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Nature is the Thing



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At the beginning of this project, as art educators, we approached the landscape with artistic methods, with the idea of creating art, something concrete. The first thing we discussed concerned the materials we could find from the landscape itself. The next step, as we already knew we would be working in groups, was to think about community art and its tools.

In art education, community-based and environmental art has been found to work well in addressing community problems and current phenomena. Art and education are both attached to a wider cultural and social structure, which is why a sense of community and thinking about it are justified and topical aims in art education and making art. Hiltunen states that art education should pursue an active role and become a future-oriented influencer, and not just the reflector of current circumstances (Hiltunen 2009, 21).

Recycled materials were easily found because there were no waste disposal facilities, but there were refuse dumps in every village. Environmental friendliness naturally became part of our artwork. We also wanted to use rubbish, such as glass bottles, which had been thrown away, in order to create something beautiful or interesting. In the fieldwork in Kozlovka, there were many willow trees and bushes growing on the fringes of the village, so it was only natural to use these quickly growing plant for creative purposes. Willow has been used in community artworks at the University of Lapland, Finland, so we were familiar with the material and its many possibilities.





In our willow group, there were people from five different countries: the Netherlands, the Komi Republic, Norway, Sweden and Finland. There were both students and teachers involved in creating this piece, who represented different age groups. The language used was mostly English.

The idea of working with the icon as an inspiration came from our local participants in the town. In the Komi area, there was once an animistic religion, where nature was sacred, whereas, nowadays, the area is Orthodox Christian and the icons are sacred objects. Using the icon as a starting point for making art caused some confusion and discussion. We had to clarify that we were not making a real icon, just using the idea of it. In the end, we all agreed to only use the shape of the icon, which is the shape of an arch. In addition, the artwork evolved to become more three-dimensional and not just a two-dimensional relief.

In the creative process itself, everyone found a role for him/herself. For example, there were willow cutters, net weavers and designers. Along with these individual characteristics, the artwork foregrounded our existing community characteristics at that time, as Hiltunen describes (2009, 132). As our hovel started to grow mould, the thought of turning the artwork into a place of meditation or reflection evolved.

Even though our group comprised leaders and instructors, we remained on equal terms, with each participant's ideas and thoughts informing the piece throughout the process. Our task was mainly to look after the structure so that it stayed durable and strong, as well as explain and discuss the meanings that the willow installation piece prompted among the group members.

Karjalainen writes that we are weaving the net of meanings around us all the time. We have the need to decode, see, understand and comprehend something to be something and, at the same time,

be able to name the phenomenon (Karjalainen, 2013, 18). This also applies to landscape. Indeed, the complexity in naming and understanding the meanings of landscape started to become visible in the environment we were working in and with. Art is, by many means, an important way of interpreting the world, or, as Karjalainen describes it: "A creative way of showing the world of meanings" (Karjalainen, 2015, 15).



While creating the willow and recycled material installation, we truly got the chance to "live in the landscape" and to feel different weather conditions and temperatures on our own skin, all the way from wet snowfall to wind and sunshine. At the same time, we got to admire the beautiful river and countryside landscape around us, for we were making a piece of art on the high bench of the river.

Jokela says that, in the concept of art, the environment is experienced in terms of its social and functional content. People understand the environment through experiences, which they create by their own actions and perceptions. The environment becomes concrete to individuals as places, as humans live in a world that is full of places, which are meaningful (Jokela 2001, 41-42).

We asked each person who had been part of making the willow installation to describe their relationship with nature by writing a few words. They were able to choose which language to do this. Karjalainen says that meanings place people in a psychic relationship with the world (Karjalainen 2013,



15). In this way, thoughts and recognized meanings locate people and their points of view about nature and the environment.

We carried the willow piece to different sites in the village, based on wherever each one of us wanted to be photographed. We managed to move the piece with cooperation. Carrying the artwork together, we started to feel like what we were doing was performance art. As Hiltunen describes, it is about a holistic experience where each person present is involved in the art happening (2009, 123).

Some people chose the riverside as their location, some chose a landscape with cows and fields, some wanted to be pictured in the middle of Kozlovka, or even the village bus stop. Vilja-Mantere says that she does not stop in the landscape, but that the landscape stops her. In this moment, a person can



confront themselves if they dare to do so (Vilja-Mantere 2016, 145). At the same time, something we call identity is formed, when the landscape becomes part of us and eventually, a landscape of our soul.

Marjo Räsänen (2015, 358) writes how environmental art usually describes an individual piece of art, but an art performance or an artistic act can be viewed as environmental art. Environmental art can foreground the values or problems of the environment. Even though some artworks are meant to solve environmental problems, usually environmental art is not presenting ready-made solutions but leading people to find them (Räsänen 2015, 358). People are already thinking their relationship with nature – or, in this case, the landscape – is important. When people steer their thoughts towards the landscape, they are able to perceive values, as well as problems that could be a threat to those values.

The participants were photographed alongside the willow art installation and the signs about their relationship with nature, in a place of their choosing. The location of the piece represented a place they found to be the most important to them, the closest to them or the most beautiful landscape they could think of. Vilja-Mantere explains that the meanings of the landscape evolve out of the interaction between the experiencer and the subject. In turn, the “view” transforms into a landscape, which has



values and meanings to the person who experiences it (Vilja-Mantere 2016, 145).

We wanted to donate the willow installation to the villagers and let them decide the location of the piece. Our host suggested the garden of a house, which was used by women. However, we located it right next to the local sauna. The side of the women’s sauna seemed like a great spot because at least Finnish people find the sauna to be a place to ponder, even meditate, and to enjoy silence. We hope the willow installation can also offer some of that. Describing their relationship with nature, many participants also talked about the inner peace they received from nature.

Every time the artwork was moved, it transformed a little, depending on the location and the people who carried it, because the willow as material is so flexible. It was not only the shape that was changed, but also the whole piece of art, which was inscribed with new and more versatile meanings all the time. Recalling anthropologist Alexander Sallstedt’s text, our working title, “The Thing”, became official and in turn took on a totally fresh magnitude. The piece inspired the participants to create even more art and written texts about the landscape. We represented the process of making the willow installation piece with a 10-piece photo series (each photo in A3 size) and a short film, made from GIF animations.

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