

BOOK REVIEWS

**AT THE HEART OF ART AND EARTH: AN EXPLORATION OF PRACTICES
IN ARTS-BASED ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION, JAN VAN BOECKEL
(2013)**

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Why is it important to link arts to environmental education? The most pressing problems of our society (global warming, climate change, overpopulation, technological control and alienation effects of technological development) might be the answer. If you want to read what the fusion of environmental approach with art and craft theory has to offer, this book is worth checking. Van Boeckel, a Dutch anthropologist, visual artist, art teacher and filmmaker, presents insight into his workshops, in which participants explore through various artistic activities their own nature and the nature around them. He continued the work done by Finnish art educators, most remarkably by Meri-Helga Mantere, Pirkko Pohjakallio and Timo Jokela. Van Boeckel succeeded in doing something that no one has done before. He built a theoretical framework in a form of a doctoral thesis for Arts-based Environmental Education (AEE), a concept developed and practiced for over twenty years in Finland. AEE, as well as Van Boeckel's work, are part of a discourse and movement for finding more environmentally responsible, creative interactions with the natural world. Outside Finland, similar attempts have been made by Tereso, Illeris, Inwood, Anderson & Guyas Suominen, London and others. Even though these attempts are somewhat similar to those of Van Boeckel, this book offers more of an active approach starting with each individual. The goal is to facilitate participants in finding, or rather in forgetting, themselves in the environment around them through artmaking and establish more personal contact with the place in which the workshop happens.

Throughout the 420 pages of the publication there emerges enthusiasm and determination for mapping and opening new ideas in the field of AEE. The publication consists of five parts: the first focuses on theory and the second on methodology, the third describes the research, the fourth analyses it, and the fifth presents hopes for emerging AEE pedagogy. This review focuses only on the first, third and the fifth part.

In the theoretical chapter, the author describes Baudillard's postmodern idea of hyperreality, where the classic dichotomies between the authentic and artificial do not apply, and places it against Arne Naess's deep ecology thinking. Naess emphasizes the importance of the aesthetic connection to nature in environmental education. In this way, Naess convinces us that we want to protect ourselves through protecting nature (animals, plants, other human beings) not because we are morally obliged, but because we are aesthetically inclined. In other parts of the first chapter, Van Boeckel examines the problems of the current disenchantment of the world, describes the historical foundations of AEE and introduces five examples of AEE activities: earth education, botanical excursion, flow learning, palaver på grenesisiska: utterances in the language of trees, and art-based perceptual ecology.

Van Boeckel's achievement of conducting 30 workshops in seven different countries is considerable. In Part III, the author presents empirical data from the workshops in a form of three case studies: wildpainting, lines of the hand and clay little-me's. The publication contains many examples of the ways the facilitator's educational experience and extraordinary gentleness supported workshop participants in emancipating from overly rationalistic perspective. As Robert, a participant of the little-me session expresses 'It was not only that the activity was physical, that I worked with my hands, but I also aimed my attention specifically to my own body [...] I was noticing how I could truly express how I actually feel. A lot has happened here' (Van Boeckel: 285). While reading the publication, certain questions come to mind, such as what is wild about wild painting, who determines the wild, and why it is less wild to paint in the urban environment.

In the last part of the book, the author focuses on emergent properties in artmaking and the relationship between science and art. He looks closer at the phenomenon of being stuck and the ways facilitator may approach it. Van Boeckel calls readers to make 'lucky' mistakes and find something while they search for something else. The great number of quotes and voices in the text give the sense of vibrant discussion in the cross section of art and environmental education but at the same time seem to obscure the author's voice. Perhaps, it was made this way because the publication was written in the form of a thesis.

Some people may see this kind of publication as a romantically 'idealized' vision on nature and dismiss it for 'remaining silent on politics'. Such a critique has been revealed in Jan Jagodzinski's doubts on 'Concerning the spiritual in art and its education: Postmodern-romanticism and its discontents' (2013: 279). Operating in the given political system makes us trapped and unable to think outside of it. We tend to forget that instead of following someone else's vision, we can create our own one. As Mahatma Gandhi said 'We need to be the change we wish to see in the world' (Potts 2002: 34). We should not discard the work done by Van Boeckel but try to see the intention behind it. *At the Heart of Art and Earth* is an attempt to find more body-centred ways to engaged with the world. The book is written in a reader-friendly and understandable way. It is a useful addition to the research literature for as much as it offers fresh insight into the interdisciplinary field of AEE and first-hand artistic experiences in nature for adults.

REFERENCES

- Jagodzinski, J. (2013), 'Concerning the spiritual in art and its education: Postmodern-romanticism and its discontents', *Studies in Art Education*, 54: 3, pp. 277–80.