

# FROM ENVIRONMENTAL ART TO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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In M.H. Mantere (Ed.), (1995). *Image of the Earth: Writings on art-based environmental education*. (pp. 18-28) Helsinki, Finland: University of Art and Design.

**My article is based on practical experience in the areas of art education and environmental education. As an instructor, I have had the opportunity to plan and carry out environmental education projects for several years. My views are also influenced by my work as an environmental artist.**

Working in co-operation with representatives of other fields of knowledge has forced me to think more thoroughly about the role of art education as a part of environmental education, and to look for those elements which the visual arts can offer to environmental education, but which are lacking in other fields. My aim has been to create projects which are based on the tradition of art education, but which are also relevant to the new interdisciplinary and cultural-ecological philosophy of art education (see Käpylä, 1991, 1993).

After initial prejudice, art has been welcomed as part of environmental education, even to the extent that expectations are being placed on it. Environmental research is looking for new points of view and is striving to detach itself from scientific positivism, the tradition of 'knowledge is power' (see Maula 1994, 87-106). In the following, I will attempt to shed some light on the relationship between visual arts and the environment, concentrating mainly on environmental art. This way, it is possible to identify the underlying determinants which guide the preparation of instruction.

## **IN THE BEGINNING THERE IS OBSERVATION**

The artistic-aesthetic learning process involves observation, experience and increasing awareness in a holistic way. Observation is a core issue in interpreting and evaluating the

environment. What is more, exercising observational skills is an important goal in art education. It has been pointed out that visual art is actually a history of evolving and varying schemes of observation. The way in which we observe and describe our environment is, to a large extent, dominated by what we have learnt. Our observations are based on the sum of our previous experiences and our expectations of the future. Seeing requires conceptual facilities, mental preconditions, which are often passed unnoticed (Gombrich 1972, 28, 84-87, 175).

Recent research on environmental aesthetics has emphasized the importance of the phenomenal environment. In the words of Berleant (1992, 155): 'environments are not physical places but perceptual ones that we collaborate in making, and it is perceptually that we determine their identity and extent'. The starting point of aesthetic environmental education is precisely this phenomenal environment. Art, for its part, has a long tradition of studying the phenomenal environment.

## **VISUAL ART AND ENVIRONMENTAL OBSERVATION**

Many of the phenomena brought to our consciousness through art can be understood as the sharpening of schemes of observation and activity. The romantic artist climbed a mountain and created an aerial perspective model of

observation, teaching us to see the beauty of the dim shades of blue in the distance. The impressionists led us to observe the color of light determined by weather, and the beauty in the changes of natural phenomena. Art creates new ways of observing, and examining art can act as a model for seeing one's own everyday surroundings in a new way, enriching one's knowledge, experience and understanding. Observational schemes can also stiffen and become confining conventions. In this case there is great educational significance in enriching them. Re-examined aesthetic models lead to new models to observe, classify, understand and construct one's own relationship with the environment. Here the tasks of aesthetic environmental education and art education join together on a theoretical level. Both rise from ways of observation constructed by man, and both are models of reality based on these ways.

The similarity between the interpretation process of visual art and that of the environment has encouraged people to make rather far-reaching conclusions, for example Richardson (1976, 191): 'Since conventional aspects are involved in the appreciation of nature, then I conclude that nature-appreciation conventions unequivocally belong to the art world, and are a variant or type of art-appreciation conventions.' However, we do not have to identify the environmental world with the art world to such an extent to find a mutual educational task. Art itself presents many environmental viewpoints. It can initiate and direct an individual's or a whole society's reflection on a relationship with the environment. Meeker (1994, 116) reminds us, that both art and ecology are abstract, man-made models of reality: 'A common ground exists between art and ecology which may help to end the long strife between thought and intuition, science and art, and possibly even that between mankind and nature.'

## **ENVIRONMENTAL ART – ART DEFINED BY A PLACE**

Art is one means by which people rearrange the environment. It clearly reflects its maker's, user's and the existing society's values and relationships to the environment. A work of art is a sort of crystallization of values, reflecting the thinking of its community. This is why understanding art enables us to notice also other, more everyday, incidents and structures between people, their sphere of activity and their environment. From this basis we can find three categories of relationship between art and the environment. (The classification is partly based on Robert Irving's thinking, 1985.) A work of art can:

1. Dominate a place (the subjugation and conquest of the environment)
2. Be characteristic to a place (the adaptation to the environment)
3. Be defined by a place, environmental art (created by the environment)

The works of art which belong to the first category are usually made in the artist's studio without taking their future location into account. Their purpose is to act as a reminder of, or reference to something other than the environment or the artistic expression. The works do not have an identity of their own in relation to a particular place or artist. They overpower their surroundings and subject them to serve their own intentions and ends. The work's symbolic value exceeds the importance of the artistic expression. Usually the works are societal reminders or manifestations of power; images of the status of the people who erected them (e.g. statues of rulers, monuments, murals). A central location is chosen for exhibiting them, and they are usually mounted on a pedestal to emphasize their distinction from, and often also their command over, the surroundings and their actual users.

The works belonging to the second category, characteristic to a place, are likewise made in the artist's studio, but are assembled at the site of exhibit. The work's suitability to its surroundings is taken into consideration in its placing and evaluation (e.g. in its proportions, materials). This process slightly approaches the idea of integrating a work into a place. The motivation for the work's existence may arise from a place or the presence of a space (e.g. an empty square, suitable for a statue). The work is no longer simply collective; instead, it begins to gain meaning through the individual artist. The viewer is required to have a certain knowledge of art: history, technique, style, materials, the artist's means of expression, etc. Such works are very often modernist works of art, striving to function purely on their visual references.

The motivation of a work of art belonging to the third category rises completely from the environment. The form, material and even the birth process of the work takes the location into account. The surrounding space in itself may act as an artistic element. This requires that the birth process begins with a close orientation to the location: sitting, watching, smelling, walking – in other words a holistic exploration of the place. The completed process, however, must not rest solely on empirical means of gaining information. Usually the process also includes orienting to the history of a place, the stories it tells, and the meanings given to it by its users. This means that, in scientific terms, the stage preceding the conception of such a work of art is called 'interdisciplinary field work'.

Moving from art that dominates a place to art characteristic to a place and, finally, to environmental art, has been typical in the recent development of visual art. At the same time, a new model for the integration of innovative art and educational processes has emerged for the benefit of art education. This phenomenological view of art and its functional principles is also strongly linked to environmental issues, both to ecological ones and to values and actions

concerning the constructed environment. The creative birth process of a work of art defined by a place is a good example of an activity involving experience-based learning. Formal education has called for such a learning process, where information is gained through personal experiences, and which is anchored to lasting practical knowledge through communal activity.

### **THE BACKGROUND OF ENVIRONMENTAL ART: THE ARCHETYPAL LANDMARKS**

The trend towards environmentally oriented visual art, which started in the 1960s, has obtained many names according to different points of view. In Finland, the general phenomenon is described by the terms 'earth art' and 'environmental art', which are often used as synonyms. The terms 'earth art', 'land art', 'field art', 'site art' and 'environmental art' classify the art form more specifically. All these concepts describe the artist's experimental studies with natural elements like water, snow, ice and grass, and the use of natural forces like gravity, wind and growth in art. The birth of environmental art as an avant-garde phenomenon is clearly connected to the same trend as ecology, in its awareness of the problems in Western culture and looking for alternative models.

One can also find other parallels like feminism, the 'earth mother' cult, the hippie movement and the search for the Orient, the interest in Zen, the idea of the holistic work of art and minimalism. Environmental art can, in my view, be understood as the environmental philosophy of the visual arts (see Walker 1977, 108, 42-43; Levanto 1990, 77-125; Sandqvist 1991, 13-26).

Environmental art was born as earth art in the 1960s. At that time, the modernist idea of the meaningful form was accepted by the visual field as an established truth and the focus of interest. Architects and artists made and remade forms which were considered characteristic to the human species and human existence all over the world and at all times. Studies in Gestalt

psychology and Jung's theories of archetypes influenced these views. The simplification of forms and various working methods lead to works of large sizes, which immediately received a lot of criticism. They were even seen as a threat to the environment.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ART AS AN ECOLOGICAL RISK**

Seeing environmental art as an ecological risk is clearly connected to environmental ethics. This view is based on separating the work of art and nature from one another. Their aesthetic character is considered to be different. The aesthetics of a work of art is seen as permanent and static. It is not considered to have the right to influence the aesthetics of nature, which are dynamic, changeable and process-like. Environmental works are considered to be instrumental and utilitarian, they are seen as traces, which derive from human needs, injuring and offending the environment. The value of a work of environmental art is defined in the same way as the value of a grave pit or a mine. This point of view also received support among environmental aestheticians (see Carlson 1985, 224-231). According to Kinnunen (1981, 53), aesthetics which do not concern themselves with moral values or an undamaged natural process, are grotesque in their anthropocentrism.

The works which have received criticisms such as those mentioned above are usually massive and permanent; they consist of a great deal of material to move, requiring lorries and caterpillars, and are clearly in contrast with their surroundings. Especially in the United States, around the time the art form was born, commitment to minimalism produced works toned by such utilitarianism (cf. Beardsley 1984, 10-11).

### **ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION AS A HEALER OF THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT**

Environmental art can also be seen as a

possibility to restore, for example, marks which industry has made in the environment. This idea emphasizes the process-like character of environmental art, and its similarities with the processes of nature. In this case, environmental art is a healing process of an injured place.

Smithson (Hobbs 1982) used the term 'anti-place' when he described the ruining of the regional identity of America's roadsides. Roads everywhere were made out of the same kind of material, they were lined by the same stones, their banks grew the same vegetation eaten by the same animals, and the roads were bordered by the same service stations and motels. Building roads wiped out the traveler's possibility to experience the character of a place. A similar birth process of anti-places seems to be going on in our own forests, on the fringes of our cities, on the ski slopes of our mountains and in our villages. The fact that such anti-places have come to exist, and some groups of people are forced to live in these areas, has been seen by Foucault as an example of structural violence in our community. In this sense, aesthetic environmental issues are an exercise of power. Art has always given us new observational models, and the 'Smithsonian' tradition has helped us to notice these buffer zones of people and nature, the anti-places, left at the sides of our cities and settlements. Creating and marking places with spatial and temporal experience became one of the aims of environmental art (see Hobbs 1992).

### **MARGINAL NOTES IN THE ENVIRONMENT: THE SYMBOLS OF EXISTENCE**

European environmental art has drawn ideas from the United States. Initially, many artists' starting point was the use of archetypal symbols, similar to those the Americans used. However, their method was completely different. The large amount of material and the moving of masses was replaced by very slight interference with nature or the use of very sensitive and fragile materials (for example, A. Goldsworthy, R. Long).

This way the artist's connection to nature is respectful, almost sacral. It is as if the work refers to nature's own beauty or significance. The work of art opens one's eyes to see something ordinary and everyday in a new way. This way the work refines one's perceptions and makes one more sensitive to the environment. The artist or the viewer of the work does not need to overcome the environment, but rather to re-discover it. Such a work of art, which considers respect for the processes of nature a primary concern, can go far indeed in terms of immateriality and non-interference with the environment. Climbing a mountain can be a work of art. What about a hiking trip to the mountains, a full pail of berries on the side of a Northern hill, shooting the rapids, the stroke of a fishing rod's line in a stream? The importance of aesthetic reflection is growing, the borderlines between art and philosophy are disappearing, environmental art and environmental philosophy merge together.

Underlying this tradition, one can often find an interest in the nature-relationship of Eastern philosophies and indigenous cultures. There are also traits of nature mysticism (see Beardsley 1984, pp. 41-54).

### **ENVIRONMENTAL PROCESSES AS WORKS OF ART**

In its search for new forms, following the reign of modernism, environmental art has abandoned archetypal symbols to some extent, and moved on to a more conceptual and process-oriented identity. Many works of environmental art can, in fact, be seen as environmental processes which aim to change environmental attitudes on an individual or community level. These processes can relate to or support nature's own healing processes.

For example, Christo's 'Surrounded Island'-project can be seen as looking after the environment. During the two weeks he built his work, Christo and his crew cleaned all the litter

from the eleven islands he encircled with pink fabric. Nevertheless, he had to pay the local conservationists a considerable amount of money in order for them to permit the construction of the work (see Spies, 1985, 15, 28-47). It is interesting, that many works of art that gently touch (disturb) nature's processes are condemned, while the typical examples of utilitarian thinking are accepted as natural and necessary human activities: gravel pits which eat away natural ridges; trunk roads which violate the landscape, and ski slopes which scar the sides of mountains. The possibility environmental art offers as a part of culture-ecological environmental education seems to be that it functions in the same way as works of art do in general: it strives to create the biggest possible thought-provoking charge of values and discussion, by using the smallest possible means.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ART AS A METHOD OF ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION**

Taking the above-described, perhaps somewhat roughly classified, tradition of environmental art, one can easily derive functional models which are applicable to art education and also to the working methods of environmental education. The didactic planning of art education takes, as a basis, artistic models which work as underlying determinants of activities and exercises. Alongside these determinants, the pupil's own inner models are also taken into consideration: his or her phase of development and previous knowledge of the subject. In the preparation process, the art world and the learner's world are combined into a project, in which experiencing, searching for information, and structuring all merge together (see Seitamaa-Oravala 1990, 185-192). So, the determiners of the didactic models in environmental education can be found in the tradition of environmental art.

Forms of environmental art are remarkably suitable for field work and research practiced in the environment by learners of all ages. On the

one hand, these kinds of exercises are faithful to the structures of environmental art, and are basic matter of art education, in this sense. On the other hand, they are methods of increasing one's sensitivity towards the environment, or models of analyzing it, and are essentially environmental education. From this basis we can derive at least the following categories of exercises which can be adapted as methods of environmental education.

### **1. Exercises on focusing your observations and perceiving them more sensitively.**

The 'chaos' of the environment is organized according to certain chosen variables. Your choice can be based on visual observations: color, form, size; on tactile sensations: soft, hard; or cognitive concepts: living, lifeless, belonging to nature, left behind by a human.

The work starts by making observations and it continues with methods of comparison, classification and organization. One can make small 'marginal notes' from gathered materials, human marks and arrangements in the environment. Especially well-suited as starting points are the archetypal symbols: the circle, square, triangle, point, line, cross and spiral in different variations and combinations (see Horelli 1982).

### **2. Exercises which bring forward the processes happening in nature, and help one in perceiving them more sensitively: growth and decay, the flow of water, the turning of day and night, the changes of light, the wind, etc.**

This category includes, for example, sundials, water mills and other sculptures that work on hydro-power, wind sculptures and kites, planting seedlings, etc. In addition to static works, it also includes paths of movement and rituals in which the participant or viewer takes a part. The work creates a moment of change; movement and time create new spaces and environments.

### **3. Exercises which aim to alter set ways of viewing the environment.**

The starting point of the work can be an agreement made in advance, a way of moving in the environment. This way one avoids always being drawn to observe the same things, already accepted as 'beautiful'. For example: Move in the environment according to your watch. Stop precisely every five minutes at exactly the place you are at that particular moment. Describe and document the environment in front of you, or what you are feeling. Alternatively, roughly sketch a line or circle on a map. Walk the distance of the line in nature. Stop every hundred meters, document and gather samples. Afterwards, analyze the differences between the experiences you gained this way, and the preconceived impressions you had (see Anttila 1989, 99-104).

### **4. Exercises which test the scale of the environment and human 'limits'. The starting point is a large amount of material and the aim is a clear change in the environment.**

'Real works' such as these require sociability, co-operation and planning as well as bodily exertions, and are in this way, alongside personal observational education, useful methods of communal education (work pedagogics). Suitable locations for works like this are places where nature brings the material back into its cycle: beaches, gravel pits, growing coppices, snow and ice, etc. Some examples of exercises include the following: Arrange, in a mathematical order, the flotsam on a shore. Change the yard with a snow sculpture in a way which creates new spaces and pathways. Build huts according to models from different cultures using cleared thickets of saplings – create new spaces and spatial experiences.

## **CHALLENGES: FROM EVERYDAY SURROUNDINGS TO ENVIRONMENTAL CRITICISM**

In this article, I have dealt with environmental education and environmental art from a limited viewpoint, concentrating mainly on the meeting of art and the natural environment. However, more attention should be drawn to architecture, material objects, and people's everyday surroundings. This is an arena where the individual's authority on his or her own environmental actions is the strongest, and which is, therefore, the ground for very strong commercial manipulation, for example advertising, fashion and uncontrolled traveling, which steer consumption and exploit aesthetic values (see Jokela 1995a).

In this article I do not go into the issue of environmental critique. One must remember, though, that like art, the environment includes, as a phenomenon, a maker, a medium and a recipient (Sepänmaa 1994, 10). In the art world, critique has its own recognized and precise place between the maker and the recipient. For this reason, an art education based on the context of the art world involves improving the skill of analytical receptiveness to art, i.e. art critique. In the curriculum of art education this is included in the subject material of 'knowledge of the arts'. A conscious training of receptive and interpretative skills should also belong to the subject matter in aesthetic environmental education. Working models for environmental critique are easily derived from the working methods of research into the arts (see Jokela 1995b).

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