

A Closer Look – the Subtle Discovered through Altered Vantage Points

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In open spaces of the Siunissaq psychosocial and community-art activities with young participants in Greenland, we learn from the direct encounter with people, the environment, and the materials. We engage in a joint art and community education, making it a New Genre Art Education as it entails community art and psychosocial activities in an eco-social and ecocultural perspective of sustainability. It is a collective endeavour aiming at decolonizing as it values self-determination and knowledge build through local epistemologies and ontologies. It is also co-creating our identities (agency, subjectivity, and even positioning) in a framework of human dignity, freedom, and equality. We see a need to unfold our full

potential as creative human beings in our Anthropocene time, to secure and strengthen eco-political stewardship (Gross, 2020).

It has been said that the people of Greenland are the most important raw material for building the nation (Udvalget, 2014). In art, people are often the motif, serving as the material for the creation of an artwork. However, the concept of material is far broader, including materials such as wood, clay, canvas, colours, and other resources used in the craft of art. Today, in both global and local ecocultural understandings, people and the environment are not seen as separate but are intertwined, weaved together and folded into each other.

The aim of Siunissaq art-and-community education is to give space for young people in local communities to engage in creating sustainability in the local community. The young people participate in co-creations of aesthetic expressions, curate exhibitions, and organize community-art events.

The overall goal is to open spaces, where we, through collaborative action, have freedom to develop our full human potential as creative beings, able to originate a social and eco-cultural environment of caring for each other and for our planet. Participatory community art encompasses humans, non-humans, materials, and the shared presence and future. It is co-creative aesthetic expressions.

The education covers how art can contribute to building a sustainable present and future, i.e., an environmentally responsible and socially supportive community; and such a community opens spaces for creativity. It is a double loop of creativity. A core principle of creativity is to look beyond the immediate, the instantaneous, and to apply a close-up look at our environment, ourselves, others, and materials.

We use a closer look, which may include a close-up in photography or other techniques. A closer look is to examine the subject more carefully, in greater detail, and proximity. It includes intimacy, emotional closeness, and bonds or connection. The song A Closer Walk with Thee has given solace to many people in hard times as it conveys hope and comfort. It is a spiritual song about being in close connection and in movement, walking. The song evolved as community art.

In this essay, we will reflect upon the closer look in the art-and-community education, and in two visual essays, we will give examples of psychosocial activities and of aesthetical expression.

A Closer Look

There is a famous book for children by the Swedish author, Astrid Lindgren. It shows a *nisse*, a *tomta*, (which may translate to goblin or gnome), who walks around on a small, lonely farm in Sweden during a cold winter's night. He, the *tomten* walks there as a little household deity, a deep thinker of the present, the coming of spring, and the passing of the years in the eternal turn of times. The *tomten* may be the spirit of the first farmer who cleared the land and build the farm there. The Swedish word *tomt* signifies a homestead. The word *nisse* may mean "dear little relative" in Old Norse, or it may just be a nickname for Niels.

The *tomten* is small, a little, old figure in the night where the snow is white, and the moon provides a dim and calming light. Astrid Lindgren depicts how the little, old *tomten* cares for the small things at the farmstead, for the wellbeing and even the dreams of the animals, and of the people, who are fast asleep in their beds. He walks silently from building to building and leaves small footprints that only the children will notice in the snow the next morning. He talks with the animals in a still and hushed little language that the animals, but not the humans, understand.

The book builds on a poem by Viktor Rydberg, who offers a closer look at the considerations of the *tomten* as he walks his quiet round in the winter night. *Tomten* thinks of the unpaus-

ing stream of time, the years, the flow of life, generation following generation. The poem makes us understand the quiet and gentle language of the *tomten* and sense his caring presence in the silent night while the moon shines on the snowdrifts.

The novel *The God of Small Things* (Roy, 1997), is a narrative of how subtle moments and details can have profound impacts on our life. Small things are occurrences, which may seem small and unimportant, but turns out to be of major significance in the grand course of a life. Both the *Tomten* and *The God of Small Things* address the trivial and subtle, yet significant, details and offer a closer look at them.

In Siunissaq, we take a closer look on the subtle yet potentially pivotal in our social, cultural, and environmental context to open space for creative expressions. To take a closer look becomes a meticulous quest to see, to touch, and to be touched by the world, we live in with its materials, localities, and people.

Into a World of Wonder

In accordance with our concept of the double loop of creativity, a closer look includes both seeing and being seen as it creates a closer look at things and a closer look at your identity, i.e., the position, we are looking from. When we go closer, we go beyond the superficial and start to discover previously unseen aspect of the other and of ourselves.

In the book *Bitácora* (logbook), the artist Jan Hendrix (2000) captures the Irish landscape through close-up photographs. His combination of travel notes, photos, and reflections show the beauty of, often overlooked, minu-

tiae details of the environment. Applying a new lens makes the ordinary extraordinary and converts it into a fount of wonder and creativity. His approach allows viewers to see the landscape in a new way, focusing on the details, the materials, and the very small things as they become visible through his camera lenses. It offers an arsenal of new visions and connections to the material, and thus to oneself as an engaged viewer.

There is a famous saying by the renowned war photographer Robert Capa, “*If your pictures aren’t good enough, you aren’t close enough.*” (Messums London, 2021). John Szarkowski (1966) argues that details in a photograph can highlight textures, patterns, and nuances that might otherwise go unnoticed. It is a way of transforming the ordinary into a wondrous world of beauty, textures, and patterns.

In Siunissaq, we follow a similar pathway of delving into the subtle things, the material of our environment, and our connections to each other. It is a quest and a discovery as it opens for the power of details to convey deeper meanings and evoke emotional responses. The before-unseen grows and opens a grand world of knowledge and intuitive insights. Metaphorically, we may call it an expanding universe that reveals itself as we travel into it. We see patterns, maybe even fractals, within the trivial material, akin to entering a world of marvel, like in a dream, or like sleepwalking and then waking up in a landscape full of previously unnoticed wonders.

The closer look is creative and challenges superficial and often automatically replications of thought and emotions. We connect to our material and social environment directly, with-

out immediately submitting to discursively imposed images of ourselves and the world. The closer look, beyond the immediate, removes the obstacles to seeing this world and discovers the poetry in the materials and relationships, in our seeing, and in our embeddedness in the material world and in our relations. It is like seeing the materials and relations around us for the first time, with astonishment. It is finding a light of wonder again, through joining psychosocial activities, where we start to really notice each other, and the aesthetic expressions of connectivity.

The Beauty of a Stone

Taking a closer look allows us to move beyond dominant narratives about people and the environment. Without this closer examination, we tend to view ourselves through these prevailing stories, which then become ingrained in our language, self-perception, and reality. However, when we observe with curiosity, we start to develop new insights, which we refer to as ‘post ideas.’ By ‘post,’ we mean transcending the traditional, abstract, generalized, and often restrictive ways of categorizing people and materials found in colonizing discourses.

The process of going beyond automatized and generalized ideas is fuelled by astonishment. It may be daring to go into the unknown without holding on to already formed ideas. But when you dare, then you see the stone instead of seeing the idea of a stone. You see the *Inua*, the heart or spirit, of the stone. In the Inuit ontology, the *Inua* means soul or spirit in everything, in human beings, in animals, plants, and stones, and thus connects everything that exists (Sonne, 2017). In 1920, William Thalbitzer (2016, 20) wrote that the Inuit said that “*there*

is a soul behind stone and water and no soul can die.” In new materialism terms, we will say, that the spirit of the stone, is the stone.

In Siunissaq workshops, the artists Tina Enghoff and Soeren Zeuth invite the participants to go closer and closer to snow, ice, the sounds of dripping meltwater, and footsteps in the melting snow. They encourage a closer look at a stone, into the stone, to see the world within the stone, the patterns, colours, and grains of sand, and still further, to engage in the discovery of the universe anew.

In psychosocial activities, in a comparable way, we invite the participants to notice details as expressions of life: a smile, a young adolescent suddenly climbing out the window, and a sad expression on a young girl’s face amidst the vivacious turmoil of the session. We go closer to these expressions that otherwise would be gone forever. We see them, we connect to them, and they stop being “small things”; they become significant as patterns of connections, as the grains of sand in human togetherness. From the micro world of relationships, they grow into a narrative and practice of connectivity, in a context, in a movement. The small things become grand as an art of living.

A principle of Siunissaq is that we do not impose on people; rather, we allow participants to be who they want to be. We don’t enforce theories or methods on people but connect by responding to the outspoken and to the slightest or most ephemeral expressions. We don’t go there to tell an already told story; we go there to come closer to the material and the togetherness with all its details, and its subtle, but significant movements.

Appreciating the details changes our perception of the space of the workshop session. It reveals a world of significant movements and expressions of life, providing a picture with far more nuances—an existence beyond the immediate impression of the “group.” Consequently, this picture displays a myriad of important interplays, connections, and negotiations through performances and speech acts that collectively shape and transform our social life.

The Quest

To go into the small things through a closer look is like a quest, as mentioned above. In the psychosocial activities, the quest is to build togetherness through recognizing the small, yet essential, expressions of connecting to each other with our full human potential. It is a search, an adventure, an expedition into the fractals of social support and shared action within our context, our landscape, and our environment.

At times, our prefixed ideas of a stone, a person, ourselves, our culture, and our environment make us blind. When we look closer, we start to see again, with fresh eyes. It is a journey into an open land and the journey sets us free from prefixed roles as an artist, researcher, or psychologist. Our role, position, and agency change with the closer look, as we become aware that we are part of the system and that we can have a closer look at our identity as we can have at a stone. By getting closer to people, or to the melting snow, or the inner world of a stone, we become attentive and let the discoveries happen to us, like an inspiration. We become deeply involved with the discoveries. Thus, the quest transforms both you and the world simultaneously. It is a “worlding” in the sense that the world forms

you, when you allow it to enter you, become you, and shape your identity. Journeying the quest makes us listen, see, and reflect with openness. We change as we journey on.

The closer we move to a person, a photograph, a stone, or a landscape, the more it widens. It starts to guide you. It feels surreal, as you touch the formerly unknown aspects of a stone, a person, or a snowflake. You enter another order of things.

When you take a closer look, you can never return to your previous views. There is a change within you, and you will never see stones as just stones again. The same happens when we love; we break the prefixed ideas about the other, open ourselves to the details, go beyond generalizations, and see the uniqueness and wonder in the other person. We meet the other with appreciation, caring, and human dignity. The closer look helps us to see the wondrous in the other person, in the group, in the community as a living system, and in the environment – and at times, even in our own contributions.

In the workshops as human encounters, we go beyond seeing people as participants, students, or co-workers in creativity. The closer we look, the more we see human beings – alive and present. The heart of Siunissaq as a psychosocial and community art project is to go beyond the immediate and the trivial and through a closer look to enter the wondrous aspects of people, materials, and the environment.

Nietzsche said that if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you. Similarly, if you gaze long enough at the small, significant, and wondrous patterns of a stone, a person,

a relationship, and a community, the wonder will become part of you. If you focus on the “small” moments of connection between us as human beings and between us and our environment, humanity will become part of you, of us. ●

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