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INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGICAL ART
Participatory Art With Elders

My doctoral thesis deals with dialogical art as the encounter between different generations of people. My viewpoint is subject-centred, in that at its centre is a joint art project involving senior citizens and children in which I have actively participated as both a researcher and art educator. The research is a process description emphasising sociality. As an author I have a double role: I am both the researcher and the object of the research.

In this presentation I will outline my method, dialogical aesthetics, with reference to the American art historian Grant Kester and the Finnish artist and DA Lea Kantonen.

Social relationships as material

The starting point of dialogical art, which belongs within the field of so-called community art, is a dialogue with a community: working on a common idea or problem. Social relationships form the material. The senior citizens in my project participated in creating an artwork, in an event they experienced jointly. Kester defines an artwork as “a process of communicative exchange rather than a physical object.”

The different names used for community art, each with a different emphasis, include: “new genre public art”, “littoral art”, “engaged art”, “community-based art”, “socially-engaged art” and “dialogical art”. Community art has political objectives as well as the objective to exert influence and make things visible. In my project I have paid attention to the untapped resources of senior citizens in the encounter of different generations.

In Kester’s view, debate is not merely a means for social influence but is above all a method of working artistically, in which dialogue not only means verbal discussion but also takes place through aesthetical expressions.
Kester’s dialogical aesthetics distances itself from the Modernist Western view of the relationship between the artist and the audience, where the artist is associated with the cult of genius. Instead, Kester sees that the identity of the artist and his or her partners is both constructed and changes in the artistic work process. The experiences obtained from the dialogical practices are an essential part of Kester’s art theory. In his opinion, it is important that artists themselves write about and analyse their projects, and not just art historians, who are used to studying art displayed in museums. The seminars organised by arts academies and other actors within the field of art have indeed become places where an art emphasising the community presents itself.

The state of the dialogue

The starting point of my research has been to bring senior citizens from different parts of Finland (14 participants aged 60-70 years) to work together in an arts project where data, experientiality and playfulness are linked through artistic means. During 2005-2007 the group has come together for six meetings of short duration in Finland, Russia (Vyborg) and the French Pyrenees.

In the aesthetics outlined by Kester, the emphasis is on the point that discussion must be removed from the everyday surroundings of the participants in order to create an equal dialogue. John Dewey refers in his book *Art as Experience* to how an unknown environment can expand experience and in this way create a new kind of sensitivity.

Most of the meetings in my art project were held in places outside the participants’ home districts, which a private visitor would have difficulties accessing. I attempted to promote dialogicality through the choice of physical spaces. I assumed that senior citizens decided to participate in the project because at the same time they also had the opportunity to acquaint themselves with architecture-historically important places and, for instance, visit a factory in Russia that utilises new technology.

Kirsi Saarikangas, a researcher of contemporary culture, has discussed the importance of space in internalising cultural norms, customs and ideas. Referring to Henri Lefebvre, she considers space as something both social and socially constructed. In the experience of space and the construction of the meaning of space the importance of corporality is emphasised. Space is active and its meaning shifts. Saarikangas also refers to Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, in which, apart from the construction of networks of power linked with the use of space, the remembering and forgetting induced by spatial organisations are emphasised.
Dialogical art as an encounter

Art is often brought to senior citizen institutions as part of the activities aimed at the aging population. In my project the senior citizens, who are living their ‘third age’, are active actors producing material for the artwork project and organising events linked with it. Their own experience of life, their interests in expressing themselves and their working together are the starting points of the activity.

The visible elements of the two-year project are walking sticks or staves made from wood and memory games. The recurring event of the project has been playing memory games with children. The memory games are made from plywood pieces and these have been made by the senior citizens, by painting them or by using other means. The games have taken place with Russian and French children in their home countries. In Finland the senior citizens wanted to play the game with war veterans. According to Kantonen, the emergence of surprises is a part of community art, as are conflicts, even though these are not always sufficiently described in the documentary material of the project.10
Playing with the children from other countries relied on images, gestures, expressions and a few words. Playing with the almost 90-year old veterans was made difficult partly by their difficulties in remembering. In all the game situations being together has meant an aesthetical experience of joy and pleasure. All game situations have been videoed for the research.

Experiential knowlege

The culmination of my art project was a six-day meeting held in the French Pyrenees. I had chosen the location based on my long-term familiarity with the area. The programme consisted of treks, getting acquainted with the mediaeval architecture and the works of artists, playing games and experiencing nature.

Getting acquainted with the architecture and visiting a vineyard are, in my opinion, general tourism, and yet they are important in orienting oneself in a foreign culture. On the other hand, getting acquainted with the work and working methods of two artists initiated a joint exploration which continued in later meetings. The artists in question were Wolfgang Laib and Salvador Dali, whose art the participants had the opportunity to become acquainted with on location.

Laib’s ‘meditation room’ built from beeswax was situated near our accommodation and we journeyed by bus to Dali’s home museum. Laib’s wax room raised debate about the relationship
between art and skill, the construction of the artwork, the pollen that the artist used in his work, etc. The intensity of the discussions was based on the background knowledge of the senior citizens; on the trip was a biologist who had studied pollen, engineers who knew construction, and others with craftwork as a hobby, and who all felt an aversion towards the conceptuality of modern art. In the following meeting our biologist demonstrated to us how pollen is used in research.

I had come across Dali’s home museum in Port Lligat in Spain by accident when my project was already in progress. I was impressed by Dali’s unique use of materials and spaces and I discovered features in his views on art that many contemporary artists now apply. To my surprise, I found in the museum a collection of walking sticks that had belonged to the artist. The intention is to continue to develop knowledge linked with Dali in connection with the exhibition of his works due to open at the Espoo Museum of Modern Art, EMMA, in autumn 2007. For the senior citizens, Dali is a familiar ‘real’ artist.

Pauline von Bonsdorff uses the concept existential knowledge when talking about experiential knowledge based on either one’s own or others’ personal experiences. It is said that art conveys knowledge not conveyed equally well by other means. Referring to Hans-Georg Gadamer and Arnold Berleant, she states that experiencing art is both a collaboration and dialogue, and it can therefore expand the sphere of experience of a person.

Notes
7. Dewey 1934, chapter XII.

References


Verwoert, Jan (2006), "Lessons in Modesty. The Open Academy as a Model", *Metropolis M* no. 4, 2006: <http://www.metropolism.com/>