

Mapping Environmental Education Approaches in Finnish Art Education

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The theme of the first European regional INSEA congress, held in Finland in 1971, was Environmental Protection in Art Education. The accompanying rationale for the conference stated:

One reason for making the theme was the wish to emphasize the manifoldness and diversity of our environmental problems – – – [they] are not purely biological, economic and social ones but also aesthetic ones, and are consequently part of art education, not only as separate subjects of study but also as integrated parts of other subjects dealing with our living environment.¹

In my article, I will reflect on different approaches to environmental education in the context of Finnish art education since the 1970s.

The context of art and environmental education in Finland

Before I go to discuss environmental art education I need to establish some basic information about the Finnish school system in order to contextualize the topic of this paper²:

The school reform, a new public comprehensive school for all children between the ages of 7 and 15 years, was established in Finland in 1970. Before that schools were divided into secondary schools for the wealthier and folk schools for labour families. The new school system was part of the democratization process in Finland, based on the understanding that everybody should have an equal right to relevant basic education and the possibility to enter higher education regardless of family

¹ Kauppinen 1972, VII.

² The article is based on my doctoral dissertation on the history of Finnish art education. I analyzed the public discourse and the discourse of the Art teacher Association's journal *Stylus* (published since 1907), and interviewed art teachers who had studied during the 1960s. (Pohjakallio 2005).

background. Since 1970's there have been few private schools; the whole field of education is free of charge and state sponsored.

The new curriculum for comprehensive schools, developed in the 1960s, was based on research in education and the academic fields of respective school subjects. This curriculum determined the content of teaching across the country. Integration was one of the leading ideas of the developers of the new schools system. In the early planning there was a suggestion to combine art with crafts, and to establish a new school subject *forming* (as was the name of the subject in Norway and Denmark) as a way of connecting art with craft and design, and the related notion of environmental education.

At the time, however, in art teacher education and in the field of visual arts, other kinds of interests were prevalent. For example, there was interesting and new, eye opening research into interpretations of visual communication and of the power of images within the social sciences and arts. Marxism, semiotics, critical theory – and other social theories of the time tempted art educators into cultural studies and linguistic and conceptual directions, not towards crafts or traditional approaches to art history, as before.

The environment as a part of art education was also defined in the new approaches as a field to be interpreted conceptually: for example, by aiming to identify by what ways buildings and objects communicate, and what kinds of values do they represent? In what ways could the critical interpretation of one's surroundings reveal ideology and power? At the beginning of the 1970s, the Finnish media campaigned to preserve art as a subject in schools with the view to pursuing the new approaches as opposed to integrating art with crafts. The campaign succeeded in attaining its aims with art remaining a separate curriculum subject supported by legislation in 1970, though with fewer hours compared to the former school system.³

³ The name of the Art subject in Finnish was first *piirustus* (drawing), then *kuvaamataito* (1950-1999). *Taito* (*ars, tekhnē*), the last part of the name means, according to the web dictionary ability, skill, craft, talent, hand, art, knowledge, knack. The first part of the word, *kuvaama* (from the verb *kuvata*) means: to show, picture, delineate, image, shoot, describe, film, photograph, figure, depict, portray, represent, illustrate, describe (<http://www.sanakirja.org/search.php?id=125331&l=3&l2=17>). The current name of the visual arts subject in the comprehensive school is *kuvataide* (since 1999). It could be translated

The representatives of art education in the new public school curriculum committee were practising art teachers who were active in the Art Teachers' Association, working in secondary schools and with teacher education. Art as a subject was divided into eight areas in the new curriculum (updated in 1976), one of which was environmental education.

The curriculum (1976) of the art subject was built on the following topics:

1. Making Images (Basics of composition, Plastic forming and structures, Graphic methods, Technical drawing)
4. Mass communication education (Visual communication, photography, film, media education)
5. Environmental education (Natural and cultural landscapes; Environmental protection; Landscape, buildings, ways of living, special living environments; Objects and clothing)
6. Art history
7. Writing and letters
8. Expression through integrating arts (masks, puppet theatre, shadow theatre, light – shadow)

Discipline based environmental art education

If we look at environmental education in this context of the new strands for art education, we can see that it is hardly connected to traditional arts. Of course, architecture is an art form, but the way to study buildings, according to the new curriculum, was neither through traditional art history by concentrating on style or by the modernist approach based on formal elements through the use of vision alone.

The new art curriculum represented environmental issues as generic and therefore best taught across the subject. In doing so, it was hoped that a solid foundation for life-long learning about environmental issues would be established. It was proposed

as visual art. There is a continuing discussion on the identity and name of visual arts in the Finnish school because many art teachers think that this new name gives a limited idea of the subject (Pohjakallio 2006). The current name of the major subject of the School of Art Education at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki, is Visual Culture Education.

that problems were to be approached from global, national, communal and individual levels. In art education, the main focus was suggested to be the local built cultural landscape and learning to understand the formation of local environment, as well as ways to improve and protect it. The ethos of the curriculum was the protection of the traditional Finnish cultural landscape; such as communities with a church in the middle of the village, small towns with their original forms and zoning maps etc. These kinds of environments were threatened by modernization and economic growth especially through rapid urbanization and in the course of it, a change in life styles.⁴

The new curriculum specified themes and content but not the practical or theoretical tools for how to work with the important and difficult issues. Environmental education concentrated on problems, as the INSEA 1971 publication highlighted: *“One reason for making the theme was the wish to emphasize the manifoldness and diversity of our environmental problems – – –.”*⁵ So, the images created in art classes represented dying nature, spoilt built environments, factories that polluted, and chaotic traffic jams. Posters, cartoons, collages, installations, photographs, films and happenings were used to deal with environmental – and equally political – problems. Some art educators criticized the new paradigm by asking if educating political attitudes or stances, instead of artistic vision, was the leading principle for the new form of art education. (Images 1, 2, 3.)

One important idea of the new approach was to attempt to build democracy and prepare for the related forms of citizenship by empowering everybody to learn to take care of the ecological and cultural environment. In order to achieve that aim, both scientific reasoning and emotional attitudes were needed. So, images of the Finnish environment, documentations of its building traditions, studies of the details of the vanishing culture were made in the art classes. In such cases the focus was on becoming aware of the importance of conservation and the related need to protect the traditional environments. (Images 4,5)

⁴ Kuvaamataito. POPS-opas (Visual Art curriculum), 1976.

⁵ Kauppinen 1972, VII.

The roots of the welfare society in Finland are found in the aspiration to realise democracy and equality, which meant that everybody should be capable of understanding their share in financing welfare and their role in actively working to develop society and the more world-wide humanitarian cause. The disciplines benefited in the new art education approach were the social sciences and natural sciences. The ecological and political pamphlets of the time were common readings of art teachers and art teacher students. The themes and questions addressed during art lessons were often so wide and difficult as to be beyond solutions that could be posited by pupils and teacher, which lead to despair.

Art-based environmental education

In 1995, art teacher educator Meri-Helga Mantere pointed out that environmental education has been part of the Finnish art education already for a quarter of a century, and it has included the critical study of the environment and ecological viewpoints. Anyhow – she summed up the experiences of many Finnish art teachers of the 1970s who had worked through these problems with their students in this way:

In the minds of many individual art teacher and in the profession's collective memory there are experiences of how information about the exploitation of nature, the ill effects of fanatical consumption, global pollution and the demolition of old building complexes reached the vigilant art pedagogues at the turn from the '60s to the '70s. Teachers drew conclusions concerning their own teaching. As they were times of social activism, the issues were viewed through the language games of social activism and propaganda, and the cultural production of images. Up-to-date art educators wanted to open the eyes of their pupils and, besides traditional artwork, introduced assignments using short briefings on some single topic issues as openings. It was new and refreshing to see, or at least assume, that art and art education could take an active part in social debate.⁶

Her conclusion was that even before the 1980s, this led to a dead end: the use of conscious, threatening environmental scenarios and political topicalities as intellectual fuel proved to be a questionable idea.

⁶ Mantere 1995, 6.

Meri-Helga⁷ was one of the active figures, who developed a new approach to environmental education in the 1980s. In the publication *Image of the Earth, Writings on Art-based Environmental Education* she writes that artistically oriented environmental education is at its best, or at least its characteristic features are best brought forth, when the artistic and creative perspective runs through the teaching project from the planning stage to the evaluation of the results:

*This presumes that the entire environmental education process is accentuated by the manner of observing, experiencing and thinking customary to art. This way, the artistic contribution is not restricted merely, for example, to the illustration or animation of factual information on the environment. Instead it truly offers a view and approach of its own both towards the environment and toward education.*⁸

At the same time Mantere emphasizes that the holistic ideas of the art-based environmental education do not, anyway, contrast or contest the scientific and artistic approaches.

But what did an artistic approach to environmental education look like in this new context? When art educators of the 1970s worked on environmental studies by using semiotics and critical studies, the teaching of the practical content of art remained independent and parallel from the new approach. This meant that art education as self expression and the formalism of modernism continued to be practised, despite the new theories. The linguistic methods occupied in semiotic and critical approach to environmental studies concentrated on polarizing bad and good, ugly and beautiful, female and male, and so on. Such opposites were usually represented by students through the use of collage, which was derived from images that had proliferated in the new media, making the new approach to environmental education realised through media images rather than personal and intimate contact with the actual environment.

⁷ Art teacher Meri-Helga Mantere (Licentiate of Arts) studied gestalt art therapy during the 1980s when teaching future art teachers at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki, where she also developed art therapy studies connected to art teacher education.

⁸ Mantere 1995, 3.

Through the use of such linguistic methods and the corollary of media derived imagery, art lessons on the environment came closer to the way humanities structure their curriculum, which did not fit very well with what had motivated most art teachers to become involved with art in the first place, that is, because the subject resonated in a deep way with their personal experience and love of art. This meant that such need and longing for experiences and more direct contact with the art-specific content of topics still persisted, so that when the new expressionist painting, earth and environmental art emerged in the 1980s, all of which had initially escaped galleries, they were greeted as a breath of fresh air by art educators after the threatening images of the 1970s that had failed to empower those who had created them. Therefore, aesthetics and sensibility underwent a resurgence of interest after the critical and semiotic phase art education, as the quote from Mantere shows.

Art based environmental education⁹ was developed in this spirit at the University of Art and Design, School of Art education, during the 1980s and 1990s¹⁰. As a component of a course in environmental pedagogy, teachers¹¹ arranged, for example, environmental camp schools in “unspoilt” environments; in the Finnish archipelago and Lapland, but also by the Russian White Sea Karelia and the untouched shores of Estonia, just after the Soviet era in the beginning of the 1990s. The primus motor, in many of those, was Meri-Helga, who stressed that ecological thinking and action should be regarded as the guiding principle of all education and that art can bring these new forms. The activities drew their inspiration from deep ecology, gestalt art therapy, experimental learning theories¹², environmental aesthetics, and writers such

⁹ The concept *Art based environmental education* is from Meri-Helga Mantere.

¹⁰ Since 1990 there also exists another department in Finland in which art teachers are trained, at the University of Lapland. It has a strong emphasis on environmental education. E.g. Timo Jokela, Mirja Hiltunen and Maria Huhmarniemi, have shed light on their approaches connected, for example, to community arts and tourism (<http://www.environmentalart.net/environm/linkit.htm#education>; <http://ace.ulapland.fi/Projects/lapland/winter/winter.pdf> ; <http://olos.ulapland.fi/mm/katoavajulkinen/index.php?mmkatoavajulkinen=f935ad64e577515a09a11bd137079672>)

There was also inspiring cooperation with Polish art educators in the 1980s and 1990s, e.g. Janusz Byszewski in environmental art education.

¹¹ Meri-Helga Mantere, Marjo Räsänen, Maria Laukka and myself.

¹² Marjo Räsänen developed experimental learning theory in the context of art education at the University of Art and Design, Helsinki (Räsänen 1997).

as Henryk Skolimovski, Suzy Gablik, Thich Nhat Hanh, Arne Naess, Viktor Papanek, among others.¹³

The methods harnessed in art based environmental education, which were introduced by Meri-Helga were based on ideas derived from gestalt art therapy. (Images 6,7,8.)

In contrast to the semiotic and critical approach to environmental education, art based environmental education concentrates on students' experience and life-world¹⁴. The life-world approach to environment art education addresses aspects most neglected by formalism and semiotics. Life-world here refers to the culture and environment as inhabited by persons rather than something remote or detached. In this approach, the environment is as much a drama and narrative as a set of critical insights and political views. In life-world, environmental aesthetics, all the senses contribute to understanding, so that the environment is as much felt as understood. It is partly a tacit affair – but not, as a consequence, beyond theorising.¹⁵

In art based environmental education, a life-world starting point is assumed. The life-world approach thematizes the inhabitants' relationships with the environment as one of participation rather than focused attention, involving a two-way influence and identification. Here the word "inhabitant" is worth emphasising since the more common "user" implies a different relationship to the environment. According to the life-world approach, environment or a single building is not an instrument in the world but a constitutive part of its world.¹⁶

From the 1970s to the 1990s

The paradigm shift that took place in Finland during the 1960s and 1970s in art education and the theme of environmental education as connected to art, was a shift away from – on the one hand the child centred, self expressionist approach, and on the

¹³ Mantere 1995, 12.

¹⁴ The concept life-world comes from phenomenology. There is an active development work and research made in the field of environmental studies at the International Institute of Applied Aesthetics. Located in Finland, Lahti (<http://www.helsinki.fi/jarj/iaa/finpubli.html>), see e.g. Sepänmaa (1986).

¹⁵ See Berleant 1992, 77-78; Bonsdorff 2006, 23.

¹⁶ Berleant 1992, 10; Bonsdorff 2006, 23.

other the formalist, modernist, approach – towards a cultural studies approach using semiotics to promote ideologies such as Marxism. With such an approach, the major reasons for environmental problems were understood as political, economic and cultural, and thus not susceptible only to scientific solutions.

In environmental education, in the context of art education, the development in the 1970s meant a shift from the formal analysis of the environment to linguistic, critical and semiotic (postmodern) approaches. Teaching and learning about environment involves political, social, technical, economic, aesthetic, ethical and ecological questions.

Many art educators felt they were incapable of mastering all this new content in the context of environmental education. Also, as a counter effect of the activism of the 1970s, critical visual studies were found to be too “political”. This had the effect of making art educators give priority to the aesthetic component of environmental education, so that in the visual art curriculum of 1985 the generic concept of environmental education was absent, which had the effect of making the art curriculum once again dominated by formalism. In 1994, environmental aesthetics reemerged as one of the four major thematic components of the art curriculum.

In art-based environmental education the idea requires that art is included in the process of education rather than being only a goal or content. It is a question of art’s character, where play, interaction and engagement are often foregrounded and imagination is given a more prominent role than in most everyday activities.

Questions for the future

The need for critical evaluation has emerged again during the new century in the field of art education. The Finnish school has since the 1970s’ emphasized “bildung”, academic skills and art as part of it, in public education. But now in the school politics, there is a strong demand for efficiency and for measuring results. There is less space for art in the current curriculum than in the previous 1994 curriculum.

In the actual comprehensive school curriculum (2005) visual art has four major fields:

1. Visual expression and visual thinking

2. Art and cultural knowledge
3. Environmental aesthetics, architecture and design
4. Media and visual communication

The emphasis of the environmental education of the art subject in school is on environmental aesthetics, architecture and design. The Finnish government even created a political programme for architecture (1998) and design (2005) and their education in Finnish schools, for building innovative, creative Finland. Design and architecture are art forms through which Finland has gained international visibility.¹⁷

In the discourse on art education in the beginning of the new century, the dominant paradigm is visual culture art education, which has connections to the paradigm of art and environmental education of the 1970s. From this perspective, and from the perspective of the critical pedagogy, art based environmental education has faced criticism for romanticizing nature and for individualistic views.

Anyhow today, the question of environmental education is a vitally important issue, where diverse approaches are needed. The challenge lies in teacher education; in inspiring future teachers to delve deeper in understanding, to be aware also of the history, and in providing starting points for research, reconstructing and in developing the field. At the University of Art and Design in Helsinki a group of doctoral students has started to study different approaches and cases in art based environmental education inviting art educators to join in building international connections and developing the field. (See www.naturearteducation.org)

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¹⁷ www.arkkitehtuurikasvatus.fi
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