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# Angels talking back and new organs of perception: Art-making and intentionality in nature experience<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

*This article focuses on the role of the artistic process in connecting to the natural environment. In my research I have explored what participants experience and learn when they engage in different types of arts-based environmental education (AEE) practices that I have facilitated. The premise of AEE is that efforts to learn about our (natural) environment can effectively take their starting point in an artistic activity, usually conducted in groups. I found that, on the whole, two major orientations can be distinguished. One starts from the point of aesthetic sensibility: the tuning in with the senses, or with 'a new organ of perception' (Goethe), in order to perceive 'the more than human' with fresh new eyes. This tradition can be traced back (but is by no means limited) to the Romantic Movement. Art in this context may help to amplify the receptivity of the senses and strengthen a sense of connectedness to the natural world. The other major orientation in seeking bridges between nature and art builds on a view of artistic process as leading to unexpected outcomes and 'emergent properties'. The fundamentally singular experience of making a work of art may evoke an aesthetic object that becomes a 'self-sufficient, spiritually breathing subject' (Kandinsky). The artwork can be spontaneously generative and multi-layered with meanings, some of which may even be ambiguous and paradoxical.*

## KEYWORDS

imagination  
sensory perception  
improvisation  
arts-based  
environmental  
education  
emergent properties  
defamiliarization

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*But perhaps more importantly: it can catch the participant of an AEE activity by surprise, overwhelm him or her as 'coming from behind one's back'. The element of improvisation, of taking in the new and unanticipated and accommodating for it, is the core quality here. These two orientations, when practiced as part of AEE, have implications on how we relate to nature through art. In the closing of this article I address the question of whether it is possible to bridge the dualism between the two orientations.*

## INTRODUCTION

In our technological world, second-hand experience, mediated by screens, has increasingly come to replace our receptivity to the phenomena that take place in the natural world. At schools, emphasis is not on enhancing our immediate perception of the world, and thus we can forget how to remain responsive to living things. Today, to a growing number of people, the concept of nature seems to have become obsolete and irrelevant, and to speak of any need to reconnect to nature seems to invite accusations of being a sentimentalist, romantic or worse. Timothy Morton (2007) speaks of an 'ecology without nature', and argues for a complete letting go of the term. He considers it an artificial construct, always referring to something 'over yonder'.

Counter to this is a defiant resurgence and embrace of the term 'nature', a case in point being Richard Louv's *The Nature Principle* (2011). 'The more high-tech we become, the more nature we need', Louv argues. His new book is essentially about the power of living in nature – 'not *with* it, but *in* it' (2011: 6, original emphasis). With Louv, I believe that it is important not to do away with 'the idea of nature' and to retain it as a domain of otherness that is not fully controlled by humans. In this understanding of nature, nature is not conceived of as something opposite to us; rather, in our (post)modern era we cannot help but have an ambiguous relation to it: we are being both a part of it *and* separate from it. It is our circumambient universe – so familiar and yet so strange.

More than three decades ago, in his book *Mind and Nature* (1980), Gregory Bateson suggested a different way of understanding and relating to nature – not by taking it down to its tiniest bits and analysing those, but by studying relationships and patterns. He would ask rather unorthodox questions like 'What is the pattern that connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose, and all four of them to me? And me to you?' (1980: 8). In his search for what he called 'the pattern which connects', Bateson was very interested in the contributions that art can make. He believed that the purposive, logical mind needed correction from dreams, art and poetry. Expression through the arts was considered by him to be the most honest and pure form of human communication, as his daughter Nora Bateson recounts in her documentary film *An Ecology of Mind* (2010). She adds,

It's easy to forget that when we find meaning in a story or enjoy the beauty of a piece of music, we are engaging in the realm of thinking that is most in sync with nature. Metaphor is the language of relationships, the language of natural systems, in which there is room to communicate in spectrums of possibility, instead of tightly defined cul-de-sacs.

(2010)

In my arts-based autoethnographic research I have explored what participants experience when they engage in practices of arts-based environmental education (AEE) that I facilitated as a teacher. The premise of AEE is that efforts to understand and learn from our natural environment take their *starting point* in an artistic activity, usually conducted in groups. Finnish art educator Meri-Helga Mantere defined 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: 1). According to Mantere, artistic experiences improve one's ability to see; they help one in knowing and understanding.

Having engaged myself in this field of combining art education and nature education for some time, I found that there is an elementary distinction between two AEE orientations in the way the natural environment is approached. The centre of gravity for the first nourishes a state of receptivity, of aesthetic perception and appreciation of phenomena in the natural world. Here the focus is to encourage the participant to be observant, minimally interfering and attentive to the world around her. The other takes its point of departure in a view on artistic process as active engagement with the circumambient universe. The participant is stirred to act upon the world around and in him or her, and the goal is to seek a dynamic open-ended immersion in a fundamentally improvisational undertaking.

### **AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY: TUNING IN WITH THE SENSES**

At one side of the spectrum is an approach to artistic process as a way of heightening the aesthetic sensibility of participants through art. Art, then, may help to amplify the receptivity of the senses (in the case of the visual arts this obviously mostly pertains to our sense of seeing). In the mid-nineteenth century, Henri David Thoreau wrote in his *Journals* that he was continuously struggling to meet nature in its elementary directness, unmediated by conventions, categories, concepts and scientific knowledge:

It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know. I do not get nearer by a hair's breadth to any natural object so long as I presume that I have an introduction to it from some learned man. To conceive of it with a total apprehension I must for the thousandth time approach it as something totally strange. If you would make acquaintance with the ferns you must forget your botany. You must get rid of what is commonly called knowledge of them. Not a single scientific term or distinction is the least to the purpose, for you would fain perceive something, and you must approach the object totally unprejudiced. You must be aware that no thing is what you have taken it to be.

(Thoreau, quoted in Shepard 1961: 210)

In AEE activities that are centred on aesthetic sensibility, participants are encouraged to perceive nature afresh – 'totally unprejudiced' – with artistic process as a means. A typical example of this approach can be found in *New Eyes for Plants* by Margaret Colquhoun and Axel Ewald (1996). This workbook for observing and drawing plants is, the authors say, an invitation to practice science as an art. They aim to engender in their readers 'a sense of wonder', and thereby sow seeds for the development of 'new organs of perception'.

The latter term stems from Goethe. 'Every new object, well-contemplated, opens up a new organ of perception in us', he maintained (Goethe, quoted in Cottrell 1998: 257). Brent Dean Robbins (2005: 119) tries to grasp what the great Romantic writer, biologist and physicist meant with this. Through our relations with the surrounding world and its beings, we become who we are, Robbins asserts, and because our bodies are formed of and by the encompassing earth, 'our organs can be understood to be the flesh of the world emerging into consciousness of itself, like an infant examining for the first time the back of her own hand and gaining sudden insight that the flailing limb is her own'. This view comes close to Paul Cézanne's view on how painting a scene in nature affected him: 'The Landscape becomes reflective, human and thinks itself through me. I make it an object, let it project itself and endure within my painting [...] I become the subjective consciousness of the landscape, and my painting becomes its objective consciousness' (Cézanne, quoted in Medina 1995: 221).

Colquhoun and Ewald (1996) provide a host of exercises to acquaint oneself with the transformations that plants undergo in their growth process, such as drawing each part meticulously, thereby in a way 'forgetting' the motive. In the attentive state of mind of looking carefully at a plant and drawing its features, we may start to feel that it is the emerging leaf producing region *itself*, which is showing us how to 'tune into' and 'swim with' the rapidly unfolding myriad of forms, each being a transformation of the one before (Colquhoun and Ewald 1996: 32). But, in order to enter into this realm of plant development, the authors suggest, participants engaging in this way of art-making have to 'dream a little' (1996: 169). 'The exercise of drawing exactly what you see allows one's prejudices of how things "should" look to fall away and we experience a "cleansing" in our very process of seeing' (1996: 32).



Figure 1: Participants in an arts-based environmental education (AEE) exercise. Image courtesy of the author.

## EMERGENT PROPERTIES AND IMPROVISATION

The other major orientation of artistic process in a natural place is not primarily about doing justice to the phenomena but is more preoccupied with what kind of 'emergent properties' stem from the art-making process itself. (And this more self-referential mode may very well be an indirect but just as legitimate way of being righteous to the phenomena, as we will see.) When one contemplates an artwork that someone else has made or the aesthetic object that is evolving in one's own hands – e.g. as a participant in a guided AEE activity – it can be felt as a piece of art that has generated spontaneously by itself, as it were, and that is ambiguous and multi-layered in its meanings. It is important to point out here that when I talk about participants engaging in 'artistic process', I do not mean to say, with Joseph Beuys, that 'everybody is an artist'. However, I do believe that every human being can participate meaningfully in some form of artistic activity – if we sever the notion from the nouns 'artist' and 'artwork' and instead shift our attention to the act of creating and releasing something new and meaningful into the world. Rather than referring to art-making as exclusively coming forth from talent, skill or mastery, I want to bring to the fore its basic meaning as a human activity that consists of deliberately arranging items in a way that influences and affects one or more of the senses, emotions and intellect. Art-making thus understood can catch both artist and participant by surprise, as if it came 'from behind one's back'. Expressive arts therapist Shaun McNiff suggests that our art pieces, once finished, may become angels or messengers. In *Art Heals* (2004), McNiff describes how he facilitates sessions with groups of participants who are encouraged to enter in a conversing mode with the paintings they make. He contends that images generate stories and that one can enter into an 'imaginal dialogue' with them; we can respond to pictures in ways that correspond to what he calls their 'spirits'. Explaining what he means with this he says that '[t]he angel is the surprise, the infusion of spirit that arrives unexpectedly' (2004: 105). At that point, the controlling mind relaxes its grip and allows spontaneous expression to form itself into fresh structures. This is how Kandinsky put it:

In a mysterious, puzzling, and mystical way, the true work of art arises 'from out of the artist'. Once released from him, it assumes its own independent life, takes on a personality, and becomes a self-sufficient, spiritually breathing subject that also leads a real material life: it is a being [...] [and] possesses – like every living being – further creative, active forces. It lives and acts and plays a part in the creation of the spiritual atmosphere.

(Kandinsky 1994: 210)

For Kandinsky, a 'true' work of art leads a full inner life. The word he used for this life force was *Klang*, spiritual reverberation. McNiff, however, underlines that he is speaking of angels in a metaphoric and imaginal sense, rather than as literal appearances of supernatural beings (2004: 113). Although McNiff's focus is primarily on imagination as a healing instrument, I suggest that the metaphor of 'an angel talking back' may be extended to beyond the domain of expressive arts therapy. The great advantage of the angel metaphor to him is that it personifies the image and brings it to life in a way that opens up many new possibilities for interaction: 'All of these creative methods require one

to establish an emphatic connection with the expressions of an image' (McNiff 2004: 101). This mode of artistic process is a way of interpreting through an ongoing active imagination, thus accessing the imaginative expression and potential of the artwork that we have released in the world.

The idea that the purpose of art was to make the 'familiar, unfamiliar' was articulated first by Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky in 1917. '[A]rt exists that one may recover the sensation of life', he wrote, 'it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*' (emphasis added). Its true purpose 'is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known'. The technique that art employs to achieve this is 'to make objects "unfamiliar", to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged' (Shklovsky [1917] 1965: 12). Without art, '[t]he thing rushes past us, pre-packed as it were: we know that it is there by the space it takes up, but we see only its surface'. (Shklovsky, cited in O'Toole 2001: 165). This defamiliarization is reminiscent of Thoreau's 'making acquaintance with the ferns' and the act of paradoxically trying to forget all our prior knowledge about them.

The defamiliarization, however, may also induce a moment of transformation, after which the world as it was before is not quite the same anymore. In his article 'Authenticity revisited', Bruce Baugh (1988) argues that the distinctive function of works of art is to reorient the experience of the perceiving subject. Peculiarly, the artwork *itself* determines the organization of this experience: 'the world of the work of art [...] is none other than that of the perceiving subject as transformed by the work. An artwork makes this world *its own* according to the depth and singularity of the transformation it effects' (Baugh 1988, original emphasis). A work of art, says Baugh, is something 'that exists *in order to be perceived*' (original emphasis). This aspect of 'perceivability', to me, relates to aspects of latent properties in the artwork that only manifest themselves to the extent that we are receptive to them.

This seems like a far cry from art-making and art perception as a means to observe and understand nature. We need a degree of defamiliarization to be open to the emanations that spring from the evolving or finished artwork that is in front of us. By allowing the artwork to organize our experience, it is given 'a power over us sufficient to alter our experience of the world from its very foundations' (Baugh 1988: 480–81). Thus it achieves its epiphany. This moment of transformation, however, will always be transitory, Baugh asserts. It is momentary and its duration coincides with that of the manifestation of the work. Others have called such moments *peak* (Maslow) or *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi) experiences.

Crucial for Baugh is that an authentic work of art must have an end *that cannot be understood in terms of our own*. It resists our everyday understanding of the world. By consequence, arts-based experiences in the natural world may redefine our conceptualization of nature and the manifestations of life that we find there. Art, through its unique power to transform experience, reveals new possibilities of existence to us (Baugh 1988: 485).

Baugh's reflections on how the artwork 'makes the world its own', which I have summarized here, seem to implicitly presuppose that there is an intentionality, a willfulness, on the part of the percipient of an artwork. The moment of transformation that the artwork brings about, the moment of epiphany it achieves, seems to be a consciously sought affair: we set



out to undergo a momentary revelation when we engage in meeting the artwork.

Baugh focuses his attention on the *percipient* of an artwork, not on the process of making art oneself – in solitude or as part of a group of participants. Yet I believe his understanding of how the aesthetic object transforms our experience is also meaningful for understanding the impact of art-making as *process*. McNiff provides an illustration of how such transformation is brought about in art-making, in dialogue with the nascent artwork, as it matures further and further. In a similar vein, Gerhard Richter says that when he is working on a picture, he feels that ‘something is going to come, which I do not know, which I have been unable to plan, which is better and wiser than I am’ (1995: 155). An artistic process may evoke and engender emergent properties, that is, qualities that are not directly traceable and reducible to the system’s components, but rather to how those components interact (Laughlin 2005). The idea of ‘emergence’ is understood here as the arising and manifestation of a ‘radical novelty’ that was previously not observed in a system (Goldstein 1999). Latent or potentially emergent properties lay dormant in the artwork and manifest themselves in the process of making it and at the moment of its completion, when it is released to the world. Nachmanovitch mentions the famous example of Michelangelo’s conceptualization of the process of sculpture: ‘The statue is already in the stone, has been in the stone since the beginning of time, and the sculptor’s job is to see it and release it by carefully scraping away the excess material’ (1990: 4).

### **MAKING A LITTLE-ME OF CLAY**

An example of emerging properties that are evoked in the artistic process is in my own experience of facilitating sessions with groups in which the participants make a clay sculpture of their own body, a so-called ‘little-me’, with their eyes closed. I learned to do this – myself being a participant – from sculptor Antony Gormley in 2006 at the course Art in Place at Schumacher College in the United Kingdom. Such a guided little-me making activity lasts about an hour, and I lead participants step by step into making a miniature version of their own seated body. In the process, I try to focus their full attention on each of their body parts, beginning with one of their feet and ending with their head. I ask them to lend expression to what they perceive in their body, and at that place – in and through the clay; thus, ‘for the thousandth time’ as Thoreau said, they approach it as something totally strange.

But it does not stop there. This activity, using a material that comes directly from the earth and with which humans have worked and been in close contact with for millennia, tends to have a strong impact on the participants. The circumstance that they work the clay with their eyes closed has a defamiliarizing effect. Perhaps even more strongly, they have to find their way forward without being able to rely on the controlling gaze; they have no reference whether the growing clay sculpture is realistic or aesthetically pleasing. Just as important is that the controlling eye of *others* is not felt – yet the activity is conducted together in a group. As the facilitator, I set the parameters for making this encounter come about, which I in turn learned from Gormley. I have facilitated little-me making sessions several times now and occasionally I try to bring in a new element of which the outcome is unknown to me. This prevents the process from ossifying, and feeds my own curiosity as facilitator – which is in turn reflected in the excitement of the participants who feel that



*Figure 2: A seated little-me, made from clay while having the eyes closed. Image courtesy of A. Gillespie.*



*Figure 3: Little-me's seated on the shore. Image courtesy of the author.*



some new territory will be entered. One of these ‘innovations’ was to introduce the drinking of a cup of water, again with the eyes closed, at the moment in time where the throat and neck are being moulded from clay.

One participant confided to me afterwards that he felt that in the making of a little-me there was an element of ‘bearing witness’: one is amazed, he said, when one at last opens the eyes and actually sees the figure that one has made that, so to speak, is ‘looking back at you’. Under other circumstances, he added, the process of art-making is much more based on ‘stepping-back’ from time to time, to make judgements and to be able to adjust something in the emerging artwork, if necessary, or desirable along the way. He perceived the drinking of the water as a ‘reverential gesture’, a threshold experience before commencing with the formation of the clay head. It is as if there was a latent meaning in the swallowing of the water (that I, as the person who introduced this element, had never thought of myself) that manifested itself through the process.

### **CAN THE TWO ORIENTATIONS BE BRIDGED?**

In AEE activities that aim at fostering a receptive and aesthetic awareness of the natural world, the imaginative part seems to be delimited to sensory imagination in service of an unprejudiced way of looking; these kinds of activities undoubtedly offer new understandings of the natural world, but lack the quality of improvisation. On the other hand, art-making that comprises a dynamic *acting on* the world (with the aim or effect of evoking emergent properties) may miss out on phenomena as it is more preoccupied with meaning-making in its own right. The first mode is a meeting of nature in an almost intuitional if not naïve sense, unclouded by reason or prior knowledge. In the second mode there is a shift from the object of one’s creative engagement – i.e. nature – to the artistic process itself and the objectified shapes that stem from it: the angels that talkback, and that start to surprise us during and through their own maturation.

But does this dualism imply that the two wholly different modes of exploring the natural world through art are incommensurable? Perhaps they are two sides of the same coin, at least that is what John Dewey maintained. He described these two approaches, of being receptive and acting upon, as actually being two parts of one experience of art. Moreover, he argued that transformative experiences *require* both active doing and receptive undergoing (Dewey 1934: 44). In David Wong’s explanation, an aesthetic experience, for Dewey, is a transactional phenomenon where both the person and the world are *mutually* transformed:

We do something, we undergo its consequences, we do something in response, we undergo again. And so on. The experience becomes educative as we grasp the relationship between doing and undergoing. The experience is transformative as we have new thoughts, feelings, and action, and also as the world reveals itself and acts upon us in new ways.

(Wong 2007: 203)

In fact, Dewey held that although undergoing may be receptive, it has no existence separate from active doing. Both intentional and spontaneous activities are part of his aesthetic perspective on learning. But that does not

preclude that when we are in the grip of a compelling experience; we relate to it for a large part without exercising conscious thought and effort. Its meaning, Dewey held, is immediate and immanent, and its quality may be perceived as 'a gift of the gods'. As Philip Jackson mentions in his *John Dewey and the Lessons of Art*, 'The added meaning is not sought. It happens effortlessly and without notice – like a bolt from the blue' (1998: 15).

Perhaps the true challenge is to explore how our heightened sensitivity to nature through combining art and environmental education can be expanded by allowing our artistic creations to 'talkback', and conversely, how our defamiliarization through the encounter of emergent properties can be grounded and embedded in a receptive contemplation of the natural world, thus enriching our understanding in unexpected ways. If we recall the participant in the little-me-making session who perceived the drinking of the water with his eyes closed as a threshold moment before commencing the final part of the session, which was the moulding a miniature head in clay, we may assume that his understanding of his head, his bodily processes and the relationship of his body with the circumambient universe was thoroughly impacted in ways that most likely would not come about by 'merely' contemplating the phenomenon intentionally in a Goethean sense.

The skill of oscillating from a 'receptive undergoing' to 'acting upon' in the artistic process in relation to nature is perhaps the core of Gregory Bateson's principle of 'double description', with which he meant that two or more information sources come together to provide information of a sort different from what was in either source separately (1980: 21). Double description looks past superficial similarities and differences to consider the underlying processes. Looking beyond an assumed dualism between aesthetics and science, he would define the essence of aesthetic as 'being responsive to the pattern which connects'. 'The richest knowledge of the tree', he would argue, 'includes *both* myth and botany' (Bateson, cited by Bateson 1987: 200, emphasis added).

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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University. On top of that, van Boeckel has participated in several international research projects and has published numerous articles in professional journals in the field of art studies, art education and environmental education. Jan is member of the international eco-art network. More on his work and several of his published papers can be found at [www.naturearteducation.org](http://www.naturearteducation.org).

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