

Coming Back to the Senses

An Artistic Approach to Environmental Education

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Ecological consciousness combined with personal sensitivities and experiences form the basis of a certain methodology of education that I have started to call Art-based Environmental Education. It has been developed during 35 years with colleagues and students in a university level art teacher training unit in Finland.

Art means creating: producing something with quality which is new and meaningful, whether it are objects, art works, a curricula with aesthetic flavour, images or a life style... Evaluation of any artistic production must be done with sharp ecological criticism. For instance the flow of energy, cycling of matter, the interrelation of living systems connected to the work must be understood. But the criticism does not create anything. The pleasure and enjoyment of creating is one of the main strengths and advantages of art based environmental education.

As educators, we all are challenged by environmental imperatives of today. As an specialist of art I have tried to meet these challenges with the strategies and methods derived from the experience and knowledge of the abundant art and art education and even art therapy world. Some Finnish traditions connected with the forest and the international field of environmental art has been important sources of inspiration. Courses by Arne Naess and by James Hillman together with Margot Maclean and Mermer Blakeslee in Schumacher College strengthened me on the path of educational innovations.

I have as an artist and as a teacher and therapist 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 or reject the messages of the environment both the green as well as the built one? How do our students perceive, what are their individual and collective experiences of their environment? What affects or defines ways of perceiving and experiencing? How our often obvious blindness, deafness and insensibility occur? We are culturally dependent and programmed by our past which has led our societies to their current troubles. To perceive differently would mean that we acted differently. Or at least “better perceiving” is the necessary starting point to different ways, to creative changes in personal and collective decision making and lifestyles.

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 and otherwise receiving with sensitivity, preventing us of being humble and respectful. Commercial manipulation, material competition, stress, noise and constant hurry are certainly enemies of harmonious, beautiful life in the sense that it means loss of natural and simple talents and treasures of sensitivity .Because of this, more and more extreme artificial and stronger experiences of immediate satisfaction are offered by the

marketing and entertainment industry, mostly at nature's expense. Unceasing desire of shopping, overeating and other addictions have human souls in the lethal grip.

And what is my actual answer to the vision above as an art teacher? And generally speaking, what is art's place in environmental education? Art touches the heart and it is the speech of soul says James Hillman. It seems to me that without what I call artistic flavour all education tends to become cold and dry leaving most young people unmoved inside. Maybe the best teachers of history are masters in the art of story telling, influential chemistry teachers give aesthetic presentations in the laboratory. I know an urban biology teacher who opens young eyes to nature inside the city by showing the students his very exceptional and beautiful photos on views normally unseen. A pastor I know finds it most rewarding to arrange carefully relaxed situations for teenagers to spend some time in a peaceful natural surrounding before starting discussion about meanings of life. Artistic flavour comes from both delicate and rough beauty, sensuous experience, from surprises and awe, inner movement (emotion) of heart and soul. Much of this is not called art but is an aesthetic and spiritual quality of anyone's life that can be enjoyed without burdening or abusing environment. Art is a meaningful condensation of images, flavours and relations. So when I say art in this context I do not refer to the (hopefully) past western tradition of the art life requiring or supporting huge artist egos, the lonely geniuses of past and present. Instead I prefer to say like the most influential environmental artist Joseph Beuys that everybody is an artist. Everybody has potential sensing, perceiving, feeling and thinking capacities needed. My experience as an art therapist has proved it again and again that everybody has expressional skills. Everybody has a unique touch (like the unique fingerprints) and a unique voice and way to move, something valuable to add to the diversity. This happens if the circumstances are arranged so that they genuinely support creativity.

My method of art-based environmental education? To put it rather simply: I try to support fresh perception, the nearby, personal enjoyment and pleasure (and sometimes agony as well) of perceiving the world from the heart. To achieve that it is necessary to stop. Be quiet, have time and feel physically and psychologically secure in order to perceive the unknown, the delicate, the sometimes wild and unexpected. At times conscious training in the senses, decoding the cultural and personal 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 but also disgusting, peaceful but also threatening. The stereotype is so predominant - not only in perceiving but in articulating your nature experiences in words and pictures. I support and facilitate the subjective and often when the learning proceeds more and more unconventional conversations with the environment follow.

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 surroundings and the atmosphere of it. For instance fragility of an art work can be a message, or the changing light caught into your three dimensional installation and changing it along the circuit of the sun.

I 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 and utilizing the varying phases of the lifespan of materials used. When a pupil digs her clay from the earth, learn thousands of years old methods to model the clay, and produce ceramics in a self made kiln, when he weaves a ribbon, builds a hut and stay in there overnight, makes felt of sheep wool from the sheep he has learned to know, cook pine cones in order to dye cloth, gouge out a boat or canoe, he or she is not learning necessary survival skills of today but those activities are a real and

energising aesthetic method for recognizing the premises of life. When the art camp with these activities is kind of a drama lived in the roles and stories and songs of the ancient villagers the learning process goes on after homecoming. The apprentice of the village smith (one of the teachers) or weaver or fisherman will less likely be totally indifferent any more about materials and producing methods and consuming habits of today. The aim of this art education strategy is certainly not to recommend a return to a primitive life style or idealizing old times but it is a way to remind students in a concrete and effective way about basic realities and processes so hidden and easily forgotten in our contemporary way of life. Besides art and drama camps like this are an exciting and delightful way of learning. When so many adults complain today that children are so addicted to TV and videos and computers and spoiled by consumerism that they do not want to experience any inconvenience and toil, I do not agree. I prefer to think that those youngsters referred to have not had a chance to experience right kind of earth bound joys since the adult world has somehow prevented it.

The exercises and examples described above have been kind of basic art and environmental education work. Certainly there are artistically and environmentally more advanced projects included in art based environmental learning. For example one of my art education students based her thesis work for MA degree on the concept of walking as art. By her own long and alert walks in different environments in sunshine, rain and snow in different times of day and night she studied her sensory perceptions, experiences of rhythm, movement and space as a walker. Then she decided to make a walking study on the around 50 kilometres long shoreline of The City of Helsinki sometimes called The Daughter of the Baltic Sea. The student was fascinated by the aesthetics of the meeting line of the sea and land. She documented her walk with many artistic ways and later on connected historical studies to it. She found out facts and stories about the changes of the city shoreline

determined by different human activities of sea fare, fishing, building, commerce, industry and ideologies of city and landscape design. The last phase of her thesis work was to design a handy pack of guiding cards. Every card was a design of her drawings or her photos or old photos from archives and some short texts and detail maps. The pack was a tool for those Helsinki citizens who wanted to do their own walks, for instance three cards per day and learn to know their city by walking a stretch on a path sporadically unexpected and strange to them and from looking at the sea from unusual viewpoints. When running through the student's - the pioneer walker's-cards (published and marketed by the city itself) the walkers could enlarge their consciousness of man made changes on the shoreline and to contemplate on them. □