

environment through art can be thought in fact as being complementary to each other.

Arts-based environmental education

In the early nineties of the twentieth century, a new form of environmental education was conceptualized in Finland, in which artistic practice plays a key role. Different from other types of outdoor or environmental education which offer room for aesthetic experiences – such as the “flow learning” approach outlined in the popular nature awareness books of Joseph Cornell, the “earth education” programs of Steve Van Matre, and “place-based education” as promoted by David Sobel – arts-based environmental education turns the tables in a fundamental way. Art is not an *added* quality, the icing on the cake; it is rather the point of departure in the effort to find ways in which children can connect to nature. To make this clearer it may be instructive to dwell a little on the potential of art practice in education.

What is art? In the definition of Finnish artist Osmo Rauhala (2003, p. 24), art is one of man’s antennae stretched out to sense the world: “It is a way of existing and of understanding one’s existence.... By sensitizing our perceptions, it makes us susceptible to new information, which may not necessarily come to us in the form of language.”

Art activities offer a person unique, often non-cognitive ways of interpreting and signifying experiences in the world. They have a tendency to reach the sensory, perceptual, emotional, cognitive, symbolic and creative levels of human beings. Through the making and contemplation of art, a person’s ability enhances to get in closer touch with the inner levels of the psyche. At the same time, such activities feed and guide our sensibility for reality and life. They can sharpen and refine our perception and make us sensitive for the mystery of the things around us. In the context of learning about nature, art thus seems to have a potential that conventional nature education approaches lack, as these are more often than not based on a model of handing over a body of knowledge that is already established in advance.

Through art, we can see and approach the outside world afresh. Art can hit us unexpectedly, catch us off-guard, and sometimes provoke us. This estrangement or defamiliarization is an important quality of art. It helps us to review and renew our understandings of everyday things and events which are so familiar to us that our perception of them has become routine. In that sense working with art encompasses a learning process that is inherently experiential and open-ended. Seeking and pushing the boundaries. American cartoonist Scott Adams once put it this way: “Creativity is allowing yourself to make mistakes. Art is knowing which ones to keep.” And Stephen Nachmnovitch has beautifully elaborated how, in musical improvisation, your “mistakes” can be meaningful gifts that allow you to move along in new and exciting ways. Finally, art can open us up to chaos, to the presence of contradiction, paradox and ambiguity. Especially this latter quality of art can be of great value in our current times, as I will try to elucidate later.

In 1995, Finnish art educator Meri-Helga Mantere defined arts-based environmental education (AEE) as a form of learning that aims to develop environmental understanding and responsibility “by becoming more receptive to sense perceptions and observations and by using artistic methods to express personal environmental experiences and thoughts” (1995, p. 1).¹ In her view, AEE can also be an approach that teachers can employ to address matters of value and lifestyle with the children, particularly questions that are raised by the ecological crisis. When such issues are approached using artistic methods “otherwise unattainable

¹ The aspect of “environment” in arts-based environmental education, as it is being developed in Finland, pertains to both the built (man-made) environment and the natural environment. In that way the connotation of the word is more in line with the use of the word in “environmental art” than with Anglo-Saxon meanings of environmental or outdoor education. My focus in this paper is primarily on AEE as a specific approach to connect to nature, or more aptly, to what David Abram (1996) called the “more-than-human-world.”