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CONCEPTUAL WASTE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF ART EDUCATION

First I apologize that I cannot give you a ready-made presentation¹ with valuable definitions, operational instructions and well-dropped names of illustrious people. I am on my way to understanding something that seems to be, at least from my point of view, important, and naturally I insist that it must be important to everyone. We do that, don't we? My presentation is a thinkin' aloud, trying to bracket things into their valid discourses and therefore quite tedious to listen to. But my motives are pure.

In anyone's well-trained mind, the concept of sustainability mostly evokes pictures with worry about the **material** environment. Such a worry is justifiable, as we have learned to recognize watching pictures of waste rafts near the Bering strait, nuclear waste around the corner, reduced habitat of polar bears, pollution of air in urban areas, etc.

Less conspicuous appears to be the **conceptual waste** that is spread all over the Western world and - with the help of neo-colonial structures—the entire globe where either business or academic bliss has contaminated people's minds. It is said to be the heritage of Enlightenment, a great tradition that freed people to a relativistic universe where values are not static but in constant motion, and, simultaneously people are themselves said to create the life-context that is good for them and constantly changing.

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Modernism was said to be the era where people became masters of their own values, aims, and means. **In art** we are assumed to live in post-modern times although some challenging French writer (Latour) claimed that "we have never been modern." A giant leap from pre-modern, i.e., *ancient regime* of beliefs, to the post-modern left most of the conceptual tradition untouched, as if the threshold of change would have gone unnoticed. Another illustrious French genius has made a strong point about that (Foucault).

What Has All this Pseudo-intellectual Gibberish to Do with Art Education?

My answer is: it has quite a lot to do with art education. Both education and art are dependent on a **conceptual approach and contextual understanding** since only such an approach and understanding may connect art and education to each other on a platform that exhibits them **in a clear light**. Only in a clear light are we able to see **both art and** education in the same glance and assess them from the angle of praxis, the praxis of emancipation and human freedom.

Art comes first and education comes second. Without art, art education would not exist. Perhaps some craft and hobbies would appear were there is no art; with art all human aspirations become transformed, certainly even **transfigured**. In everyday chores we are in the habit of forgetting what a wonderful and—in the strict sense of the word—unfamiliar, perhaps even uncanny, phenomenon art is: there is no real or tangible need for it and still there it is—and we can't be indifferent to it. It shows us the otherwise hidden characteristic of human life, and we never become entirely familiar with its features since they change intermittently and without previous warning. Even the direction into which they aim at is unknown before its realization. All human activity becomes transfigured in art, even the appearance of art itself. Education is a special branch to art since education imitates art: to manipulate the way a child becomes a human is an enterprise where no one knows what will come out of it.

Art and education don't guarantee success but they promise a better life ... even after they have ruined all future as we knew it before we became touched by art and before we became treated by education. Adulthood is built up on the ruins of innocence.

Concepts and Contextual Renderings

Concepts and contextual renderings that are used in education and in mediating art are thus of vital significance. Either they cherish the speciality of the issue or they deplete the significance out of the phenomenon. Saying that “all art is...” or “education is basically just ...” are ways to empty the possible impact, often forever to those who believe in definitions made by illustrious people, like teachers or art historians. It seems of urgent importance to select the concepts and contexts of discourse so that they are in consensus with the praxis, be it art, education or other areas of contemporary life. The stress is on the word *contemporary*. There is no *life* as such, as there is no *art* or *education* as such. There is the **contemporary** context, the current world, with people who are alive and kicking *today*, and their appreciation of art and education *today*. For these people we need concepts and contexts that are valid *today*.

If we are not acquainted with the displacement of concepts in the transition from pre-modern to modern, from modern to post-modern, we are in trouble: we cannot understand the changes that have already taken place, three hundred years ago, one hundred years ago, 50 years ago. Quite unproblematically, we try to manage with inadequate concepts and are astonished to find out that they don't describe our world and experience accurately enough. We babble like children, imitate modes of speech, and just *wish*, full of hope, that our talk will have some, any, meaning.

Not only a few speak of Schiller, Kant, Dilthey, Dewey, Pierce and other pre-modern and modern writers who, without doubt, were wise and clever, *for their own time and age*. The same is true of other writers in aesthetics and education, philosophy, psychology, sociology, and politics. On the whole, we imitate and follow thinking that *was* adequate in a context that either already disappeared or was ever a fantasy.

Untimely concepts and contexts strip discourse of its meanings: the use of concepts like (and I talk of those known in art education) *talent*, *skill*, *hereditary*, *inclination*. etc.. are historically more biased than we tend to recognize. *Development in skills* and *natural inclination* are highly loaded expressions with a certain kind of worldview that seems not to be valid anymore, **if** post-modernism as a description has any significance.

The main problem, however, is concealed within structures: the crossing point of education and art appears to be like a black hole that devours all energy approaching it, even to the extent that we are not used to identifying issues that may bridge art to education, education to art. We behave as if art would have its own sphere, education its own and the meeting stays an enigma that can't be challenged.

Thus it is not customary to import a conceptual approach from art into education or vice versa. Such "vice versa" is, however, more disputable than the previous relation: from the beginning of the 20th century, to be exact, from the Banquet Years after the Belle Epoque,² pedagogical art was no caprice; on the contrary, not only a few artists were genuinely interested in intervening with art in the appreciation of politics or aesthetics of people, the then-called "masses" (in Ortega). Educational thinking, however, was not really fertilized by artistic movements since the ideological gap of some hundred years had already reigned: in educational thinking art was taken as what it had been, and therefore it was already a dead body.

[In]Adequacy of Educational Strategies in Art Education

In recent years the mutual influence between art and education has been more often the topic of erudite discourse. The strategies of contemporary art and even those of the visual culture (as a humongous, non-linear mass of visualities) have questioned the adequacy of educational strategies in art education. Pictures, images, art acts of a new kind, ideological and political discourse in and on art, artists' implications that go widely beyond the art world, an entirely new shape of artistic interventions, and similar phenomena have called forth a serious questioning of what should be taken for granted when curricula and syllabuses for art education are compiled. Are we allowed to lean on the academic ("classical") appreciation of art, with its huge coloring of psychological beliefs that have been, in other areas of knowledge and politics, entirely contested? Are we allowed to trust psychological notions of talent, skills, natural inclination, hereditary endowments, to take someone as naturally gifted, at least more so than someone else? And all this on the grounds of the habit to value drawing, painting, sculpting and the rhetorical exclamations thereof?

² Refers the Avante-Garde in France, approximately from 1885 to WWI.

Contemporary concepts, however, do not support what is academically customary. On the contrary! Both art discourse and the discourse of personal skills have taken a turn—some 40 years ago—that cannot pass unnoticed anymore. Critical discussion on psychological definitions of human, on the colonialist tradition to define the human being, on the feminist approach to gender equality, on the politics of radical democracy, on the value of singular experience, etc., have changed the needs and thus the means to *make art*. The entire practice of art appreciation is laid on a dissimilar grounds to those known as education, emancipation, or freedom of expression.

Even more challenging may be that our relation to nature is still as mechanistic as it was in the days of, say, Immanuel Kant. The reason is understandable: a common man and a common woman can easily understand mechanical chains of cause and effect. Even religious tradition supports such a naive thinking: you sin and you'll burn. Nature is depicted to us, every day, in every discourse, as a chain of cause and effect where a baby seal will die if I throw a plastic bag into the sea, where the climate will warm up (which really is not such a bad idea in this hemisphere³) if I love to drive my Jaguar with 245 horsepower.

Someone must benefit from the fact that we depend on the discourse of previous centuries, that we are not willing to come to the thinking abreast of the times. Someone—I assume, intentionally—sustains the gap between the discourse of past years and the appreciation of today's phenomena, the unbridged gorge that prevents us from a better understanding of what we experience and think. That is power in action, not really personified, not really "someone" but the system (as my generation said in the 60s), a system that prevents the world from becoming identified as complex as it is.

Some contemporary artists, actually quite many of them, have denied the validity of such a mechanistic world and the simplifying history owing to it. They have contested the role that was given to art and artists, as they have contested the means of expression expected from an artist, the supposed genres whereon to display artistic thinking, and the role of art in a consumerist society. What the contestation has done, really, has been a claim for a new rhetoric which implies a need for new concepts and a new context in which to talk and to work. We have witnessed starts of discourses with emphasis on environment, economic

³ Rovaniemi is near the Arctic Circle and in June there is no summer yet.

issues, quality of life, freedom of beliefs, etc. I assume that these only are **symptoms** of something that goes **much deeper**, that needs more **specific** descriptions, that really asks **for a new vocabulary**, a system of words for the new world we live in.

American poet Jack Spicer died nearly 50 years ago with a curious sentence on his lips. As his last words, he is said to have stated: "My vocabulary did this to me," which may have indicated the early death of Jack Spicer at the tender age of 40. As a poet, he quite certainly meant *vocabulary* but the sentence may indicate a wider view: whatever we have as concepts and conceptual contexts do this, namely the world, to us. If we don't stay alert, our current vocabulary that originated in the 19th and 20th century will certainly **do us**.

All politics of education depends on the rhetorics: how the aims are described, how the means are motivated, how every step one after the other is pictured in a way that no frustration is ahead and the goal calls for ever new aspirations. In art education, art reality either enriches the rhetorics or challenges it. Postmodern art rhetorics already penetrates art training; in art education some practice is motivated by such rhetorics. The all-round attitude, however, is not tainted by postmodern rhetorics at all since educational thinking still bears the mantle of 19th century, Enlightenment, emancipatory, fantasy. Art may be postmodern, relativistic, but *education through art* still sticks to a picture where a child or a youngster appears as material ready for free manipulation after the model authorized by the *state officials*. We may talk of identity, freedom, child-based starting points, etc., but, really, we live in a planned economy, where "economy" refers to the familiar circle of what has been done ever after. It also indicates, even claims, that no uncanny operation is desired. Only the familiar is accepted.

Sense Experience

The vocabulary that may do the world to us—and **do us**—must be tangible, concrete, everyday vocabulary. It must—without friction—depict what is present in everyday life. We have a great example of such a vocabulary in poets who since the Second World War have polished their language by quitting the abstract and importing the tangible. They have thrown away high metaphors, impressionistic dreams and the quibbling pseudo-philosophy of the modernistic tradition. If we follow their path, we end up describing the sensory world

around us in the outlines known already from contemporary art: sketchy, deformed, non-linear, non-causal, complex, self-conflicting, rich, extravagant, incontrollable, you name it. The *sensory* here is the key word: we are no longer planning, manipulating, aiming at something (not present yet), intimidating, authorizing our schemes with the power of knowledge. Instead, we adjust our plea, adapt ourselves to what is tangible, and become receptive and responsive to what is given in sense experience.

Contemporary art has often been defined, in its entirety, as "conceptual". Not only a few artists disagree: what would be the idea of representing something in the form of an art object or artwork if it could be presented - more reliably - in conceptual synthesis, e.g., as an essay? Evidently to conquer this misunderstanding, the appearance of contemporary art becomes year after year more observational, it needs to be observed: the artworks acquire ever more intense eye, ear, taste, smell experience, reliance on sensory features that highly exceed our capacity of conceptual understanding. The multiple and various means that are exploited by artists imply a need to exceed our conceptual capacity: one artist may use painting, video, performance and writing in one single artwork, or an artwork may exceed the time and space limits we are used to in art appreciation and thus s/he drains out our capacity to receive any linear message because we don't even know where the art work begins and where it ends.

In an art climate like this we bump into an untranslatable phenomenon that can be identified as an artwork but won't become conceptually apparent within the means with which we are familiar. The main problem, again, is our lack of conceptual facility: quite simply, we don't have concepts that would sustain experience as we meet it. The conceptual retardation here resembles the untranslatable relationship we have with Nature: we may describe Nature, in natural sciences, in human sciences, in immediate experiences, quite personal and singular, but none of these will ever yield a relationship that would make us equal to Nature. The subordination of man to Nature ever holds, without any breach. Whatever our knowledge of or attitude towards Nature, only subordination and concepts of subordinated relationship will stay valid and unconceal the reality we are living.

Nature only can act as the main transfiguration for humans. In Arnold Schönberg's musical poem, "Verklärte Nacht" (Transfigured Night), the theme, much simplified here, includes the idea: "See how brightly the universe gleams! There is a radiance on everything (*O sieh,*

wie klar das Weltall schimmert! Es ist ein Glanz um Alles her). Here it is the wonder of immediate sensory acceptance of the given that surpasses all expectations, all hopes, everything that was assumed. No question about the feasibility of knowledge thus acquired, nor of the operational value of the experience. Transfiguration simply denies the tradition of profit, technical solutions and the idea of *man's* impact on Nature. Whenever we try to find a way to intervene in Nature for its own good, we'll fail. We don't have such operative concepts that would create a picture big enough to equip us with anything worthy of Nature.

This is no news, of course, since we knew this already a hundred years ago, from Einstein, Whitehead, Heidegger, and many others. What is more embarrassing came already into appearance from the foregoing remarks: even the human-created and human-signified space, art, lacks the bigger picture wherefrom to observe its significance to us. We have had two revolutions, one in science, one in human culture, and, after the well-argued theses of Thomas Kuhn, both of them are in constant need for new concepts to go through the change they already commenced. If we don't accept and recognize this need as **our** need, we lose the creative benefits of the revolution and it will go unnoticed and leave us behind.

We don't want to become retarded traditionalists who stick to the world of yesteryear. Therefore a **stock-taking** must be done. For a hundred years we discussed education and art with concepts beginning with psycho-: they are derived from the approaches of psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and even psychotic life-vocation. They explain human behavior from inside out, as talent (and the lack of it), as will (and the lack of it), natural gift, natural inclination, heredity, and, finally, motivation originating from the concoction of all these. The world outside has been excluded from the inside of *man*; thus no real relation or influence was recognizable between outside and inside.

In the discourse on sustainability both of these revolutions are similarly necessary. It is the cultural execution of transfiguration that requires new concepts; of lesser significance is wherefrom came the need, originally, from a new approach to Nature or from a new approach presented in art. It is the same light that enlightens us if we accept the light, as Nietzsche said, quite prematurely but with clear vision.

Contemporary artists' approach to the sensory has been bold: evidently they wish to direct

our eyes and understanding toward the outside, the outer shape of things, the way phenomena appear, or even to the fact that outer appearance (as if there were any inner one!) is all there is. Contemporary artists, quite many of them, at least, do not cherish the inside impression of an individual, nor the inside inclination to design the world into a shape that alienates artworks from Nature. The difference between Nature and human work is no longer conspicuous: whatever there is, even if made by me (a known subject, whoever I am), it comes from Nature and returns to Nature. In between it may be a part of culture but it never leaves its source. We cannot, rhetorically, use language that separates two worlds, speaks of what is natural and what is cultural, without losing the knowledge we already arrived at in scientific and philosophical ponderings. The concepts we should prefer must include the two-sidedness without preference to cultural, human, the psycho side.

In art education what is challenged becomes clear if we tentatively quit the ideas of talent, natural inclination, hereditary rank of artistry, training in skills, materials and techniques, and the need for learning art history. Why should we? The answer is simple: all these concepts originate in Enlightenment thinking where the human approach to nature became understood as a technique, a mechanistic seizure that gave clear-cut operations, attacks even, to maintain something called “creativity”.

We easily recognize the critique of the concepts in, say, Apollinairean, dadaist, and contemporary art procedures; we know the reason to quit the belief in systems in John Cage’s and others’ theories. Therefore, the challenge can’t be that big...

Let us assume that no such operative attack is possible, nor advisable. Thus the idea of education can’t be depicted as a step-by-step approach in any operative system known beforehand, e.g. in talent, in natural inclination, in hereditary rank of artistry, in trainable skills, etc. There are no such steps, period. Although belief in systems is unwavering, one may ask what happens if the systems are quitted.

The relation of humans to nature, naturally, will become less predictable: we will find ourselves at the mercy of nature, at the mercy of Nature. It is the same experience we have had with Nature after we came to think of climate warming and the consequences of that. Why not go further and ask what happens if we quit conceptual constructions that lurk behind art educational approaches, constructions that have already been ignored by so

many contemporary artists?

Education may take place through art even though it won't give you drawing skills, painting techniques, a good eye for photographing, or 3D training. What counts seems to be either **thinking or attitude**. In contemporary art attitude carries quite far; if it is linked with thinking, career success can be ensured. This strange situation has raised the question whether in art education the emphasis should also be in attitude and thinking. That, however, won't do *save* we get rid of the conceptual heritage we are clinging to.

Need for Change

I already compared sustainable solutions in relation to Nature and in concepts and contexts we use in the approach in art education. Both depend on **replacement** of thinking, even a similar change in concepts applied to perception, sense experience and the epistemic outcome of these. Both presume a radical change: we are standing on the threshold of a possible new world and we may even reach for it if we accept the need for change. But no new world will enter if we, operationally and ideologically, stick to tools of thinking that already are obsolete.

I find it hilariously fertile and productive just to concentrate on the **sensory appearance** of contemporary art, the multifarious and non-controllable, any-techniques, what-so-ever-materials and who-knows-what-contexts the artists are throwing in our face. Quite many contemporary artists have a disrespectful attitude towards the petit-bourgeois lifestyle of the majority. If art education is to be taken seriously—not just as “interesting” but as a serious undertaking—such an attitude must become a part of art education. We know already that the lifestyle of the Western world is unsustainable, both from the angle of Nature and finance, not to say a word about ethics and human rights. Since the rest of the world is after the same kind of life, we see that disrespect may be the key to a better future.

The sensory zone of the life-world is the most uncontrollable by man: even though one may exclude from thought the impact of smells, taste, noise, the visual world; these are present and influence us, directly. They don't count when we are planning the environment, as neither does beauty or harmony. One may live in a city that is ugly, smelly, and downright

awful from the sensory angle. Even though one does not **think** about the environment the environment influences one's nervous and cardiac systems through the senses. Is this direct, un-cultural impact, unimportant?

We have segregated our world into contexts that can only be approached through segregated concepts. Every human activity has its own territory that has been marked with its own terms. But really, there is no way to appreciate the world from such angles. The world, as Nature, is one and its influence on us is one.

To continue life on earth seems to need, however, a new angle, an angle taken as unrealistic so far. Such an angle would include serious consideration of the sensory world, serious critique of any approach through ideas only (something we cherish just now), and a kind of return to a vulnerability or sensibility that was, perhaps, known to humans in premodern times (if we know anything of those times).

The problem has been, up to now, that no real, tangible context for such an angle has existed, experiential enough, ideologically recognizable, etc.. Therefore, no concepts have been found, identifiable for a new approach. Contemporary art, however, changed the situation, not once and for all, not in the beginning, but step by step: just now we may identify the context needed here in the compiled or collectable contours of contemporary art. No material, no form, no technique, no size, no topic is unsuitable to a contemporary artist, and more than ever the artist relies on the sensory output of his or her experience as an artwork (whatever it is, by shape).

What we should do now is to dismiss discursive approaches that evidently originate in the 19th century, those heavy with psycho-burden. Similarly, contexts that require complicated constructions whose goals are not conspicuous enough, tangible, seeming, operational (talent-speech). Moreover, we should rely on art, on the contemporary life, on the presence that is not intellectualized, not made "French" in the English vernacular. And, naturally, benefit from contemporary art and its attitudes, complex shape and uncontrollable appearances when it intervenes in the outdated features of our heritage.

