

Nordic contemporary art education and the environment:

Constructing an epistemological platform for Art Education for Sustainable Development (AESD)

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Abstract: How can art educators address questions of environmental sustainability, accepting to be ethically normative but avoiding becoming dogmatic? How can the complex 'pool' of knowledge generated in and through art education research become useful in working with these questions, which many of us find overwhelmingly difficult? AESD – Art Education for Sustainable Development – is a concept coined for this article with the intention of bringing environmental problems onto the agenda. In an attempt to provoke the necessary discussion about environmental sustainability in art education, the article examines selected texts from recent Nordic research in order to build an 'epistemological platform' that might function as a research-based 'tool' for discussing environmental issues. The article is organized in four sections, which refer to the four 'cornerstones' of the platform, where each cornerstone corresponds to a recent current in art education. These currents, as defined by the author, are: *critical art education*, *poststructuralist strategies*, *visual culture pedagogy*, and *community oriented visual practices*. Using selected Nordic texts as material for the analysis, the epistemological perspective of each current is briefly presented and its relationship to environmental questions is discussed. In the final discussion, eight keywords are presented: *praxis*, *change*, *performance*, *reflexivity*, *visuality*, *event*, *situatedness* and *collaboration*. When put together, these concepts offer a dynamic picture of the 'pool' of ideas offered by contemporary Nordic and international research, which will be useful for 'performing' AESD both as teaching practices and as research.

Keywords: Art education, environmental sustainability, epistemology, poststructuralism, visual culture pedagogy

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Prologue – Living in denial?

Climate change is disturbing not only because of the social and ecological collapse that is predicted, but because of the apparent possibility that our existing political structures are not up to the task. Unless we can also refashion our political and economic systems, we are trapped. We need to imagine the reality of our lives and break through the absurdity of the double life. (Norgaard, 2011, p. 224-225)

Over the past decade, during which climate change has become a harsh reality, the need for alternative models for thinking about economic, social and individual ways of living has become urgent. In her recent book *Living in Denial* (2011), American sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard presents and discusses her results from an ethnographic study carried out in a rural community in Norway in 2001-2002. The book presents a careful, multi-layered analysis of Norgaard's data combined with data from other international studies. Norgaard describes how people in Western societies are increasingly experiencing "the absurdity of the double life", continuing to live as if oblivious to the obvious threats of climate crisis. Even though most of Norgaard's Norwegian informants are well aware of the scientific facts about their contribution to global warming through the economic growth and ever-increasing consumerism on which their lifestyles depend, they seem nearly paralyzed even when it comes simply to *talking* about these issues in everyday conversations.

As an average citizen of a nation with one of the world's highest rates of consumption, at a personal level I recognize very well the ambivalences of the 'double life' that Norgaard describes. Also in my role as a university teacher in art education, I see how problems relating to climate change are much less debated during my classes than other societal and individual problems such as inequality and marginalization. In one of her chapters, Norgaard discusses how cultural norms of attention, emotion, and conversation in the Norwegian village make climate change an almost impossible topic to introduce. When talking about difficult topics in school, "...educators described balancing personal doubts and deep feelings of powerlessness with the task of sending a hopeful message to their students". Norgaard quotes one teacher as saying that she felt as though she was "taking nature away from the children". She suggests that such language refers to "the very common Norwegian sense of nature as a refuge and as children's birthright" (Norgaard, 2011, pp. 101-102). Yet also in university settings in the United States, Norgaard finds that many of her students "indicated that avoidance of climate change as a topic of conversation is part of maintaining social tact" (Norgaard, 2011, p.200).

My intention with this article is to start a necessary discussion about how we as art educators can work to break the cultural norms of silence and embarrassment and bring environmental problems onto the agenda. In an attempt to provoke such a discussion, this article examines selected texts from recent Nordic research in art education in order to find examples of epistemological and pedagogical 'tools' for discussing environmental issues.

For the purposes of the analysis, my key term will not be 'climate crisis', but the less alarming 'environmental sustainability'. I selected this term because, as indicated by Norgaard, in educational settings it is preferable to use terms that suggest solutions rather than problems, thus providing space for action in a positive sense. I define 'environmental sustainability' to mean a long-lasting, yet dynamic, balance between humans and their natural and man-made environments, a way for us to live within the capacity of our supporting eco-systems.²

² Inspired by IUCN (1991).

Before introducing the main arguments of the article, I include a short critical discussion of the internationally recognized umbrella concept of *Education for Sustainable Development* (ESD). I also outline my ESD-derived concept of *Art Education for Sustainable Development* (AESD).

ESD and AESD

ESD is a concept that has been introduced by various international organizations, most notably the United Nations and UNESCO. As a top-down policy, ESD stands in contrast to other more locally-driven, bottom-up educational currents, most notably the broadly Anglo-Saxon current of *Environmental Education* (EE). ESD was launched in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987), *Our Common Future* ('the Brundtland Report'), and was furthered in 1992 by the UN through the publication of *Agenda 21* ('the Rio Declaration'), which was adopted by 178 governments. In 2002, at the UN summit in Johannesburg, the UN announced a new initiative: the *Decade of Education for Sustainable Development* (DESD) 2005-2014, administered by UNESCO (www.desd.org).

The overall vision for ESD, as formulated by the UN, is "[...] a world where everyone has the opportunity to benefit from quality education and learn the values, behavior and lifestyles required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation".³ To realize this ambitious vision, ESD is built around 'the three pillars of sustainability', namely *society* ('people'), *environment* ('planet') and *economy* ('prosperity').

In spite (or perhaps because) of the powerful institutions that stand behind it, ESD appears to be a rather weak and undefined concept characterized by a lack of critical thinking and political clout. Critics of ESD have referred to:

- a failure to define key concepts (including the precise meaning of 'ESD' itself). This has rendered the concept vulnerable to contrasting and even counterproductive definitions, including some promulgated, e.g., by private companies (UNESCO, 2009, p.7).
- the exclusion, at least at the level of global agendas, of established terms that many people would associate with sustainability. Such terms include, most prominently, all those including the words 'ecology' and 'ecological' (Jickling and Wals, 2008, p. 4).
- the orientation of the concept towards a feel-good consensus, and an avoidance of discussing and exposing underlying ideologies, values and worldviews (Jickling and Wals, p.7). In particular, the economic pillar ('prosperity') can easily be interpreted by neo-liberal forces to suggest that ESD is supportive of global capitalism and a culture of unfettered consumerism.

While it may be true that ESD suffers from a lack of clarity as a concept, nonetheless there is widespread understanding among observers that it is crucial for ESD not to be constrained by rigid definitions imposed from above if it is to act as a democratic force for political change. Indeed, ESD must be allowed to remain a dynamic concept that is the subject of continuous debate:

Forcing consensus about an ambiguous issue such as sustainable development is undesirable from a democratic perspective and is essentially 'mis-educative' (Jickling and Wals, 2008, p. 6).

Perhaps ESD can be seen as the total sum of diverse ways to arrive at a 'learning society' in which people can learn from and with one another and collectively become more capable of withstanding setbacks and dealing with sustainability-induced insecurity, complexity and risks (UNESCO, 2009, p.7).

³ www.desd.org/About%20ESD.htm. Retrieved 2 January 2012.

Following this dynamic line of thinking, for the purposes of this article I have decided to work with an ESD-derived concept: AESD (Art Education for Sustainable Development). Although the adoption of such a concept might seem too ambitious for a text like this, for now the idea seems promising – perhaps precisely *because* the concept is ambitious and as such calls out for exploration and discussion. To my surprise, a Google search failed to find any other uses of this term. This has encouraged me to seize this as an opportunity to adopt a dynamic and reflexive vision of ESD as an inspiration for AESD. In this article, I also aim to outline my more radical and critical position by emphasizing the epistemological positions that I think should form the perspective from which expressions from the overall vision of ESD presented above (e.g., “values, behavior and lifestyles required for a sustainable future” and “positive societal transformation”) should be understood.

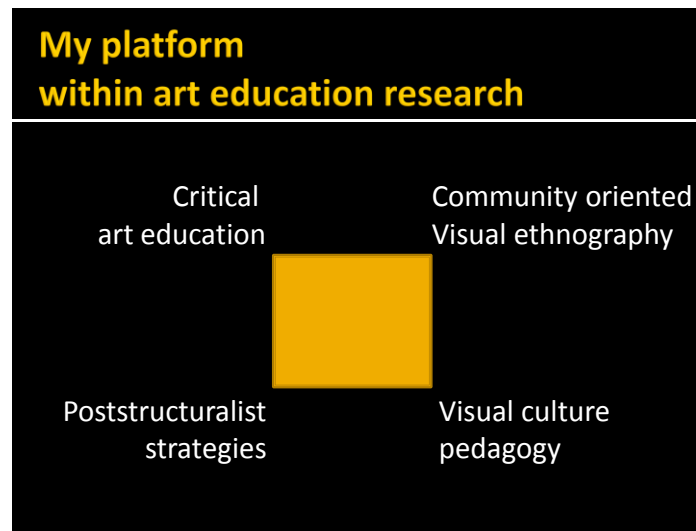
Nordic art education – building an epistemological platform for AESD

Following this brief introduction to ESD and AESD, we now come to the key objective of this text: the outlining of an epistemological and genealogical platform that can be used as a tool for the discussion and development of AESD. This ‘mapping’ process, I contend, is important in order to understand how recent currents in art education can contribute to the development of environmental sustainability as a central perspective in the field. I describe the platform as ‘epistemological’ because it involves some basic understandings of how knowledge is constructed within dominant trains of thought, while the adjective ‘genealogical’ is used in the foucauldian sense, to indicate how major currents in Nordic visual art education have become part of the ‘naturalized’ discourses and ways of thinking in the field⁴ I believe that this bird’s-eye view, even though it may appear simplistic, can be used to explore how we, as art educators, can approach environmental sustainability without forgetting the complex epistemological insights that have been introduced in recent decades. While I would admit that this kind of ‘square’ model tends to limit our understanding of complex and intertwined trends, thoughts and practices, I hope that readers will try to push their understanding beyond both the ‘squareness’ of the model and the linearity of the narrative and consider these as ‘instruments’ that can be used for different and more open-ended – and more ‘rhizomatic’ – ways of thinking and practicing art education.⁵

My point of departure is the model shown below, *My platform within art education research*. I created this model for a keynote talk at the InSEA regional European congress in Rovaniemi, Finland (Illeris, 2010):

⁴ These currents have been, and are still to be, found in art educational research in most countries of the Western world, but as they have had different histories, conditions and outcomes, I prefer to limit my investigations explicitly to Scandinavian and Nordic research. In this article, the term ‘Scandinavia’ covers Denmark, Norway and Sweden, while ‘Nordic’ also includes Finland and Iceland. Most of my personal research experience derives from Denmark. Since 2010, however, I have been working full-time in Norway.

⁵ In another article (Illeris 2012b), I provide an example of how to use the epistemological platform and some of the keywords in the development of actual curricula.



In line with this model, the following text introduces four ‘cornerstones’ in Nordic art education: *critical art education*, *poststructuralist strategies*, *visual culture pedagogy* and *community-oriented visual practices*.⁶ I will link each of these cornerstones to research into the relationship between art education, the environment and questions of sustainability.

The first cornerstone: critical art education

If the concepts of a class society have a real enemy, that enemy must be praxis, because praxis is the phenomenon that comes closest to objective truth. When concepts are confronted with praxis their real content is revealed – one discovers that they only seemingly and partially correspond to reality. The concepts of classless society must be developed from praxis and be guided by it. This is the only way to solve the contradictions between the formation of concepts and reality (Nordström, 1975, p. 104).⁷

Critical art education is here conceived of as being based on a dialectic materialist conception of knowledge that is closely related to the Marxist concept of *praxis*. Critical art education aims to change society through a transformative pedagogy based on liberation, creativity and consciousness. This pedagogy aims to counter the growing alienation of working class people engendered by the false idealist myths that form the basis of the capitalist market system.

In the Nordic countries, Marxist views had a strong influence on education during the years following 1968. During the 1970s there was a belief among radical teachers and teacher educators that art education could actively contribute to changing society in ways that would lead towards socialist revolution. Seen from the outside, this appeared to be an overwhelming task: not only would teachers need to invent new forms of educational practice based on entirely new ways of thinking, they would also have to operationalize a new language with new words capable of challenging old ways of thinking and of constituting new patterns of consciousness for the students.

As shown by the initial quote taken from Swedish art educator Gert Z. Nordström’s groundbreaking book *Kreativitet och medvetenhet* [Creativity and Consciousness] (1975), the concept of *praxis* became central to this endeavor. The Marxist understanding of this concept (as distinguished

⁶ For this text I have chosen to change ‘community-oriented visual ethnography’ to ‘community-oriented visual practices’. In another text (Illeris, 2012) I have used ‘community-oriented visual interventions’. It is always difficult to give names to evolving concepts – consequently my inconsistency of phrasing.

⁷ Translations from Swedish are my own.

from the more general concept of ‘practice’) most notably stems from Marx’ *Theses on Feuerbach*, which were written in 1845 (Marx & Engels, 1973). Here Marx defines praxis as human sensory activity and thereby lays the foundation for the idea that materially grounded practical approaches to the world, rather than abstract and idealistic approaches, are the central motors of historical change.

In Nordic art education, the ideal of praxis was employed both to encourage critical and analytical approaches to capitalist society’s dominant ‘culture of images’, and to help students to develop new and emancipatory visual and pictorial forms and aesthetic activities. In contrast to the child-centered trend of *creative arts education* (Danish: *formning*), which was theoretically grounded in developmental psychology and dominated Scandinavian art education during the 1950s and 1960s, in critical art education pictures were not understood as individual expressions, but rather as communicative texts composed of visual signs that could be created and used in the service of social and political activities (e.g., Hansson, Karlsson & Nordström, 1974).

Epistemologically, critical art education posits that knowledge production, especially within the educational sciences, is a political endeavor and that positivist and formalist claims of ‘objectivity’ and ‘neutrality’ function as instruments of oppression against unconventional worldviews, especially those worldviews that favor exploited groups such as working class people, women, non-Western people and children. Using the terminology of Jürgen Habermas (1968) the ‘knowledge interest’ of critical art education is *emancipatory*, based on a dialectic understanding of social phenomena from a historical perspective: patterns of behavior, including aesthetic behavior, must be understood in relation to their opposites and include the possibility of a third, qualitatively different, emancipatory position free of conflicts.

Critical art education and the environment

Only a classless society will be unable to accept that woods are devastated, watercourses poisoned or that animals are subjected to cynical exploitation. These things are connected to a lack of identification that can be seen not only in the huge destructions of the environment, but that can also be found in the small things – in relation to daily practices such as furnishing, cooking, planting, laying of lawns etc. All these things can be done wrong, i.e. without feeling and identification. Ruthlessness at one level leads to ruthlessness at another. And equally: feeling and identification at one level leads to feeling and identification at another. (Nordström, 1975, p.13)

Having originated in the 1970s, the Nordic current of critical art education preceded the introduction of the term ‘sustainable development’. Rather, the main focus of the current was on the opposition between a negative conception of the consequences of capitalist exploitation, such as ugliness, pollution, dying nature, vanishing cultural traditions etc., on the one hand, and positive humanistic ideals focusing on values such as naturalness, authenticity, emancipation and community on the other. Educators assumed that by applying the principles of critical art education, pupils’ consciousness of environmental problems could be heightened through the analysis of existing environmental exploitation and the development of alternative design projects. The hope was that this would heighten the consciousness of future generations, who would participate more actively in environmental protection and development, both locally and globally.

The general interest in the relationship between art and society resulted in a renewed focus on interior design, architecture, landscape and the urban environment and their effects on human well-being. Following the idea of ‘identification’, introduced by Marxist art educational theory (see quotation above) during the 1980s, researchers began to study children and young people’s own

experiences of their local environments from sociological and cultural perspectives. Meanwhile teachers experimented with projects whereby pupils worked during art classes on collectively designed proposals for environmental improvement (e.g., Flensburg & Sørensen, 1983).

When considering critical art education from the perspective of sustainability, I can identify a number of basic assumptions and practices that could also be central to the development of AESD. Firstly, critical art education aims to achieve *change*. Critical art education is grounded in a profound critique of the inherent habits and systems of existing social and societal practices, consequently promoting what are seen as more humane, respectful and harmonious ways of living for all inhabitants of our planet. Secondly, proponents of critical art education view education as *transformative*. Instead of being viewed as a means of training students to reproduce existing knowledge and practices, education is seen as a collaborative voyage for both teachers and pupils towards new, and in many ways unknown, ways of thinking and living. Thirdly, proponents of critical art education believe that human beings should be considered primarily not from an individual but from a *social perspective*. In other words, both the critical and sustainable approaches to art education aim ideally to produce socially responsible individuals who are capable of prioritizing the needs of present and future society over their own personal needs. Fourthly, critical art education occupies a *marginalized position*, operating within the framework of the social practices of a capitalist society that is permeated by values based on individualistic competition and market forces. Accordingly, social structures that are intended to foster economic growth and unlimited consumerism seem to obstruct the achievement of the educational goals of critical art education more or less in the same ways as they seem to obstruct achievement of the aims of AESD.

The second cornerstone: poststructuralist strategies

[...] efforts to come to linguistic terms with the non-representability, historical contingency, artefactuality, and yet spontaneity, necessity, fragility and stunning profusions of ‘nature’, can help us refigure the kind of persons we might be. These persons can no longer be, if they ever were, master subjects, nor alienated subjects, but – just possibly – multiply heterogeneous, inhomogeneous, accountable, and connected human agents. (Haraway, 1991, p. 3)

Poststructuralist strategies introduce an anti-essentialist conception of knowledge aiming at the deconstruction of modernist, metaphysical ‘truth-regimes’ and ‘master-narratives’. Partly inspired by critical theory, poststructuralist strategies aim to stimulate a critical meta-reflexivity towards all dominating discourses (including one’s own), by pointing to ruptures, frictions, and inherent contradictions. In contrast to essentialist approaches, including the Marxist vision of materialist truth, poststructuralism works with anti-foundationalist, polycentric and perspectivist views of reality.

Through their extensive critique of the hidden essentialist aspirations of philosophical movements such as phenomenology and structuralism, French ‘first-generation’ poststructuralist thinkers, most notably Michel Foucault (e.g., 1966), Jacques Derrida (e.g., 1967), and Gilles Deleuze (e.g., 1968), began the construction of anti-essentialist narratives picturing fluid and openly-created ‘realities’ that are understood through a polyphony of diverse and incommensurable discourses and practices. Individuals and groups are free to navigate more or less strategically in these realities, according to desires and partial commonalities and differences. In poststructuralist theories of subjectivity and subjectivation, the solid ‘self’ is substituted by ‘practices of self’ and by an ideal of the ‘human being’ as a self-creating, aesthetic formation, able to transcend or transform power/knowledge constructions such as age, gender or ethnicity in ever new and unforeseen manners (e.g., Foucault 1984, Deleuze & Guattari 1980).

Nordic art educational research, poststructuralist strategies have had a significant impact ever since the mid-1990s. This is evidenced firstly by the use of discourse analysis to question the essentialist constructions of ‘truth’ within the field (e.g., Illeris, 2002; Aure, 2010), secondly through the quest for alternative, open-ended, rhizomatic and reflexive conceptions of art education in relation to concepts such as ‘curiosity’, ‘fascination’, ‘polycentrism’ and ‘performance’ (e.g., Illeris, 2009, 2012a; Lind, 2010). From the mid-1990s onwards, students’ exploration of their own fascination with popular culture, social media etc. has been encouraged in an attempt to avoid the stereotypical negative preconceptions of critical art educators (e.g., Arvedsen, 2000; Illeris & Arvedsen, 2011).

While praxis has become a central methodological concept in critical art education, poststructuralist researchers and educators have adopted the concepts of *positioning* and *performance* in order to construct real-life teaching approaches that avoid essentialist notions of ‘good pictures’ or ‘good pupils’ in favor of open explorations based on curiosity and playfulness. Within educational settings, students are asked to adopt shifting positions or ‘roles’ (i.e. those of both producer and audience) and to reflect strategically on the outcomes (Buhl, 2005; Illeris, 2009b).

Poststructuralist strategies and the environment

In ‘second-generation’ poststructuralist thinking, for example in the more recent writings of Felix Guattari (1995, 2000), and Rosi Braidotti (2006), ever more attention has been devoted to environmental questions. Through the concept of *ecology* – i.e., the idea of a profound and dynamic connectedness between all living creatures on earth and between humans and nature – poststructuralist nomadic subjectivity is seen as related to new post-humanistic forms of ethicality. Even more radically, poststructuralist thinkers, most notably Donna Haraway (1991), the author of the quote with which I began this section, consider such connectedness to exist across borders that within modernist thinking were considered as sacrosanct, e.g., the borders between humans/animals/plants or those between nature and the machine or between things that are natural and those that are artificial. Consequently, this newer generation of thinkers views the idea that concepts such as ‘back to nature’ or ‘naturalness’ are inherently good as essentialist and oppressive. Indeed, the whole dichotomy of ‘nature’ versus ‘culture’ or ‘society’ is open to question.

During the 1990s, critical environmental education existed in parallel with other related movements in the Nordic countries. In Finland, *arts-based environmental education*, which was introduced by the art educator Meri-Helga Mantere (1992, 1995) and her colleagues, is now fundamental to much Finnish-based research (www.naturearteducation.org). In contrast to critical art education, with its focus on the social consequences of urban and industrial development, arts-based environmental education places the relationship between an individual and her environment at the center of education. Through the development of the psychological-perceptual and phenomenological aspects of environmental art education, the current’s explicit goal is to use artistic methods to increase each student’s individual sensitivity. Although Mantere emphasizes the importance of beginning classes with an exploration of the pupils’ familiar environment, such as the school’s immediate surroundings (1992, pp. 3-4), the main focus of arts-based environmental education is on the connection between the individual and nature – a relationship that is further emphasized by followers such as van Boeckel (2010). Thus, in contrast to environmental-design education, which is collective, outcome-oriented and concentrated on urban environments, the focus of arts-based environmental education is mainly *personal* and *process-oriented* (art is considered as a method, not as an end in itself) and on the *natural environment*.

Epistemologically, arts-based environmental education is more closely related to the phenomenology of perception than it is to poststructuralist, strategic and meta-reflexive thinking. Even so, a significant overlap can be found between arts-based environmental education and those concepts that are central to our understandings of *ecology* and *sustainability*. The two fundamental tenets of arts-based environmental education, that humans are an integral part of the environment and that the production of art with and within nature has the power to educate participants to feel a deep connection to the environment, have commonalities with poststructuralist ideas of subjectivity as open, fluid and constituted by relational practices rather than by fixed identities.

For example, Boel Christensen-Scheel, a Norwegian academic in the field of art education, draws on both post-structuralist theory and phenomenology. In her thesis *Mobile homes – Perspectives on Situatedness and De-Situatedness in Contemporary Performative Practice and Theory* (2009), she studies two community-art projects engaged with ecology and environmental sustainability. Her study exposes the paradoxical relationship between ‘perceived staged’ and ‘perceived authentic’ elements when artists try to enact ideas associated with ecology and sustainability in ‘land’ projects by means of ‘performing authenticity’. Christensen-Scheel’s study discusses how a re-thinking of modernist concepts of art and aesthetics using poststructuralist strategies requires a new form of ethicality in aesthetic thinking: “...methodologically speaking ecology represents a ‘willed’ or ethical position, i.e. a holistic or “overall approach to the problems” (Christensen-Scheel, 2009, p.10).

When looking at poststructuralist strategies from the perspective of AESD, I see that it is important to critically examine and deconstruct ‘sustainability’ as yet another discourse within art education. Like every other discourse, ‘sustainability’ is inevitably inscribed in the relationships of power/knowledge that are competing to establish new ‘truths’ about right and wrong. As a researcher, it is impossible for me to avoid being drawn into this game. Nevertheless, ‘sustainability’ can also be conceived of as a strategic position that can serve to provide a perspective for the critical examination and deconstruction of ‘unsustainable’ conceptions and approaches within our field. In this sense I see ‘sustainability’ as an ethical standpoint that has the potential to function as a guideline for how I choose to act both as a researcher and as a teacher. Central concepts of poststructuralist theory, such as ‘subjectivity’, ‘positioning’, ‘performance’ and ‘ecology’, are crucial also to the development of art education for sustainable development. Only by continually maintaining a high level of reflexivity about the connectedness and intertwinedness of the human and non-human worlds and about the relativity of the positions we perform and that we implicitly assign to others, can we avoid the temptation to construct new unquestioned truth-regimes about key concepts such as ‘nature’, ‘art’ or ‘subjectivity’.

The third cornerstone: visual culture pedagogy

[...] the scopic regimes of modernity might best be understood as a contested terrain, rather than a harmoniously integrated complex of visual theories and practices. It may, in fact, be characterized by a differentiation of visual subcultures, whose separation has allowed us to understand the multiple implications of sight in ways that are now only beginning to be appreciated (Jay, 1988, p.4).

Visual culture pedagogy is based on a constructivist conception of knowledge that relates specifically to how *visualities* (or ‘visual subcultures’, as they are referred to in the quote above) are constructed and reconstructed in different times, spaces and socio-cultural settings. An important aim of visual culture pedagogy is firstly, to foster an understanding of the connection between the construction of the visual and how we create meaning, and secondly, to produce new meanings through the active

creation of *form*. In this context, *form* does not refer to objects or images, but to *events* or relationships within the visual. Epistemologically, visual culture pedagogy relies both on critical-constructivist theory (especially critical semiotics, which were also adopted by Nordic critical art educators during the 1980s) and on poststructuralist theory (especially theories of vision and its relationship to subjectivity and performance theory).

Visual culture pedagogy became an important field in the new millennium in the Nordic countries, especially among researchers in Denmark and Sweden. Danish researchers in the field of art education have applied a distinction between three overlapping understandings of visual culture: visual phenomena, visual events and visual culture as a strategy of reflection (Buhl, Flensburg & Illeris, 2004; Illeris & Arvedsen, 2011). *Visual phenomena* include everything we consciously choose to relate to by visual means: e.g., images, objects, landscapes, public and private spaces etc. Even if some artifacts, especially works of fine art, do have a privileged position with regard to visual attention in Western cultures, these are only seen as constituting a minor part of the visual phenomena relevant to visual culture pedagogy. *Visual events* denote the complex interactions that take place between the viewer and the viewed. Visual events are always geographically, historically, socially, and culturally situated, and they always imply certain specific ways of looking (gazes) (e.g., Bal, 1996). Working with visual events in educational settings therefore necessitates awareness of questions such as “Who is looking at what? When? How? And why?”; “Who has the right to look at whom?”; “How does the image/object/site look back at the viewer(s)?”; etc. *Visual culture as a strategy of reflection* is a meta-perspective that explores different perspectives on vision and visibility in education and in research. As a strategy of reflection, visual culture can be unfolded by employing meta-reflexive strategies that challenge students’ preconceptions about ‘natural’ ways of seeing (see also Buhl, 2005).

Visual culture pedagogy and the environment

The main relevance of visual culture pedagogy to environmental issues concerns how our surroundings are represented visually and how these representations affect our ways of *seeing* and, consequently, *thinking* and *acting*. Within Nordic art education, no explicit visual culture pedagogies have been coined in relation to issues concerning the environment or sustainability. In the following I give two examples of how themes associated with the environment/nature have been touched upon within Scandinavian studies in the fields of visual culture and education.

In her text *Visual culture as a strategic approach to art production in education* (2005), Danish researcher Mie Buhl uses the *landscape* as an example of how to work with ‘concept thematizing’ in visual culture education by questioning students’ unquestioned visual repertoires:

The concept of landscape could be contextualized and understood from either a spatial or narrative position. We live in and use landscapes in our daily life, at work and during leisure, for romance, crimes, war, contemplation and travel. We act in landscapes to create fiction: detective films, comedies and romantic films. We simulate landscapes in virtual spaces: computer games, holiday advertisements, documentaries, etc. From every position, nature is observed in a certain mode that constructs specialized knowledge (Buhl 2005, p.112).

As described by Buhl, ‘landscape’ is explored visually through culturally-constructed categories such as genre, style, and visual order. In modernist art education, such categories have often been considered to constitute unquestioned knowledge. According to Buhl, adopting visual culture as a strategic approach helps us to understand that concepts like ‘nature’ and ‘environment’ are socially determined visual constructions that have become ‘naturalized’ through, e.g., romantic landscape

painting or English gardening. Furthermore this understanding opens up for alternative conceptions of what a 'landscape' can be, e.g., examples from the virtual and/or commercialized world.

To take another example from Scandinavian educational studies, the Swedish researcher Helena Pedersen's recent book *Animals in Schools. Processes and Strategies in Human-Animal Education* (2010) uses critical studies and visual culture theory to inform her ethnographic study of how human-animal relationships are constituted in learning settings. Her study concentrates on the ways in which the educational gaze itself establishes power relations between learners and 'the other' as the object of knowledge, in this case the animal. For example, she distinguishes a 'zoological gaze':

The zoological gaze not only shapes, frames, and 'fixes' animals in the act of viewing, but also expresses their more general objectification under the logic of dominating societal and cultural regimes. In these processes of 'fixing' animals into given conceptions, Baker (2001) writes that human culture may render even animals, which are fully exposed to our view, effectively invisible – that is either seen as mere vehicles for the transmission of symbolic meaning or drained of any significance whatsoever (cf. Berger 1980) (Pedersen, 2010, p.59)

In addition to the constructivist approach that was also employed by Buhl, Pedersen highlights one more idea that is central to our understanding of the relationship between man and 'nature', namely how enlightenment strategies of vision have acted as powerful and controlling in relation to nature as 'the other'. Through ways of arranging and educating the human gaze, animals have been objectified and submitted to human ideas of their inferiority, as has the rest of the 'natural world'.

When connecting visual culture pedagogy to AESD, it helps me to understand, firstly, how we can actively stage visual relationships through the enactment of different viewer positions and interactions and, secondly, how visual media function as active participants in such events. This understanding tells me about the potential of visuality for understanding how sustainability is visualized through visual phenomena, for investigating the kinds of events that these phenomena are part of, and for stimulating strategies of reflection that enable students to work with the active and self-reflexive construction of such phenomena and events. Within the framework of visual culture pedagogy, one could ask the following questions: *How* is environmental sustainability staged by visual phenomena (images, graphs, films, art works, campaigns etc.)? *What kind* of sensory experiences, viewer positions and 'sustainability gazes' are stimulated in visual events regarding environmental sustainability? Is it possible to explore or create *other kinds* of 'sustainability gazes' that might lead to the exploration and production of alternative, and maybe somehow more sustainable, forms of visual events?

The fourth cornerstone: community-oriented visual practices

Community-based art [...] is typically understood as a descriptive practice in which the community functions as a referential social entity. [...]. In contrast, collective artistic praxis, I would suggest, is a projective enterprise. It involves a provisional group, produced as a function of specific circumstances instigated by an artist and/or a cultural institution, aware of the effects of these circumstances on the very conditions of the interaction, performing its own coming together and coming apart as a necessarily incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process. (Kwon, 2002: p.154)

In the passage quoted above, the American art historian Miwon Kwon critically examines the use of the concept of 'community' in contemporary art, preferring the term 'collective artistic praxis'. Even though I agree with Kwon that *projective* enterprises have more artistic and educational potential than descriptive practices, I have chosen to call my fourth 'cornerstone' *community-oriented visual practices*. I have chosen to use the word 'community' for two reasons. Firstly, to make an association with the long tradition within art education of working with community-based projects, whereby

students produce artworks in collaboration with members of local communities (in the traditional sense of the word) and, secondly, because I would like the word ‘community’ to extend, and not be substituted by, different kinds of collective visual practices (including those of provisional groups produced by specific circumstances). I also prefer to use the word ‘practice’, rather than ‘praxis’, in order to avoid making a direct reference to critical art education.

On the basis of insights gained from both critical and poststructuralist approaches, according to my understanding, practitioners of community-oriented visual practices rely primarily on a pragmatic epistemology. Here the production of knowledge is not primarily about constructing a representation of some external reality, ideology or theory, but mainly about producing relevant knowledge in a situated context (see also Haraway, 1991, p. 183-201). The aim of these types of practices and projects is to work towards making positive differences according to an idea (that is not absolute, but concrete, situated and relational) of ‘goodness’ – e.g., by promoting sustainable ways of thinking and living.

In contemporary art education, community-oriented visual practices often involve the adoption of specific ethical and political ways of working. These can be traced back to the ideals of multiculturalism, feminism, post-colonialism and ecology, but at a practical rather than theoretical level. Accordingly these practices at some points come close to critical art education, subject to the proviso that while Marxist educators saw a socialist revolution as their ultimate goal, community-oriented practices are carried out within a postmodern conception of the creation of ‘local narratives’ or, to adopt the terminology of the French art critic Nicholas Bourriaud (2002), ‘in-betweens’. On a bigger scale, such practices accordingly function more as examples of experimental forms of socially, sensory and/or visually-based collaborations than as direct paths to societal transformations – even though such practices, at their best, may function as ‘beginnings’ for ethic-aesthetically-based societal transformation.

In contrast to the situation in other countries, such as the USA, the UK or Finland, in Denmark and Norway the idea of community-oriented art education is quite new. Ever since the 1970s, the social and political framework for Danish art education has been based primarily on the concepts of ‘society’ and ‘class’. Until recently, the concept of ‘community’ was considered as connected mainly to local interests and therefore of little interest for art education as such. Nevertheless, even Danish art education during the past decade has seen the realization of a number of community-oriented projects, many of them in informal settings such as museum workshops and artist-led projects (e.g., Illeris & Sattrup 2011).

Community-oriented visual practices and the environment

Justice, equity, ethnicity, class, empowerment, and gender are now legitimate environmental issues [...]. Through heightened consciousness people should be encouraged to act, individually and collectively, within communities to improve their situation and to recognize the social and ecological costs of doing so. The focus is not on humans and environments, but rather on humans in the environment (Neperud, 1995, p. 222-223)

The American academic Ronald W. Neperud has contributed significantly to community-based thinking in art education. Inspired by the environmental design education movement of the 1970s and 80s, including its reconstructionist approaches to race, class, and gender, as well as to other hidden agendas of dominance and power, Neperud favors the view that social problems and environmental sensitivity are closely linked. Even so, in a position that is not far from the ideas of Finnish arts-based environmental education, he also believes in “... an examination and environmental knowing that

begin with the body and move outward to more distant spaces – objects, rooms, house, neighborhood, communities and regions” (Neperud, 1995, p. 233) but still with the ultimate social reconstructionist goal of “...alleviating social inequities” (p. 234).

Inspired by Jagodzinsky’s essay *The Poetics of Green Aesthetics* (1991), and by the concept of ‘deep ecology’, as coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (e.g., 1995), Neperud (1995, p. 232) uses the term ‘texture of community’:

What I mean by texture of community is that social and environmental problems are revealed not through abstract generalizations, but through the specificity of particular community contexts. The phenomenon of existence lies within the context of everyday life constituting our “eye upon the world”, which through our educated consciousness allows access to the deep ecology that defines a broad connected context.

Neperud’s approach takes into account aspects of the critical tradition, as well as phenomenological and poststructuralist ecological views. From a pedagogic point of view, it combines a recognition of the situated, particular and pre-existing community with the possibility of community as described above by Kwon “...performing its own coming together and coming apart as a necessarily incomplete modeling or working-out of a collective social process”.

In the Nordic countries, Finnish art educators from the University of Lapland have developed a tradition of integrating environmental art and community art into students’ project-based studies (Jokela & Huhmarniemi, 2008). Typically the students, in the roles either of ‘artist’ or ‘art educator’, study existing communities from many ‘descriptive’ angles and by observing and participating in community activities, identify social needs and problems, history and traditions, local forms and materials etc. Following this initial phase, the students complete a project in collaboration with local participants. They are then required to produce a written evaluation and report.

Referring back to my earlier quotation from Miwon Kwon, as well as to community art education as conceptualized by Neperud, I do believe that community-oriented visual practices have potential for enacting or inhabiting environmental sustainability. Yet I also agree with Kwon about the importance of *not* using existing communities as a sort of ‘material’ for artists (or students) to support their own artistic practices. Jokela & Huhmarniemi seem to be aware of this when they write: “Artists must learn to evaluate themselves through the processes they use to make art, not simply the art objects they create. Art processes, just like art objects, may be locally specific and have no single aesthetic; a diverse community and landscape may generate very different forms of site-specific art” (p.208)

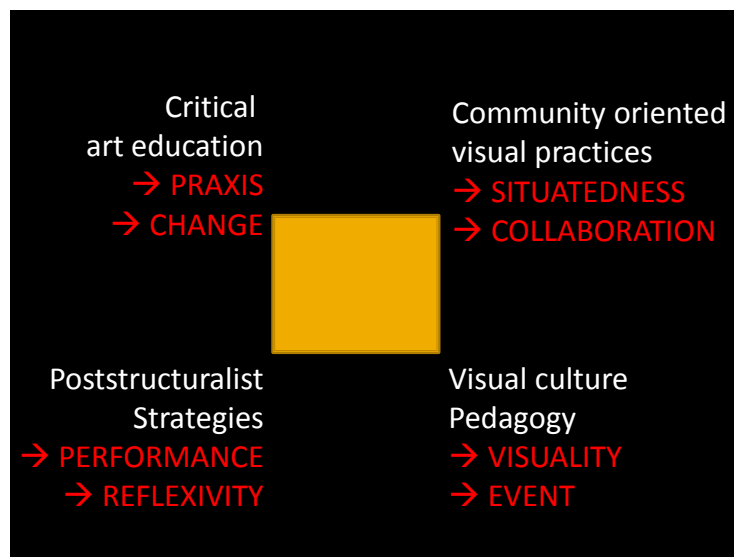
In an educational setting, I believe that working with the design and enactment of what I define as *performative experimental communities* (Illeris, 2012b) can offer a way to ‘inhabit’ not only social but also environmental sustainability. In fact it seems to me that teaching art can be used as a possibility for staging and framing alternative forms of ‘community’ and ‘collectivity’ using social relationships as its ‘material’. In this way art education can stimulate environment-friendly behavior through the experimental enactment of different ways of understanding ‘community’, not necessarily at the essential level of *being*, but first and foremost at the performative level of *doing*. For example, students within a certain ‘formal’ framing or staging (time, place, ‘rules’ etc.) could try to perform an environmentally sustainable community aesthetically - *as art*.

When looking at community-oriented visual practices and their relationship to AESD, I can see possibilities for allowing learners to deal with questions of sustainability through collaborative forms of visual practice. This would require: 1) That learners, as well as community members, should be redefined as *participants* in collaborative practices. 2) That these participants experiment with the

social group as an aesthetic form, an ‘in between’, where *the sensory as a form of communication* can be used in explorations of new forms of togetherness. In this way, ‘environmental sustainability’ within community-oriented projects has the potential to become a *socially and materially grounded theme*, maintaining openness and vulnerability towards the questions it entails, and avoiding top-down discourses of a ‘we know better’ nature.

Art education for environmental sustainability – some keywords for AESD

I have now presented the four currents in contemporary Nordic art education that I feel may be useful as epistemological and methodological ‘cornerstones’ for my work with environmental sustainability in art education. For the diagram below I have selected two keywords for each ‘cornerstone’:



For *critical art education* I have selected the keywords *PRAXIS* (understood as knowledge-producing human sensory and materially grounded activity that forms the basis for education), and *CHANGE* (understood as the will to change existing social and societal practices in order to promote more human, respectful and harmonious ways of living for all inhabitants on planet earth).

For *poststructuralist strategies* I have selected the keywords *PERFORMANCE* (understood as the enactment of different positions in order to promote playfulness and relativization), and *REFLEXIVITY* (understood as a process of continuous examination of the ethicality of the positions we adopt and of the positions that we implicitly assign to others in an attempt to avoid the temptation to construct new, unquestioned truth-regimes).

For *visual culture pedagogy* I have selected the keywords *VISUALITY* (understood as the specific ways in which we construct our realities through the visual) and *EVENT* (understood as the exploration and production of different forms of visual phenomena as continuously constituted by and within social situations of looking and being looked at).

For *community-oriented visual practices* I have selected the keywords *SITUATEDNESS* (understood as work with the creation of, or intervention in, actual social situations) and *COLLABORATION* (understood as collaborative visual investigations and interventions from an ideal

of mutual understanding and reflection within our complex and vulnerable social and cultural realities).

Epilogue

According to various researchers (Jickling and Wals, 2008; Læssøe, 2010), there seems to be a tendency among policy-makers to consider ongoing reflexivity and critique as counterproductive to the implementation of ESD programs. It is my hope, however, that the ideas presented in this text will be useful for the development of AESD, not only as yet another ‘program’ to add to existing concepts in art education, but as part of an existing desire within the field to see art and visual culture education as a driver of reflective and transformative thinking. The past decade has seen a renewed focus on political issues such as multiculturalism, feminism and social justice (e.g., Garber, 2004). Adopting basic ideas from critical art education and poststructuralist strategies, art educators have developed further knowledge about how to organize theme-based, community-oriented projects. On this basis I think the time is now right to overcome what Norgaard (2011, p. 222) describes as our “socially organized denial in the face of climate change” and to start to work with AESD both in research and in educational practices.

In her approach, Boel Christensen-Scheel (2009) uses Felix Guattari’s (2000) definition of ‘three ecologies’ in order to emphasize the deep connectedness between how we think and act as individuals (‘singularities’), how we constitute, inhabit and enact our social life (e.g., through various ways of performing experimental communities) and how we translate our deeply interdependent intertwinings with non-human physical and organic (and even artificial/technical, I would add) systems. As mentioned at the start of this article, it is my hope that the ‘platform’ outlined here can be approached as a theoretical kind of non-simplifying ‘ecology’ of intertwined currents and traditions that have been, and still are, deeply meaningful within the field of art education. When put together, the eight keywords *praxis*, *change*, *performance*, *reflexivity*, *visuality*, *event*, *situatedness* and *collaboration* offer a dynamic and complex picture of the ‘pool’ of practice-based concepts offered by contemporary Nordic and international research. Rather than the cornerstones of a square model, at this point, having brought my ‘bird’s-eye analysis’ to a kind of conclusion, I prefer to see these keywords as nodes in a rhizome where each has the potential to function as an entry point for the development of AESD⁸. By performing complex transformative pedagogies, both in our research and in our classrooms, we may be on the way to working with sustainability not only as an ideal but also as *praxis* in the original, critical sense of the term.

Presentation of contributor

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⁸ One of my next ‘smaller’ projects within my explorations of AESD will be to go deeper into the ethic and aesthetic potential of such community building for sustainable art education through further application of the concept of *performative experimental communities*.

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