science and art, as well as pedagogics, is initiated. The Hämeenlinna School of Visual Art has found a unique solution for combining artistic and scientific information, so that art-based environmental education can develop its own particular dimensions of feeling, imagination, inventiveness and ethics.

Pekka Lehtimäki was interviewed by Meri-Helga Mantere.