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Interviewed by Solveig Jahnke<https://www.artun.ee/en/interview-with-professor-jan-van-boeckel/>

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You have been elected as the Professor of Art pedagogy and art didactics at the Estonian Academy of Arts. Congratulations, first of all!

But why did you elect Estonia – what caught your attention?

As it happens, one gets these kinds of announcements of new job offerings at the academic level in art education or in the arts in general. I'm on this mailing list of Aalto University – I did my doctorate degree in Aalto. Suddenly there was this notice of this possibility and I got it, when I was still working in Iceland at the Iceland Academy of Arts and Design, at the Department of Design and Architecture. There I supervised master students in the writing of their final theses. But my background is in art education at Aalto University. The field I am specialized in is arts-based environmental education, and this approach has its origin in the early 1990s or already even in 1980s, in close contact with Estonia. Becoming art teachers went out into nature to do work, workshops, work camps, whatever, where they worked with natural materials; they looked in into issues of sustainability, of connecting to nature. And these activities were done together with students in Finland – in Lahemaa national park and on the islands.

Another reason that drew me here was that I've been in Estonia a few times before. One time long ago in 1998, when there was a conference in Tartu about the importance of cultural values in environmental protection, where I met one of the scholars in your country – his name is Hendrik Relve, who knows a lot about old trees, for example, sacred trees. I found it very fascinating to learn more about it. And then later, in 2009 there was a conference in Tartu again on eco- and biosemiotics. There's a special group there working as biosemioticians: Timo Maran, Kalevi Kulli,

are the names of some of these scholars. They expanded on the work of Jakob von Uexküll on the notion of *Umwelt*. I think very interesting work is being done here.

There is a marked contrast, geographically, with Iceland. It was very interesting to be in Iceland, but there the landscape is almost completely without trees – bare rocks and harsh climatological circumstances. In general, I love to be among forests and in natural areas. Also, I like to connect again to my subject of art education. It was interesting to supervise students in design, but the approach to learning processes is a bit different compared to those that prevail in my own field.

You also have a background in anthropology. . .

Yes, there was a large gap in-between, one might say. I did my master in social anthropology. At the time, one could still study several years – I did it a long time. In between, I did several other things like making documentary films and also traveling for a half of year with a group of friends to different Indian reservations in the US, doing volunteer work. I finished my master in 1989, in Amsterdam, and in-between then and now I did a lot of different things, like working at an organization for human rights of indigenous peoples in Amsterdam. Together with my wife and children we were also in Sweden for some years, where I worked as an art teacher. One might say that later in life, I started working more in the field of art. Before it was more anthropology, other cultures, philosophy. But in some curious way, the field of art based education allows me to connect these different fields. Or, to put it differently, I think I have a lot of benefit from having studied anthropology in studying art pedagogy. Because, for one thing, anthropology allows you to think in alternatives – alternative ways of life. You find, that the Western way of thinking, of approaching problems, is not the only valuable one. As an anthropologist, you're trained in thinking in more than just one way. And there are specific ways of approaching research – take for example 'participatory observation'. You participate and, in the meantime, you also observe what's going on. This has been very useful in my research at Aalto University.

In your research, you focus on the value that art practice gives in the context of nature and environmental education. How did you arrive at this research topic?

I was an art teacher for younger children, roughly between 9 and 12 in Sweden and we lived in the forests, in the middle of the country. And I also gave courses to adults, but I noticed with these young children that it was very uncommon for them to paint or draw out in the nature, for several reasons. One reason was, for example, very simply that the school insurance covered what happened in the school building and if you go outside, it's a bit difficult. So, most teachers generally tend not to do this. I found it attractive to develop that more. I also noticed that when you take children out into nature, which they've never done at the school, the first few times they're a bit like cows or calves that leave to the meadow, when spring starts. They jump around all over the place, because it is so exciting to be in this other place. But if you do it a few times and you are patient, then you can actually do many meaningful things, I think. I was sort of interested in exploring this. Then, at some point, I came across an article by Meri-Helga Mantere. She's now retired, but she's an art teacher from Aalto University – At the time, it was called University of Art and Design – who had written a text about this field of art-based environmental education. The title was "Ecology, Environmental Education and Art Teaching" and I found that very inspiring to read. Suddenly,

several things came together – environmental philosophy, about the value of nature to human beings and their development in life; education, pedagogy; and also the art practice – art in the outdoors. So I wrote to her and a correspondence developed – and at some point, she invited me in 2003 to come to Finland to see what they were doing with children in these specialized art schools; you might say extracurricular, where children voluntarily choose to be in such an art school on a Wednesday afternoon or maybe weekend. And I think they did magnificent things – very unlike what was happening, for example, in the Netherlands. And then she said, “It would actually be important, if someone would try to research this subject in a PhD – so far, nobody has done this. Would you be interested? Also, you come from outside and have a fresh look. Would you be interested to do this? If you want, I can bring you in contact with people and organizations”. So, I thought it would be very interesting, because also for me, it would give some kind of structure – some framework to approach this whole new field for me. I really liked the idea. Then I was introduced to a professor in art education, Juha Varto, and he also said that he was very supportive. So, I wrote a research proposal and it was accepted, but then I didn’t have funding right away to do it. So, I applied to the Finnish Cultural Foundation but in the meantime, we moved back from Sweden to Amsterdam and I worked for about 2 years at an organization for human rights of indigenous people, as Head of Communications. Then, suddenly I got notice that the Finnish Cultural Foundation had awarded me with scholarship for one year. It was only year, but still, it was for me a basis to start, so I figured that if I wouldn’t do it then, when would it ever happen? I quit my job in Amsterdam. At first we thought of moving the whole family with children to Finland, but our children were becoming teenagers and they said that they would rather stay in Amsterdam. So as it happened, I went back and forth many times to Helsinki.

It is maybe important to underline that this new field – at least new to me – of combining art education and nature/environmental education was developed mostly in Finland and also a bit in the Nordic countries. And maybe elsewhere, in Estonia – I still need to find out more about it. But hardly in the Netherlands, nor the UK or other places. So it was for me a quite natural place to do it in Finland. Also, I liked the idea of having it based in an art university rather than, say, at a university of life sciences or at a nature and environmental education department, because for me, the essence is sort of a radical turning of perspective.

Commonly, if you for example meet outdoor educators or environmental teachers, when they do something with art, their way of relating to the art practice is that it is like a play, to get people enthusiastic. You make participants a bit more engaged and then you can move to the more ‘serious stuff’, which is the biology and science. But usually, it is left at that and I think this art perspective can be much more profound in the sense that one can look at art-making or artistic process as a form of learning in itself, so that it is not like an extra to get people playing. It’s not the icing on the cake – a nice decoration that you just put on, but it actually is a way of learning and the key to that is that it is open-ended. Art-making itself informs you on what you are about to learn.

What is the value of adding art practice to teaching or learning about other subjects?

It works on different levels.

To start off with this notion that art is added to the other levels. I would go a bit further – art has an intrinsic quality and its way of approaching the world offers opportunities that are not just added,

they are in their own way a form of learning, of engaging with the world, that can run parallel to other ways of knowing.

Maybe I should give an example. An activity that I've facilitated many times is that you ask participants to make a sculpture of their own body in clay and it's about the size of 30cm. They make the sculpture in seated position – pretty much in the same position as they are sitting at the table while they are making the sculpture. A small seated figure looking in the same direction as you are, when you are making the sculpture. But I ask them to do this with their eyes closed. It takes about an hour. While they are making the sculpture, starting with the feet, up to the lower part of their legs, and then the upper part, and so on, I talk about these different body parts and ask them to put their focus on these different body parts, while they are making their sculpture. So, for example, when they are sculpting the shoulders, if one's shoulders feel very heavy and if one feels pressure, they I invite them to try to express that in clay. It's a way of sensing or monitoring what is going in one's body while one has one's eyes closed, in a sort of meditative setting and one expresses this in and through the clay. Later on, when everybody's finished, they open their eyes, they look what has come out, what is the result – and then we talk about it. For many people, it is a rather surprising experience of relating to one's own body, because one gets in another mental state.

This is what I mean by open-endedness – that it is not like that I have expectations that it will lead to certain results or outcomes and that these will be delivered; that I can put a mark, outcome 1, outcome 2, et cetera. No – in an open-ended process, if it's you participating or somebody else, for everybody it will be rather unique, because the learning is happening at that very instance in a unique configuration of how one relates to one's own body. So, the results that are coming out of it will be often surprising, new, and sometimes also overwhelming. It's almost, you might say – and in my dissertation, I write things about this – like going through what is called "rite of passage". You go through a ritual, in which the art pulls you out the ordinary circumstances. For example, if you work with the clay with your eyes closed, you're in a very basic sense helpless or vulnerable, because how to make your sculpture so, that it is anatomically still somewhat correct? It is almost impossible. And how can you check if it is still aesthetically attractive? This is also difficult. So you just have to let go – you have to go with the process. But the rewards are that if you open your eyes and see what you've made and what others have made, it is like meeting something really new.

What I notice is that when participants come back from this 'rite of passage', return from this ritual to ordinary life, they can start to try to make meaning or to grasp what actually happened to them, and what actually happened to the others? What did I feel? What might be the reason, that I felt this? How does my sculpture look now and what do I see, when I see it now?

This meaning-making is part of getting back with your feet on the ground again. But also, for the first, it provides a sort of ignition of enthusiasm, of energy, which in ordinary teaching environments often is lacking, when it is a one way process of a teacher trying to transfer his or her knowledge to the student. Often people use this metaphor of a coffee-filter. As you pour the water into coffee filter, it trickles down into the heads of the learner, but it is like you have to absorb the knowledge, which is already pre-packed for you. It is an impoverished way of learning, because learning comes from your inner relatedness to what's happening. This new energy or enthusiasm in the learning group, when people really get excited, can feed the learning process.

One could expound on this, let's say, for example, in a situation where one wants to talk about the

inner organs of humans, as part of the lessons of biology. One could start with such an exercise, and then afterwards, when participants have talked about what the experience of perceiving their body this way, while working with the clay, meant to them, one could bring the focus to where the different body organs actually are in the body and what their function is. Such a learning process would cause learners to connect quite differently to the subject of the human body. But if you only have it on a slide projection or only have 3D model of the body, it's somehow distanced from yourself.

So, back to your question – in summary, I would say that what art adds is that it is an invitation to learners – who could be children, but could be adults as well –to engage with the world, their being in the world, their body in the world and also in the natural environment, in a rather new way, which will usually heighten their curiosity, excitement and inspiration to work with this.

On a more profound level, I would say there is also something going on between a teacher facilitating this – in the case of these clay figures we talked about, it's me, but in other cases, it's other people and the participants. If a teacher allows for such an open ended process, it means that he or she doesn't know what the outcome would be. You try out something and maybe you improvise, so you add something else to it. Like with this clay-making activity, at some point I added that people should have a glass of water in front of them when they are sculpting the body. And then when they come to the part where the neck is connected to the head, if they drink this water at that very moment, when they are sculpting the neck –still with having their eyes closed – the awareness of the water, the fluid entering their system becomes very sensitive, because through working in this way with the clay for about an hour, you get very sensitized to what is going on in your body. So this is like an improvisation that you add to it, but you don't quite know beforehand, if it is going to work or not. Let's just see what happens. And this kind of excitement of a teacher, this curiosity about trying out something new which can also fail, is usually picked up by the students. You are not following a routine – it's not like a pre-programmed schedule that you follow. And I think this is also an, uncommon way of thinking about learning – that you are able to accept failure or new direction. It also requires from the teacher or facilitator a certain vulnerability – that whatever is going to happen, you will allow for it and try to accommodate for that situation.

One of your interests is the tension between trying to open the senses, whilst coping with the current ecological crisis. Can you tell about that?

If you talk about the current ecological crisis, I think it has many dimensions. A huge change is going on. To give an example – the extinction of species. Some people say that we're on the brink of the sixth mass extinction event. Throughout history of earth, there have been these periods, when a lot of species die in the same period. But this time it is mostly caused by human intervention. Another crisis that people are more familiar with, and related to the mass extinction event, is climate change – global warming. If you look at some of the consequences that people predict – even if we as a world community are able to stay within the limits of two degrees Celsius change of temperature, already then the effects will be enormous, like the melting of ice at the North Pole. That will lead to a chain of what they call positive feedbacks – for example, the methane gases stored in the permafrost under the ice will be released and it will give chain reactions that will only increase the process of how global warming is going to impact us. Some people say that it will

actually lead to several forms of crises that we're actually not quite prepared for. Maybe like people moving from areas with a lot of drought, where nothing can grow anymore, to other areas, where food can still be grown. How much can these areas still supply sustainably for those other people? If people think about these different types of crises, they often tend to get a bit sad or even depressed. A friend of mine is a teacher at Schumacher College in England. He's the staff ecologist there, his name is Stephan Harding and he says: "If you don't get depressed about the state of the world today, from the ecological point of view, you should probably go and see a psychiatrist." Oddly, the situation is so bleak, that to be depressed about it is a 'normal state' – your body is responding to something that is demanding it. Some of the things that I talked about before, for example working with the clay, being very attentive to your body as it is in the here and now, interacting with the natural world, foreground the opening of the senses more fully. It can also be an artmaking activity with children, for example, making a sculpture with twigs and stones that they find in the forest or on the beach. It's really very much about relating to the world with your senses – touch, smelling, seeing – rather than relating to the world via a screen, via your computer or your mobile phone. In order to be able to do this, you have to in a way lower your defensive shields. Somebody once made a comparison that if your hand is in a fist, you cannot really receive. If you hold on very tightly, you pull yourself together and protect yourself, you cannot really receive. Only if you have opened yourself – if you open up, then you are ready to receive the gift. In this context – only if you are really attentive to the world and your senses are fully open, you can take in this information of what it is to be in a forest or at the beach or say at a place where you will be working with your eyes closed moulding the clay.

The tension, however, it seems to me, is that maybe in the times we are living in today, we need to partly close our senses to cope, to survive. In psychological theory you have this concept of what they call 'psychic numbing'. The meaning of it is that for a person in situations of severe stress – for example people, who are in prisons or in camps – one survival mechanism is to numb oneself, to close off one's senses, so that something that is harmful from the outside cannot reach you anymore. In the case of, for example, climate change, many people respond to this with some form of denial. They don't acknowledge that it is a very urgent crisis and that we have to act immediately. From a policy point of view, this situation that people are denying it and just continue their lives as if nothing is really going on, this is detrimental, because if people are not coming to action, then how will they change the situation? Yet, some people argue that the fact that people deny the alarming situation as it is now – that they give in to this psychic numbing, that they numb their senses to the overwhelming bad news – is also in that case a survival mechanism. If you would be worried all the day, all the night about what climate change really means or what it means in 20 years or 60 years, you would go crazy. From a survival point of view, it's not very helpful.

What interests me is when you work on the interface between, on the one hand, opening of the senses, which is about being fully present in the world, not shutting yourself off from anything, but being very attentive to whatever is going on, and on the other hand, being in the world that is so out of balance, it maybe is wise not to open your senses so widely, not to be so fully present, because if you are fully present, you might get into big problems... I think the tension between these two is not so easily resolved.

I hold that art can be very meaningful here; I wrote a paper about this, entitled 'Arts-based

Environmental Education and the Ecological Crisis: Between Opening the Senses and Coping with Psychic Numbing', people can find it on the Internet. Art allows you in some basic sense to live a bit longer with uncertainty, longer than we are accustomed to in most of our day-to-day situations. Holding out, juggling as it were, with things that you don't yet fully understand or with paradoxes that you come across. Often, we find ourselves in situations where it is an either/or: for example, when a student does a multiple choice test – where it is either A, B, C or D – you always have to choose the one viewpoint is right and the others are wrong. But in art, you could say – well, maybe both conflicting viewpoints are wrong, or maybe both are right, or maybe I don't have to choose right away; I can try to live with this uncertainty a little longer, exploring the options. I think that in the situation we are in the world today, that's a very healthy position to be – not to be forced to make too quick judgements in either/or.

How can art be integrated or implemented in other subjects at school? What sort of education or preparation would that require of other subject teachers?

I think that this way of working with art is still rather new, so ways to implement it tend to be rather difficult, still, in the kinds of education systems that we have today. It is moving – there are developments in education happening – but on schools this is not something that you can easily put into a time slot between everything else that is happening, because it's a fundamentally different way of approaching things. But I think for example that one could start working in a more project-based way of education. If you, for example, work with a combination of teaching biology, geography, about landscapes and art-making, maybe even physical exercise – you can try to develop a project with different elements of what the pupils need to learn combined, and in which art can possibly provide openings to find new ways of tackling issues. But it will require some willingness from teachers to also maybe put aside textbooks for a bit and see what can be done in this very concrete situation, combined from different perspectives.

There's a school in Denmark called the Bifrost School, where they work a bit on this basis. It is for children roughly at the *Grundskole* level, from about the age of 6 to the age of 16. In the beginning of the year, teachers determine a certain theme that will be worked with during that whole following year. For example, it could be Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, so for example in music lessons, they work this theme and what this music is about, but they work also with the phenomenon of what exactly is the night; the properties of celestial bodies, the stars and the moon; how can we learn about this; they learn about the times when Mozart was living, the history part. But the teachers try to see in the lessons, if they can combine subjects from mathematics to language or whatever they need to present in that year and seek connections to that theme. Teachers spend a lot of time to prepare their own lessons according to the theme. So, you cannot fall back on a textbook for that, because, as a teacher, you need to prepare yourself, to familiarize yourself with the theme and to study the potential of finding interrelations connecting subjects.

In my own research, I did not want to look too quickly to how can we implement arts-based environmental education in the prevailing curricula – although I think that it is very relevant to ask the question – but I thought: let's see what happens, if you are in a relatively free environment of testing this out, this more experiential way of learning, without seeing how could practically implement this right away. Because if we'd start with how can we have it in the curriculum, it would

predetermine a bit what the outcome of our probing would be. You only look at things that are applicable in a given context. In contrast: maybe by having it more experimental, even utopian, it may give some clues or insights that maybe trickle down in some way into a future curriculum later ... but we don't start there.

Posted by Kunstiakadeemia

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