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Jan van Boeckel

It seems to be our predicament that we live in post-normal times, characterized by extreme states of flux and uncertainty, and interweaving social, economic and ecological crises. And while we dwell in the eye of the storms that sweep around us, we – at the same time – relate to the world more and more through second-hand, that is, through technology-mediated, experience. We are literally out of touch with the living earth around us. If we are to bridge this disconnection, we may have to think

and act in radical new ways. Or, to put it differently, if we would use the old mindset, we will be doing new things in old ways.

Educators report that the attention span of today's students is extremely short. Used as we are to fast-paced imagery and constantly refreshed and fragmented information on our phone and computer screens, the "real" of the natural world, in comparison, seems hopelessly slow. One of the first challenges we are faced with is to find a frame of reference that is fundamentally different from prevailing modes, and – at the same time – not to deny the concrete lifeworld of today's learners, including the virtual realities they're so often immersed in.

These considerations fueled my interest to see what happens if one were to take a completely different approach to environmental education, turning prevailing practices, as it were, upside down. Instead of starting pursuits from a science-informed angle, grounded in biology and physics, one could also set out to see what occurs if one facilitates a learning process in and about nature that starts from a more open-ended approach. Taking a perspective from art education, I hold that art – or better put: artistic process – can make a great contribution here. A century ago, Russian critic Viktor Shklovsky put it this way: "art exists so that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived," he said, "and not as they are known."

Commonly, in environmental education as practiced today, those elements that could be regarded as being arts-inspired are likely to be treated as merely forms of play. Typically, the artmaking element, when and if practiced, is employed to loosen up the participants, after which more serious elements of learning can follow – that is to say, those that actually seem to matter. But I would suggest that we can regard artistic practice not as an aide to learning, but as constituting in itself a form of coming to understanding of the natural world. When we seek to connect to nature through art, what happens?

It was through Finnish art educator Meri-Helga Mantere that I first heard of the concept of arts-based environmental education. In this approach, learners are encouraged to be open to their sensitivity, and they are stimulated to find new and personal ways to articulate and share their environmental experiences. These might be beautiful or disgusting, and peaceful or threatening. Participants are invited to relate to a plant, an animal or landscape – and even their own body – as if they encounter them for the first time in their lives. John Dewey held that in any learning activity it is important to first establish a direct felt contact between the learner and the items of his or her learning – in short, to facilitate having "first hand" experiences.

In this, it seems imperative that the learner is somehow able to suspend for some time the commonly held expectations and anticipations of appropriate ways in which the world is to be understood. In an educational setting, it may mean that a facilitator fosters a state of attentiveness and presence among learners that allows them to feel

safe and at ease when moving about in uncharted terrain. In the English language there is this beautiful concept of “holding the space.”

As a reflective practitioner, I facilitated three different art-making activities, at several occasions and locations across Europe. My empirical data were my observations, written notes, memories, and my transcribed interviews with participants, colleague teachers and informed outsiders. I tried to interpret the experiences of both the participants and myself. To this end, I employed so-called interpretative phenomenological analysis, paired with autoethnography.

The research questions that guided my study were: First, what is distinctive in the process of the artmaking activities that I facilitate? Second, which specific competencies can be identified for a facilitator of such education? And, finally, does participating in these activities enhance the ability of participants to have a direct experience of feeling connected to the natural world?

In the short time for this introductory lecture it is hard to give a summary of the extensive exploration that I undertook. Therefore, I have chosen to dwell at some length on one of the key themes that came to the surface.

As I alluded to earlier, my interest in artistic process as learning practice stems from the thought that we have grown more and more blind and deaf to the living world. Our “common sense” pre-understandings and the existing body of scientific knowledge all predispose us to interpret phenomena a certain way. By consequence, we seem to miss out on a lot that we simply overlook. The central question for biologist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson, according to his oldest daughter Mary-Catherine, was what caused humans to be so destructive of natural ecological systems. He wondered what it is in our way of perceiving that makes us not see the delicate interdependencies in the ecological system that give it its integrity. We don’t see them, he said, and therefore we break them.

But this need not be the case. Environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy shares a striking observation about his artmaking process in the film *Rivers and Tides*. While he has just finished an installation of driftwood that will soon be taken away by the incoming tide of the sea, he confides: “You feel as if you have touched the heart of the place, and that’s a way of understanding for me.” And he continues, “To see something you never saw before, that was always there, but that you were blind to.”

When reflecting about the role of artistic process in connecting to the natural environment, one can, I believe, on the whole, distinguish between two major orientations or paradigms. One of them starts from our aesthetic sensibility: the tuning in with the senses, or with, what Goethe called, “new organs of perception.” The aim then is to perceive the world with fresh new eyes. And art, in this context, may help to amplify the receptivity of our senses. The focus is to encourage the participants to be observant, non-interfering, and attentive to the world around them.

In the mid-nineteenth century, American naturalist Henri David Thoreau was continuously struggling to meet nature in its elementary directness, unmediated by

conventions, categories, concepts, and scientific knowledge. “If you would make acquaintance with the ferns,” he suggested, “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, Thoreau continues, 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.”

The other approach to encountering nature through art takes its point of departure in viewing artistic process as, foremost, actively engaging with our circumambient universe. The participant is stirred to act upon the world, and the goal is to seek a dynamic open-ended immersion in a deeply improvisational undertaking. This orientation builds on a view of artistic process as leading to unexpected outcomes and emergent properties. The singular experience of making a work of art may evoke an aesthetic object that becomes a “self-sufficient, spiritually breathing subject,” as Kandinsky put it. The artwork can be multi-layered with meanings, some of which even ambiguous and paradoxical. It can literally catch its maker by surprise; overwhelm him or her as “coming from behind one’s back.”

These two different orientations, when practiced as part of arts-based environmental education, have implications for how we relate to the natural world. In activities that aim to foster a receptive and aesthetic awareness – the kind of fresh perceiving that Thoreau and Goldsworthy value so strongly – the sensory imagination is put to the service of an unprejudiced way of looking. Such activities seem to offer new understandings, but they may background the quality of creating something new.

On the other hand, artmaking that comprises a dynamic acting upon the world may miss out on subtle natural phenomena, as it is more preoccupied with meaning-making in its own right.

Where the first mode is a meeting of nature in an intuitional – if not naïve – sense, unclouded by reason or prior knowledge, the second mode entails a shift of focus from nature to the artistic process itself and the shapes and expressions that stem from it. We can engage in an imaginal dialogue with the maturing artwork. It thus may become like an “angel” talking back to us, as art therapist Shaun McNiff conceptualized it.

Does this dualism imply that these two apparently very different modes of exploring the natural world through art are incommensurable? Perhaps. But maybe they are just two sides of the same coin. In fact, this is exactly what philosopher and pedagogue John Dewey maintained. He described these two approaches, of being receptive to and acting upon the world, as actually being two parts of one experience of art. Moreover, he argued that transformative experiences require both. An aesthetic experience is for Dewey a transactional phenomenon where both the person and the world are mutually transformed.

In a basic sense, my research was an exploration of how our heightened sensitivity to the natural world through art can be expanded by allowing our artistic

creations to “talk back.” And, conversely, how our sense of surprise in the encounter with unforeseen emergent properties while making art can be grounded and embedded in a receptive contemplation of nature, thus enriching our understanding in multiple ways.

According to Dutch philosopher Ton Lemaire the most difficult challenge in our encounter with nature may be for us to put into practice an attitude of compassionate attentiveness that is, at the same time, also detached. To acknowledge the inhumanity of nature, her grandiose indifference with respect to our fate, and yet not to have the feeling of being excluded.” What is called for, he suggests, is that we intensify our attendance to the phenomena of the world and simultaneously minimize our imposition on them. That we, as it were, perceive the earth as if she is not being perceived.

When I practice “wrong-footing” in the art activities that I facilitate – that is, when I deliberately cause confusion on the part of the participants with the aim to bring about defamiliarization – I try to evoke in them their imaginative capacity, which they need to face and overcome this unexpected threshold. In a basic sense, wrong-footing is quite different from the sense of wonder that a person may have when she meets a new phenomenon completely on her own terms, at a location, a time and in a tempo that I haven’t “organized.” Wrong-footing can perhaps be appreciated as an encouragement to partake in a rite of passage, of entering a new and liminal space, where the imagination is ignited and spurred.

Ultimately, one of the key contributions of arts-based environmental education, in my view, is its capacity to create conditions for a sense of wonder to manifest itself. Wonder about the natural world and our own partaking in it. I believe that subsequent learning may fruitfully build further upon this. In best cases, from this kind of artistic practice, new forms of what I call rudimentary cognition may evolve, that is: latent pieces of understanding that are still in need of clearer articulation in words. The extent to which this may happen is for a major part dependent on the inclination of participants to invite the unforeseen themselves.