

# The World is Breathing Me

## Introduction to *Artizein* Special on Art, Ecology and Education

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To me, one of the most compelling expressions of art, ecology and education coming together happened when I attended a lecture, a decade or more ago, by Timo Jokela, a Finnish professor in art education and environmental artist. He gave a presentation on his work, addressing his audience from a platform. In front of him was a glass of water. “This here,” he started his presentation, pointing his finger at the water, “is part of my *environment*.” He then raised the glass to his mouth and took a deep sip. He paused a moment. “Now it is part of *me*.” With his performance or, if you will, artistic intervention, Jokela made something clear. The self and environment are always intertwined and inseparable. I found it, in all its simplicity, a great teaching, a compelling expression of the idea that ecology is not something “out there.” My own initiation and immersion in the field happened, I now see in retrospect, when I facilitated a course titled “Art in place, linking art and ecology” at Schumacher College in the United Kingdom, in 2006, with guest teachers Antony Gormley, Peter London and Peter Randall-Page. The grounding idea was that aesthetic and ecological sensibilities are two sides of the same coin. I was drawn by the following description: “Nature has always inspired artists, and art offers a medium for a deeper environmental connection. This course will offer an opportunity to explore the relationship between humans and the natural world ... the union between art and ecology.”

In this new issue of *Artizein*, the triad of art, education, and the natural environment is the central theme for reflection. Contributing authors and artists present ways in which artistic practices can be a starting point, in its own right, to connect with the earth. Through such approaches, new understandings can be gained, including about our self. The authors dwell upon the experiences that have been gained so far. What are the pedagogical underpinnings that can be articulated? And what would be the relevance of facilitating and promoting such encounters in an age of nature-deficit disorder and climate fear? Which challenges come up when participants, through art, are encouraged to open their senses more fully to the world, at a time when psychic numbing and cognitive dissociation seem to be the default mode for many people, faced with the overwhelming news of the scale of the ecological crisis? This issue of *Artizein* offers a wide range of perspectives. There are

artworks, videos, theoretical essays, and inspiring “reports from the field” from practitioners who have their feet, quite literally, in the mud.

French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty was much taken by the art of Paul Cézanne. Cézanne once said that when he paints, the landscape “thinks itself” in him. And he would add that he thus became “its consciousness” (Cézanne, cited by Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 67). Martin Buber (1950) thought this relationship to be even more active on the part of the landscape: “This is the eternal source of art: a man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power” (p. 9). Anticipating Gregory Bateson and his seminal work *Mind and Nature* (1980), German philosopher Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) held that the opposition between mind and nature is only apparent. For Schelling both are informed by a common order and are ultimately in harmony with each other: Nature is “visible spirit,” and spirit is “invisible nature.” In human reason, Schelling held, “nature contemplates her past works; she perceives and recognizes herself as herself.” Or, as Robert Williams (2004) explains Schiller’s position: “Nature *needs* our minds to be complete” (p. 109). The best instrument of thought, in Schelling’s view, is art. Schelling suggested that because art is necessarily only *partly* a conscious activity, it is better able to express the harmony between nature and the mind. In art, nature “consciously comprehends and completes itself.” As knowing animals, we are that “in which nature opens her eyes and sees that she exists” (Schelling, cited in Tallis, 2005, p. 110). Beyond art and human reason, there are more basic echoes of this intertwining of self and environment. Like in this remarkable conception of Dutch artist herman de vries, as he once expressed it in an interview: “When I breathe, nature enters my lungs. Sometimes I have the feeling that I am not breathing, but the outside world is breathing me, because I am obliged to breathe” (de vries, cited in Furlong, 2002, p. 52).

The artist’s task, painter Agnes Martin held, was to be a “midwife of awareness”: “The life of an artist is a very good opportunity for life. When we realize that we can see life we gradually give up the things that stand in the way of our complete awareness. As we paint we move along step by step. We realize that we are guided in our work by awareness of life. We are guided to greater expression of awareness and devotion to life” (Martin, cited by Popova, 2017) Another side to this awareness to the world through art, however, is that it may also highlight ugliness and cruelty. Nature is not always pleasant, comforting and harmonious. Finnish art educator Meri-Helga Mantere (1998), who first coined the concept of arts-based environmental education, underlines that she, as an environmentalist and art teacher, tries to support fresh perception, the pleasure of perceiving the world from the heart. To achieve that, she is convinced, it is necessary to stop, be quiet, have time and feel psychologically secure in order to perceive the unknown, the sometimes wild and unexpected. It may be necessary to first train the senses and to decode the stereotype. Mantere’s aims to support an openness to sensitivity and to facilitate the conversation with the environment. With the help of artistic activity, she wants participants to find new and personal ways to articulate and share their

environmental experiences. But she is very aware that these might be “beautiful, disgusting, peaceful or threatening” (Mantere, 1998, p. 32).

An important dimension of bringing art, ecology and education together is that art can support making meaning, coming to understanding of, and perhaps even finding ways to cope with, the ecological disasters we find ourselves in (and which most likely will increase in scope and magnitude). Swedish researcher in pedagogical studies Margaretha Häggström (2017) recently made a plea for bringing aesthetics and art more thoroughly into schools, for in that way pupils can be encouraged to open up and be more sensitive and receptive. And through this they are given opportunities to strengthen their ability to endure in a turbulent world that is increasingly in flux. Leaning on Per-Olof Wickman (2006), Häggström also stresses that aesthetics is not just about beauty. It can also be frightening, repellent and unsightly because it relates to emotions and all of the senses.

Most contributors to this issue of *Artizein* look at the infusion of artistic activity in environmental or sustainability education as a form of empowerment. They appreciate the synthesis as a welcome new approach that may augment the meaningfulness of such endeavors, as they tend to heighten the degree of engagement and attentiveness of participants and are likely to enhance their self-confidence. However, the contribution that artistic activity can make vis-à-vis the more psychological and existential element of dealing with the “shadow” of today’s existence – the sense of despair and hopelessness, is an aspect that is taken up by some of the authors as well. Below I shortly introduce the written essays that comprise this edition.

One of the more theoretical pieces is by **Hans Dieleman**. In his essay “Arts-based education for an enchanting, embodied and transdisciplinary sustainability” he argues that much of the prevailing thinking on the theme of sustainability is situated in the narrative of disenchantment, which has its roots in the enlightenment ideal of freeing ourselves from nature. As an alternative, he proposes an enchanting narrative which would be embodied, transdisciplinary and acknowledges complexity. In Dieleman’s view, arts-based education for sustainability is key in the transformation process. In the new storyline of enchanting sustainability the exploring of a new connectivity and intimacy with the more-than-human world would be central. We would be encouraged to listen to multiple voices creating polyphony, acknowledging the existence of more than one truth, and be invited to work in spaces of imagination and experimentation. Ultimately Dieleman, who is of Dutch/Flemish origin and works as a full professor in the Autonomous University of Mexico City, would want to move beyond the two ideal-types that he sketches. He makes a forceful plea for hybridization. The challenge, he argues, is to work with what Nicolescu calls transdisciplinary hermeneutics, as a way of knowing across various levels of reality. Dieleman proposes artful doing, as a specific form of dialogue with the reality we work with, allowing for new forms and insights to emerge during the process. We are part of the process, but we do not control it entirely, thus allowing the process to go in unforeseen and unplanned directions. This really stimulates intrigue, surprise and wonder and therefore: enchants. Arts-based education holds a new meaning in at

least two different ways. It plays a role as a sluice, preparing people for the new way of looking at sustainability. It is also a key component of creating sustainability, which in itself could be conceived of as an incomplete and abstract work of art.



Figure 1: Eco-artist Erica Fielder's *Bird Feeder Hat*. Image: G. Morris

In a similar vein, US author and eco-artist **Linda Weintraub** sees traces of the emergence of a vanguard movement. Here, contemporary art, philosophy and ecology intersect and new practices are developed in which materialism becomes participatory, sensual and respectful. Weintraub, who is author of *To Life! Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (2012) and many other publications, invites her readers “to travel as far from familiarity as Marco Polo might have travelled by sitting in front of a computer console.” The territory of unmediated, human-scaled interactions with the material world is so alien to current experience, argues Weintraub, that it has never earned its own word. Therefore, she proposes a new word for the intermediary middle range between the “macro” and “micro” domains and the term she comes up with “muckro”: “The muckro realm is located where our feet are located. It consists of everything our hands can touch, our noses can smell, our ears can hear, our mouths can taste. It is where interactions are sensual, intimate, and responsive.” In her contribution, Weintraub discusses two art examples. Both provide means to help people reunite with their sensory receptors. The first is fellow eco-artist Erica Fielder's *Bird Feeder Hat* (see Figure 1). This artwork invites people to have a sensorial experience of intimate bodily interaction with neglected nonhuman inhabitants of their watersheds. The second example are the exuberant

clay sculptures of Rachael Mellors, which are small enough to nestle in the palm of a hand. “They feel intimate,” says Mellors, “to be cradled in the hand, from my making hand to be held by another, in the palm or between fingers and hand or resting on thumb and fore finger.” Through her working with the earth – collecting the clay, firing the sculptures, returning the nutrients back to the soil – the creation of art is synchronized to the generative cycle of trees, the annual cycle of seasons, and the geological processes of erosion and decomposition. Contemporary society, says Weintraub, lacks a training regimen for exploring the wondrous complexity and variability that can be accessed by the un-aided, un-augmented, un-amplified mind and body. In contrast, an ecologically responsive art education can provide access to the muckro domain of experience.

**Lee Ann Woolery** is a teaching artist and environmentalist. More than a decade ago, she pioneered *art-based perceptual ecology* (ABPE), a unique interdisciplinary approach for ecological research. Artmaking, to her, is a unique means to acquire new knowledge. Painting, for example, allows her to “sense” more than her eyes can see. It is a mode of direct experience that opens up to knowing ecological elements of the landscape such as temperature, season, and moisture content of the air. Reminiscent of how Merleau-Ponty put it, her relationship to place, and to the ecological elements in it, is fundamentally a reciprocal one: “I am shaped by the elements of the land – the patterns, which are a code of the energy transformation in a landscape – and I cannot separate myself from the environment in which I exist.” When practicing ABPE in the field, the investigator enters a temporal and spatial dimension of a particular landscape, revealing a world that he or she could not see, know, or otherwise understand before making art about it. During the art-making process, says Woolery, these layers rise to the surface of one’s consciousness and present a tangible awareness, an unveiling of sorts, of the networks of relationships embedded in larger networks known as Earth’s systems. The image created during the art-making process can be seen as a symbol representing the language of what one feels (intuition), and what can be touched (direct experience in landscapes), but also of things that cannot be seen (mysticism). In effect, ABPE recognizes art as a language within itself. In her contribution to *Artizein*, Woolery elaborates on a new ABPE method that she developed more recently, called a place-based graphic facsimile, which is inspired by her previous professional training as an art therapist. She reflects on how the tools of observation and dialogue for studying humans might translate to the subject of living organisms in the landscape.

**Bettina Matzkuhn** is a visual artist who lives and works in British Columbia. She has worked in textiles for over thirty years with an emphasis on embroidery and fabric collage. Matzkuhn is interested in the way fibers can be a language of visual narrative; textile has a long history of inscribing social and personal stories. The various fibers and the range of stitches form a vocabulary, a language. She has used it to articulate a range of stories. To name a few: on flooding as a metaphor for personal turmoil, mapping as documentation of adventures and more interior terrain, and embroidering sails as an homage to her late father. Her geographies are made of

thread and metaphor. In her article for *Artizein*, Matzkuhn reports on the understandings she gained through the field of meteorology and how she translated these into the medium of cloth. The tales that she stitches on textiles are her understandings of data visualizations. Meteorologists, for example, talk about “perturbation analysis.” Perturbation can mean a disturbance caused by something, implying degrees of alarm. Matzkuhn says this is implicit in her work, as humans increasingly contribute to the perturbations. In creating one of the works of embroidery which she describes in her article (*Ensembles*) the Canadian artist chose the color white to render flags – a color that might imply surrender. Surrender to exactly *what* she finds difficult to say, but she is convinced that the influence of humans on the climate will dictate many changes including changes to how we live. Her explorations caused Matzkuhn to zoom in on the difference between the adjectives “complex” and “complicated.” Weather includes both. Complexity allows a degree of predictability. The complicated systems of weather are best described by chaos theory. A low-pressure system Matzkuhn explains will always rotate counter clockwise in the northern hemisphere. Complication, by contrast, arrives as random intrusions. Forecasting has become much more accurate recently, yet the degree of unpredictability is still worrying. She quotes Rebecca Solnit, who warns, “Weather with its apolitical, amoral, and wanton violence is murderous if you don’t pay attention to it, murderous if you don’t respect the magnitude of it.”

From the west of Ireland, **Eileen Hutton** reports on how she tried to find, understand and create relationships between artistic practice and the landscape of the Burren. Hutton is American artist whose work is environmentally-based. In 2012, she co-developed the master program in MA in Art and Ecology at the Burren College of Art. At the heart of her practice is the notion of reciprocity, a fair and mutually beneficial exchange between the natural environment and humans. As she elaborates in her article, Hutton is interested in the critical role that honeybees and birds play within ecosystems. She has built various artificial habitats in order to support them and the surrounding biodiversity. Within these nesting boxes and beehives she created sculptures in conjunction with these priority species. This practice of crossing boundaries between ecological and artistic intervention lends her new ways of understanding landscape representation. In this, the concept of ecology is applied as a theoretical framework to analyze the function of individual artworks. Ultimately it is her hope that the work serves as a model for positive environmental actions that others may integrate into their lives as well. For now more than ever, she says, there are ethical environmental implications associated with the creation of art. Artists today must be aware of the impact their art and arts practices have on the environment. In her contribution. The artworks created in the Burren – both Hutton’s and those of her students – can be appreciated as a reflection of humanity’s relationship to the natural world; it is interconnected, interrelated, complex and continually evolving: much like the ecology of the Burren itself.

To one of the articles in this issue of *Artizein* I contributed myself as one of the co-authors. Biology teacher **Linda Jolly**, colleague art teacher **Solveig Slättli** and I look at ways in which the teaching of biology, when widened by allowing room for

more experience and art-based activities, can contribute to sustainability education. We suggest that such an approach has the potential to increase the students' level of engagement with the natural environment. We try to show how a turn to more artful approaches may deepen and expand the learners' insights in natural phenomena, which in turn might foster or enhance an attitude of care-taking for the natural environment. In education, science and art are often seen as two opposites. The common idea is that the first is based on logical, precise steps, while the latter is associated with a subjective inspiration and making intuitive leaps. In our article we provide examples of how a combination of these apparently distinct disciplines can help stimulate the students' engagement with and interest in natural science and enhance their development, both academically and personally. We reflect on what happens, when teenage pupils spend a week-long fieldwork period on a relatively isolated Norwegian island and learn about plants through both art and science. On basis of the feedback from the students, we infer that they establish a closer connection to nature and become more aware of our collective responsibility to take care of it.

**Amy Ruopp** is both artist, teacher and researcher; she holds that more research is needed into a more ecologically responsive art education. Her piece, "The art of reflection," is a report on how she and a colleague teacher tried to address the disconnection from nature which was so typical, they found, for several of their middle school students. As teachers they experienced that the students' attention roamed anywhere but the moment they were in. Ruopp offers examples of how spending extended time in nature caused transformations in their students' thinking and their attentiveness. One of the things Ruopp and her colleague asked their students to contemplate was how the macro environment in the spot in nature that they had chosen might be reflective of their own inner environment. After research of specific plant organisms and symbiotic relationships within the natural ecology at their spot, the students were asked to design and create a terrarium. The terrarium was to symbolize those qualities of nature that they wished to carry within them. Ruopp states that through the practice of reflecting on and making efforts to connect to nature, both students and teachers remember a deeper part of who they are and what they are connected to.

At Strawtown Studio in the Hudson Valley, a remarkable environmental education and advocacy program was set up by artists and art educators **Laurie Seeman** and **Joanna Dickey**. In their contribution they share how they and their students create art from the earth and try to speak out on behalf of the natural places that they know and love. They develop place-based arts programs that connect people with their natural surroundings and show them new ways of seeing. Students become aware both of the aesthetic appeal of natural places, but also of the environmental impacts of development, especially upon local streams and rivers. At such locations, the group is invited to address three guiding questions: "*Where are we? Who are we here with? How are we all doing together?*" In listening to the answers that come up, the students not only start to notice more of their surroundings, say Seeman and Dickey, but they also open up to the place of humans in the natural world.

Questioning as a pathway to learning is fundamental to Strawtown Studio's philosophy. The class journey continues with skill-building practices which stimulate awareness, relating and responding. Seeman and Dickey also turn to the realm of science. In their view, scientific explanations of the interactions and relationships that are characteristic of a place add to the ability of the artistic mind to imagine more fully the life that is present there. A case in point for them is the contribution that "citizen science" can make, which they define as the gathering and examination of data related to the environment that is performed by members of the public in partnership with professional scientists. They tell the story of grinding wet creek stones into color pigments which are then used for painting in Strawtown Studio workshops. The geology of the place is thus experienced directly in an artistic, embodied way. The two authors ask themselves how artistic perception, the ability to imagine beyond the obvious, can lead to greater knowing and relating.

Canadian environmental educator and visual artist **Lisa Lipsett**, practices Creative Nature Connection with youth. This not only brings them joy, she reports, it also allows them to "be in sync" – a state in which boundaries between nature and self dissolve. In her article, Lipsett explores what the role is that art can play in this. One of the themes Lipsett takes up in this context is the aspect of duration. Most art-based environmental education activities, she found, neglect to provide for a repeatable regular pattern of engagement. Creative Nature Connection program aims to assist student to *stay* in sync with nature for longer periods of time, thus building their confidence in using their own improvisational art practices for nature connection and self-change. In the workshops that Lipsett offers, students get "in touch" with nature textures, "tune in" to the local soundscape and "see beyond" first glances to notice miniature worlds and tiny treasures as they create. The aim is to balance the sense of sight with deep listening and touch, thus arousing new ways to shift into nature connection. In effect, we bring ourselves out from our enclosed world of human verbiage. By emphasizing methods such as working with the eyes closed or using the non-dominant hand, even reluctant "non-artists" dove right in, according to Lipsett. Many expressed excitement about how easily they were able to draw and paint. Through her practice, Lipsett found confirmation, time and again, that art-making done with an intention to connect helps us to shift from our thoughts about things to direct felt experience. She holds that educators who are able to trust this innate capacity in themselves and in their students, contribute to the strengthening of qualities of caring, belonging, hope, and resilience.

The *Artizein* special on the theme of art, ecology and education also contains a book review. **Barbara Bickel** discusses Four Arrows' *Point of Departure: Returning to a More Authentic Worldview for Education and Survival*. This is not a book on arts education *per se*. However, its rootedness in Indigenous worldviews, on the language of art, songs, drumming, and words through ceremony and visioning to create new realities, causes it to be a foundational recommendation for the arts and education. One of the elements Bickel elaborates more deeply on is *trance-based learning* (TBL). For Four Arrows this is source for wisdom acquisition and deeper learning. It allows for the gathering of our intuitive, aesthetic and imaginal co-

consciousness with both the human and non-human world and, as such, distinct from the scientific therapeutic use of TBL such as in hypnosis. Four Arrows offers steps that people can take to practice the art of TBL, which include utilizing all seven senses (sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch, vestibular and proprioception). Thus, says Bickel, they can delve into their deepest selves and find ways to articulate their experiences through sacred words. In this context it is important to bear in mind that Indigenous languages are verb-based. For Indigenous language speakers the world is read as being fully animate. The Indigenous worldview that Four Arrows presents does not separate the arts from daily life.

Summarizing, the authors for this issue of *Artizein* present a rich palette of articulations of the diverse contributions art can make in connecting to and learning about nature. They range from stories and reflections on artistic practice as a way of coming to (embodied) knowledge, to conceptualizations of artmaking as a doorway to ignite a sense of wonder, engage the senses, spark the imagination, and so on. Ultimately, such encounters may help us to open doors and to invite in the unknown, the unfamiliar. For as Rebecca Solnit (2006) puts it, to “calculate on the unforeseen” is perhaps exactly the paradoxical operation that life most requires of us. And this holds, I would argue, all the more in our present times of uncertainty and extreme states of flux.

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