

Art at the heart of matters: Connecting art, people and place

Glen Coutts

What should be the purpose of contemporary art at the beginning of the 21st century? What sort of training should art schools and universities provide? Apart from aesthetic and cultural contributions, is there potential for artists contribute to the economic and social life of a community? Is the sort of training that most professors of art received (probably in the 20th century) still 'fit for purpose' in the 21st century? In short, what should be the key features of a good training in art? These big, fundamental, questions were central to the thinking of the planning team that developed new types of training in art and art education at the University of Lapland in the first two decades of this century. A multidisciplinary group, comprising artists, designers, filmmakers and art education specialists set about devising a completely new programme with an emphasis on developing the social and economic potential of contemporary art.

During 2008 – 2013, a pilot masters course was conducted within which these questions were central. Operating in the far north of Finland, across Lapland, two groups of students were admitted to a two-year master's degree that focused on developing and testing new ways of using contemporary art and service design thinking in community and economic settings (Seppälä, 2012). Community-based and participative approaches were developed as the dividing lines between the disciplines of art and design were constantly tested and, over time, blurred. A meld of participative, user-generated approaches (Armstrong & Stojmirovic, 2011), service design (Miettinen, 2012), community engagement (Zieske, 2013; Macdonald, 2012) and 'real world' approaches to art (Coutts, 2013) meant a challenging training period for students. This 'melting pot' of methods and theory challenged the students to balance their established expertise through previous training (in design or art) with the need to accept new situations and, often, work 'outside of their comfort zone.' The programme was deliberately constructed to encourage interdisciplinary work. In addition, and unusually for many art institutions, much of the students' experience was field work, with local companies or community groups.

The university of Lapland has a long and distinguished record of community-based and environmental art. It also has significant expertise in service design. In addition to excellent local networks, for example the tourist and forest industries, international collaborations have played a crucial role in developing new ways of training in art, design and art education (Coutts & Jokela, 2008; Jokela, Coutts, Huhmarniemi & Harko-

nen, 2013). The artists and academics in the university have been acutely aware of the need to share and learn from the experience in other northern and Arctic countries of the changing role of art, design and art education (Jokela & Coutts, 2015). Over the past 10 years or so there has been a fusion of these experiences, ideas and activities that has coalesced into the masters programme now called Arctic Art and Design and in particular the development of the notion of Applied Visual Arts (AVA). In the next section, I will discuss the concept of AVA in a little more detail.

ART AT THE HEART OF MATTERS

Social circumstances, as well as industry and commerce are changing rapidly in the Arctic as they are around the world; concurrent with these changes, the demand for an adaptable, highly skilled and creative workforce has increased. In most countries in northern Europe, particularly in Finland and the UK, higher education institutions have traditionally produced graduates with a good “skills mix” of creativity, Information Communication Technology (ICT) knowledge, and sound practical competences. Art schools, with their emphasis on independent and studio-based learning have been excellent at allowing students to pursue their own ideas, whilst providing training in practical and craft skills. Education in art and design has always been about creativity, problem solving and encouraging alternative ways of seeing and making sense of the world. Although there are notable exceptions, what has been missing in many such programs has been practice-based learning rooted in the “real world” (Coutts, 2013).

Given the seismic changes that have taken place over the last 50 years or so, economically, socially, culturally and politically, it is surprising that there has been so little change in art schools. Without wanting to exaggerate, it is still possible to visit many schools of art and see the same sort of activities that might have been going on in the middle of the last century. This is not to criticize the quality of teaching and learning, merely to wonder about the extent to which the training in some, especially fine art departments, prepares students for life beyond the academy, how does the experience prepare graduates for life, to make a living, in the 21st century? Interestingly, the discipline of art education – especially where it is located in an art school or faculty of art and design (as opposed to a faculty of education) has often been at the cutting edge of innovation and research in devising and testing alternative approaches to contemporary art practices in society (Coutts, Soden & Seagraves, 2009). The department of Art education at the University of Lapland was one of the first education programs in Finland, where a fusion of contemporary art practice and social engagement through art has been developed, particularly in community-based and environmental art (Coutts & Jokela, 2008; Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2008). Inevitably, the focus has been on how new approaches to community, socially and commercially based art might work in the Arctic context with its special conditions. However, the work has attracted interest from

around the world, particularly in Northern countries who share some of the challenges facing artists and designers (Beer, 2014; Biggs, 2016; Gunnasdottir, 2014).

Concurrent with the societal changes that have taken place, the role of artists and designers has developed and adapted to the requirements of local and national circumstances. There is still a place for high quality fine arts, design, art exhibitions and so on, but realistically, such work will not be for the majority of young people training in our art schools. Many will enter the teaching profession, or some sort of public service, for example social work, therapy or health and well-being related employment. There is an increasing trend for artists (or designers) to be employed as specialist consultants or lead 'creatives' in public or private enterprises. Since the public art and 'town artist' movement in the 1970s in the UK the idea of employing people with creative skills on multidisciplinary projects – particularly those aimed at addressing some environmental or social issue has gained momentum.

In this model, artists act as facilitators for a community group, public service or business, using their skills and experience. For example, visual arts and cultural productions have become an integral part of the tourism-related 'experience industry' in the North (ref to projects in the book Tonttula, Art Gear, etc).

What is referred to as Applied Visual Arts (AVA)¹ differs significantly from the way in which artists have traditionally been trained in art disciplines that mainly focused on the artist's technical skills and personal expression. In that model, it was quite possible for students to pass through their entire training without having to make a presentation to clients (i.e. non-artists), devise a funding application, negotiate with a team of (non-art) experts, cost and deliver a project or write reports. Such skills are now fundamental to many jobs. We need specialists, but we really need specialists who can collaborate and negotiate the best outcome as part of a multidisciplinary group. For that reason, the Arctic Art and Design (AAD) master's degree embraces a project-based, inter and multidisciplinary model from the very first week of the student's training. AVA therefore, is situated at the intersection of visual arts, design, visual culture and social engagement. It is from the interplay of these different, but related, fields of study that AVA develops practical working methods and lines of action. Almost always in close collaboration with communities, companies or a combination of both. The key characteristic in AVA is that artist is not alone in a studio, rather she or he is part of a team - AVA is intrinsically multidisciplinary.

In the AAD degree, this philosophy permeates the entire program. Student experience in the master's program follows a very different path to normal practice in fine arts, it is always context-driven; by that I mean that the place, participants and socio-cultural situation form the starting points and framework within which the students must work with a local team. In order to succeed in the program, students are required

1 It is important to note that 'applied visual art' should not be understood to mean the same as 'applied art' in the sense of decoration, ceramics, glass or furniture design as the term is understood in many other countries

to demonstrate competence, not only in high quality creative practice, but also in mastery of collaborative working. To do that, students are allocated ‘real-life’ projects with community groups or local businesses. Hands on experience of ‘social engagement’ is an integral part of the program; students are required to design and deliver “innovative productions” (Seppälä, 2012, p.7) on location and with community groups.

In practice, AAD projects involve artists working with, or for, people in a public context. AAD is characterized by notions of participation, collaboration and inclusion. It should also be recognized that, while the focus of AAD is on visual arts, projects frequently embrace work across art disciplines. Projects might include, for example, performance, sound or movement. Working in this field, artists need to draw on many different disciplines, including anthropology, cultural geography and place-making, sociology, history or town planning. Inevitably, there are many points of interaction between different professional disciplines and it is, of course, impossible for the artist to be an expert in all of them. However, it is essential that the artist has skills in what Lester and Piore have called “interpretive innovation” (2004, p. 97), and this has implications for the way we conduct art education. Education providers need to consider whether the programs on offer are those most conducive to developing the skills-base required to deal with the complexities of the world of work in the twenty-first century.

CONNECTING ART, PEOPLE AND PLACE – TWO EXAMPLES

In this short essay, it is not possible to fully explore the range of ways in which contemporary art thinking has been used to engage with issues of import to communities, places or both. However, to illustrate just some of the ways, I offer two examples, both from my home country of Scotland. Although I have been talking about AAD and the innovative work going on in Lapland, it would be wrong to imply that this is somehow unique to Finnish Lapland. There are many examples all around the work of artists’ and designers’ engagement with urban or rural places and communities.

What is certainly unique and without doubt, innovative, is the master’s degree, but it owes a debt to the many community and environmentally focused art works and art-based interventions that have taken place over many years, often as the initiative of individual artists or community groups. The closest parallel I can think of to the master’s degree is the environmental art degree at Glasgow School of Art (GSA, 2017). In this book the work of many of our students and staff in Lapland is featured, therefore I have selected these two art-based projects from another country.

The first project is about a place that it has changed over the years. Instead of people, the artist has chosen to focus on animals with inextricable links to the place. It is public art on an enormous scale, a celebration of the place’s industrial heritage using a combination of civil engineering and creative skills. The second

project is also about place, but this time using a mix of ethnographic research techniques, sound, filmmaking and installation to both document and encourage people to think about a sensitive area of marine life. In both cases, art really is at the heart of the matter.

PROJECT ONE.

Andy Scott, *The Kelpies: Art meets engineering*

The Helix project (Helix 2017a) in the east of Scotland is an ambitious regeneration initiative aimed at transforming a huge area of land between Grangemouth and Falkirk. The idea was first mooted in the early 2000s, to reinvigorate around 350 hectares of land, connecting 16 local communities using an extensive paths network, forest and waterways authorities. The Helix was awarded £25m in 2007 (the maximum grant available through the national lottery and one of only three UK projects selected to receive cash from the Lottery's Living Landmarks (National Lottery, 2017) program.

The big idea behind the Helix was to create a local greenspace that connects and engages the local communities. It is, by any standards, a massive civil engineering and 'greenscaping' project and the work I want to focus on is only a part of this big picture albeit an extremely high profile and successful part – that places art at the heart of industrial regeneration and community engagement. At the time of writing (early 2018), the Helix has achieved the following:

- The Kelpies, two 30 metre high stainless steel monuments that form the vanguard of The Helix and the Forth and Clyde Canal
- A kilometre of new canal with towpaths, creating a safe new connection to Grangemouth
- 27 kilometres of shared access, high quality pathways connecting 16 communities
- A new lagoon in Helix Park
- A new splash play area
- Adventure Play Zone and Splash Play area
- The new Plaza Café
- Sustainable LED lighting for at least 14 kilometres of these new pathways
- Two new toucan road crossings and a new road underbridge
- A new wetland boardwalk
- A new group of Nordic Walkers, bringing a new health activity to the area
- Over 120 trained Nordic Walkers & over 30 trained walk leaders
- Multiple community projects, including a new beekeeping society (Helix Beekeepers), Meet The Species events, The Abbotshaugh Sentinel project

- 25 direct training places in woodland management hundreds of ongoing volunteer opportunities
- Several high level events, including a Bike Week Party, Helix Day 2013 and HOME.
- A canal tunnel under the M9 motorway
- Two new pieces of public art and the refurbishment of two existing pieces
- Multiple jobs and contracts for local and national companies during construction
- Jobs for the local community, with more to follow
- The development of a 16-mile cycle route connecting The Helix, The Kelpies, The Falkirk Wheel and Callendar House.

(Helix, 2017b)

My focus is on the role that art might play in such a massive project and I think there are lessons for us in the North about how art and engineering have come together in this project, about how artists need to be able to work seamlessly with other disciplines; engineers, planners, conservationists, local and national politicians and other decision makers. Artists who undertake such ‘place – specific’ and public work need to be versatile and willing to accept and adapt to new challenges. In the book that chronicles the story of the artworks the artist, Andy Scott, reflects:

... I'm a sculptor, not a writer and I usually let my hands do the talking away from a laptop keyboard. I'm handier with a five-pound lump hammer than with a thesaurus. I'm kind of an old-fashioned sculptor at that and I usually make the artworks by eye, relying on dexterity and drawing skills rather than CAD programmes and distant fabricators. [...] the journey of the Kelpies took me into uncharted waters: a new realm (to me) of cutting edge computer design and vast civil engineering works, engaging with myriad contractors and client groups, shifting busy motorways and huge utility pipes and even digging canals. And of course, the challenge of building the sculptures themselves. (Scott, 2014, p. 3).

Each of the two sculptures (see Figures 1 & 2) that welcome visitors at entrance way to the Forth and Clyde canal site near Falkirk weighs 300 tonnes, is 30 metres in height, uses 1200 tonnes of steel-reinforced concrete, contains 928 unique stainless steel plates and were built on site in 90 days (Helix, 2017). The idea of the Kelpies is based on the mythical horse like creatures of Scottish folklore that were able to transform themselves into other forms and were said to have the power of 100 horses. The place plays vital role in the story too, the canals were used to transport coal and other goods around the country and horses were used to tow the barges that contained the goods. The sculptures were unveiled in October 2013 and since then have proved to be extremely popular with locals and visitors, in the first year almost one million people visited the Kelpies (BBC, 2015).



Figure 1. The Kelpies by Andy Scott. Image: Graham Wylie.



Figure 2. The Kelpies and surrounds. Image: Graham Wylie.

PROJECT TWO.

Stephen Hurrel and Ruth Brennan, *Clyde Reflections: Art meets science*

2013 was designated Year of Natural Scotland by the Scottish government. A major interdisciplinary project, Imagining Natural Scotland (INS), was developed by Creative Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and the University of St Andrews. The overarching aim of the project was to examine the role of the arts and culture in advancing our understanding of the natural environment. A series of projects were selected for funding, following an open call to the creative and scientific communities. In total, fifteen projects were funded to investigate the natural world and how it is represented by means of art and science, underpinning the projects was the notion of engagement between the creative and scientific sectors. The variety of art-science collaborative approaches was extensive, including archaeologists, biologists, sociologists, ecologists, social ecologist, historical geographers, writers, sound designers, photographers, playwrights, software developers, poets, storytellers, environmental artists, engineers, composers, musicians, filmmakers and zoologists. Each project was led by a small interdisciplinary team, typically two to four people. The main scientific and creative work was conducted between the summer of 2013 and the spring of 2014. Outcomes of the project included several exhibitions, a public conference, a website and several publications including the anthology *Imagining Natural Scotland* (Griffith, 2014).

Scott Donaldson of Creative Scotland, summarises the aims and scope of the project, encouraging new lines of enquiry by:

... engaging scientists, environmental historians and artists of all kinds in the project: what types of 'nature' are to be found in arts and popular culture? What do these imagined Scottish environments of film, song and story tell us about 'the real thing' and our relationship to it? (2014, p. 5).

Readers interested in more information about each of the INS projects can find details at the Imagining Natural Scotland website (INS, 2017).

In this essay, I highlight just one of the projects Clyde Reflections (see Figures 3) by Stephen Hurrell and Ruth Brennan 'a meditative, cinematic experience based on the marine environment of the Firth of Clyde on the west coast of Scotland' (Hurrell & Brennan, 2017). This film, produced by collaborative art-science team of artist Stephen Hurrell and social ecologist Ruth Brennan, features underwater and microscopic footage, combined with voice recordings of people who have a close relationship with, or specialist understanding of, the Firth of Clyde. These include a retired fisherman, a marine biologist, a diver, a marine conservationist, a spiritual leader and a physical oceanographer (Figure 4). It is worth quoting Hurrell and Brennan at length as they reflect on the experience of working together:

The INS commission has contributed to our development as an innovative art-science working partnership. [...] At the outset of this project we wondered how feasible it would be to combine a documentary style approach for the interview stage with a more ambient, meditative and poetic rendering of that material. Although we belong to seemingly distinct disciplines, we have found that the overlaps between our working practices, as well as a shared aesthetic sensibility, are more important than the differences that exist within our respective fields.

A defining characteristic of our work, therefore, is that we are able to draw on a range of different material and to respond to it in a structured as well as an intuitive manner. This approach allows us to create work that opens up space for contemplation by reflecting the unfixed, shifting nature of the relationship between people and place.

(2014, p. 49).



Figure 3. Clyde Reflections. Courtesy of the artist, Stephen Hurrell.



Figure 4. Analysing the interviews. Courtesy of the artist, Stephen Hurrell.

The film premiered at CCA in November 2014 and was installed in the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA) (Figure 5), Glasgow for six weeks in Summer of 2015. Hurrell and Brennan continue to pursue their individual professional careers and work together when possible on projects concerning art, science, people and place.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I have provided two examples of projects that I think provide us with food for thought about the way we train artists in the 21st century. In this book we celebrate the work on of the students and staff on one program at the university of Lapland, not forgetting the numerous community groups and local companies that have helped us to pioneer new ways of working through art and have also challenged us to come up with innovative solutions to common problems and issues facing society in the far north. Ageing populations, long distances between communities, migration, health and well-being concerns to name just a few of the complex interrelated problems facing many societies around the world. Apart from the challenges of living with harsh climatic conditions perhaps, these are not unique to Finnish Lapland, but such issues do present both challenges and opportunities for artists and, surely, for the way that artists are trained.



Figure 5. The film installation at Glasgow Museum of Modern Art. Image: Alan Dimmick.

The development of AAD at the University of Lapland has not been without its challenges, but it has also brought significant successes and led the way in terms how universities, businesses and local communities might fruitfully interact using art. From the early days, during the 1990s when community-based and environmental art was being developed as a core activity by the department of art education to the more recent projects there is a clear story of progress. Because the reputation of the department and faculty is well known across Finnish Lapland and, indeed the Arctic region, the University is a first port of call for businesses and entrepreneurs seeking creative collaboration.

This collaborative way of working is central to the AAD degree program and its predecessors. Whether it has been our staff and students working with small to medium size companies on art-based productions or staff research publications - partnerships and working together are key concepts. A related development has been the formation of the highly successful 'thematic network' entitled Arctic Sustainable Arts and Design (ASAD, 2018). As part of the University of the Arctic and with members in 26 Institutions across 6 Arctic countries, the group has been pro-active in research, knowledge exchange, exhibitions and publications. All of this activity and the examples in this book demonstrate, I hope, some of the benefits and potential of putting art at the heart of matters.

REFERENCES

- Armstrong, H., & Stojmirovic, Z. (2011). *Participate: Designing with user-generated content*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- ASAD (2018) *Arctic Sustainable Arts and Design*. Retrieved from <http://www.asadnetwork.org/>
- BBC (2015). *Falkirk's year-old Kelpies set for millionth visitor*. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-tayside-central-32396667>
- Beer, R. (2014). Trading routes: The intersection of art practices and place. In T. Jokela, & G. Coutts (Eds.), *Relate North: Engagement, art and representation* (pp. 14–33). Rovaniemi: Lapland University Press.
- Biggs, I. (2016). Re-visioning 'North' as an ecosophical context for creative practices. In T. Jokela, & G. Coutts (Eds.), *Relate North: Culture, community and communication* (pp. 12–33). Rovaniemi: University of Lapland Press.
- Coutts, G. (2013) Applied visual arts: Learning for the real world? In T. Jokela, G. Coutts, M. Huhmarniemi & E. Härkönen (Eds.), *Cool: Applied visual arts in the North* (pp. 22–31). Rovaniemi: University of Lapland.
- Coutts, G., Soden, R., & Seagraves, S. (2009). The way they see it: An evaluation of the arts across the curriculum project. *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 28(2), 194–206. DOI: 10.1111/j.1476-8070.2009.01606.x
- Coutts, G., & Jokela T. (2008). *Art, community and environment: Educational perspectives*. Chicago: Intellect.
- Donaldson, S. (2014). Introduction. In D. Griffith, (Ed.), *Imagining natural Scotland* (p. 4). Edinburgh: Creative Scotland.
- Griffith, D. (2014). *Imagining natural Scotland*. Edinburgh: Creative Scotland.
- GSA (2017). Sculpture and environmental art. Retrieved from <http://www.gsa.ac.uk/study/undergraduate-degrees/sculpture-environmental-art/>
- Gunnasdottir, T. (2015). Product design in Arctic terrain. In T. Jokela, & G. Coutts (Eds.), *Relate North: Art, heritage and identity* (pp. 14–37). Rovaniemi: University of Lapland Press.
- Helix (2017a). About the Helix. Retrieved from www.thehelix.co.uk/Helix (2017b). The Story So Far. Retrieved from <http://www.thehelix.co.uk/about/the-story-so-far/#.Wm3OC0vLjUI>
- Hurrell, S., & Brennan, R. (2014). Clyde reflections – a film and audio-visual installation. In D. Griffiths (Ed.), *Imagining natural Scotland*. (pp. 38–49). Edinburgh: Creative Scotland.
- Hurrell, S., & Brennan R. (2017). Clyde reflections by Hurrell and Brennan. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/89793693>
- INS (2017). Imagining natural Scotland. Retrieved from <http://imaginingnaturalscotland.org.uk/>
- Jokela, T., & Coutts, G. (Eds.), (2015). *Relate North: Art, heritage and identity*. Rovaniemi: University of Lapland Press.
- Jokela, T., Coutts, G., Huhmarniemi, M., & Härkönen, E. (Eds.), (2013). *Cool: Applied visual arts in the North*. Rovaniemi: University of Lapland.
- Jokela, T., & Huhmarniemi, M. (2008). Environmental art and community art learning in northern places. In R. Mason and T. Eça (Eds.), *Intercultural dialogues about visual culture* (pp. 197–210). Chicago: Intellect.
- Lester, R., & Piore, M.J. (2004) *Innovation: The missing dimension*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Macdonald, S.W. (2012). Tools for community: Ivan Illich's legacy. *International Journal of Education through Art*, 8 (2), 121–133. DOI:10.1386/eta.8.2.121_1
- Miettinen, S. (2012). Service design, radical innovations and Arctic wellbeing. In P. Tahkokallio (Ed.), *Arctic Design: Opening the discussion* (pp. 28–33). Rovaniemi: University of Lapland.

National Lottery (2017). Living landmarks: Supporting large-scale capital projects through two distinct funding streams. Retrieved 12.12.2018 from <https://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/global-content/programmes/uk-wide/living-landmarks>

Scott, A. (2014) *The Kelpies: The making of the world's largest equine sculptures*. Glasgow: Freight Books.

Seppälä T. (Ed.) (2012). *Taidetta, kulttuurien yhteistyötä ja uusia verkostoja: Pohjoinen kulttuuri-instituutti / Arts, cultural collaborations and new networks: The institute for Northern Culture*. Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences. Tornio: Kemi-Tornion ammattikorkeakoulu.

Zieske, C. (2013) The town is the venue: A methodology for the North? In T. Jokela, G. Coutts, M. Humarniemi, & E. Härkönen (Eds.), *Cool: Applied visual arts in the North* (pp. 110–119). Rovaniemi: University of Lapland.



Antti Stöckell, *Playing with snow and ice*, 2018, details of a series of installations.

