Abstract

Art has changed a lot during the last fifty years. In spite of that, the role of art in schools has remained the same. The aim of this paper is to show the many different ways contemporary art offers itself as an environment for learning. An idea of contemporary art as a learning experience presented here is based on teachers’ views on the matter. The analysis of the material shows that by concretizing the properties of artworks and the experience produced by them, arguments for seeing contemporary art both as a credible and a necessary environment of learning can be found.

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1. Introduction

The background for my dissertation is in an activity at the pedagogical department of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, where I worked from 1998 to 2007. We constantly faced the fact that people find contemporary art strange and difficult to approach and understand. One way to approach this is through the concept of interdisciplinarity prominent, in contemporary art. In Kiasma this concept has been developed to be used especially in school education and the basic idea is to approach art from the point of view of various school subjects’. In my research I examine the relationship of contemporary art and learning in a larger and deeper scale. I try to explain how the appreciative or creative a situation with art or a single piece of art is, or can be, a learning experience. What and how can one learn about or, especially, through contemporary art?

Notions on the influence of the arts on man have been presented throughout history, and they have been referred to, in arguments, for the significance of art for human growth. For the sake of
generalisation, most of these explanations are very theoretical and abstract. I am interested in finding out whether it is possible to concretize the factors, which make the appreciation and creation of art a situation in which one can be learn something. According to many theories based on a modernist conception of art (e.g. Osborne, 1970; Beardsley, 1982; Goodman, 1984, 1985; Smith, 1987), the value of art and artworks is based on their capacity to produce an aesthetic experience, which is contingent upon aesthetically high-standard art, which in turn is defined as art that produces an aesthetic experience. In addition to the apparent circularity of this thinking, another problem is that the matter cannot be left here. We must establish what in a work of art produces the aesthetic experience, or possibly, an experience from which something can be learned. It is thus necessary to study the works of art, and what in them provides a worthwhile experience, together with the matters borne by man. John Dewey’s theory of art as experience (Dewey, 1980/1934) is fruitful for that.

Considering art from the perspective of learning, the essential view is that experiencing art entails dialogue between the individual and the work of art. That is why I construct a picture of contemporary art as learning environment through the perceptions of different groups of people, focusing on three of them. These are teachers, as specialists in teaching and learning; artist as experts on the artistic process; and young people, who do not have any professional viewpoint on the issue. In this paper I will present the outcomes of my analysis of the teachers’ material. Before that there is a short overview of the theoretical background of the research. In the concluding section of the paper I reflect on why and how contemporary art in general could be considered in the perspectives of various learning situations.

2. Theoretical background: about nature of contemporary art and learning

The primary reasons to examine contemporary art as a learning environment are that its meanings are less established than those of the older art and that many of the works make strong statements regarding the conditions and modes of operation of the society and human being. In his relational view of art, Nicolas Bourriaud states that the role of contemporary artworks is not to give shape to fantastical and utopian realities but to be the form of living and action in the existing reality (Bourriaud, 2002, 11-13). Artistic activity, both the appreciation and creation of art, is a set and an endless series of relations between individuals and the surrounding world (Bourriaud, 2002, see e.g. 21-22 and 85).

Pauline von Bonsdorff notices that the novelty of contemporary art is not absolute but rather relative and often unexpected with in regard to the prevailing notions of art, and, she continues, this is one of the reasons contemporary art is so demanding in terms of interpretation. Another aspect of this demanding nature is the status of the cultural and societal context of contemporary art as incomplete and still forming. Where the meanings of phenomena have not yet become established, teaching, research and overall discourse in society impact the ways in which they are understood, interpreted and evaluated. (von Bonsdorff, 2002, 52.) This is an important realization for art education and art in education.

In her discussion of the challenges of contemporary art for art education, Helena Sederholm also underlines, that there exists no language or grammar of art. She maintains that contemporary art should be approached in terms of individual cases. Contemporary art, as contextual, performative and politically and socially active, creates strategies and tactics for acting in different situations. (Sederholm, 1998.) Accordingly, art education should also be situation-specific preparation of tactics and strategies.

This thinking is supported by Helene Illeris’s studies of young people’s appreciation of contemporary art. (Illeris, 2005). Illeris observes that young people in particular do not want to think in terms of established concepts in the reception of art. Instead, they establish their own direct contacts with artworks, taking personal responsibility for the learning process. Also the message of educators and artists in the book Rethinking contemporary art and multicultural education (2011) is that art education should not consider only the art object and its function but also the cultural and social values and beliefs,
including cultural biases, of teachers, students and artists. Strategies of education should also be flexible enough to accommodate the multiple directions in which global cultures continue to evolve.

These notions offer many different aspects for the study and understanding of art in the context of learning. It is also interesting to realise that many prevailing concepts of learning emphasize things, which have been seen to be included in art, in the artistic process, in the appreciation of art and in works of art. For instance sociocultural point of view to learning based on Lev Vygotsky’s theory (Vygotsky, 1978), emphasizes that knowledge, which is learnt, consists of meanings provided by the individuals and the community. Meanings come into existence during and as a result of interactional processes, and a learner has an active role in those processes (see e.g. Wenger, 1999; Kumpulainen & Renshaw, 2007).

In their theory of inquiry-based learning, Hakkarainen, Lipponen and Lonka underline the fact that the learning process includes not only human actors but also the means of man-produced intelligent activity (Hakkarainen et al. 2004, 362). By claiming contemporary art to be a learning environment, I argue that artworks are also such means. Like cultural objects in general, they, too, have been charged with more and more intelligence and knowledge. In contemporary cultural objects, such as new technology, and accordingly in human work and activity, symbolic and material dimensions are markedly integrated (Hakkarainen et al., 2004, 272). This integration has always been present in art. Since learning involves a relationship between people and cultural artefacts, a relationship in which the objects of activity are refined and enriched (Hakkarainen et al., 2004, 276; Bereiter, 2002), it allows us to approach art as a learning environment.

The thought that learning takes place in different environments and situations entails seeing art as a learning environment. It is good to understand the role of art in formal, informal and non-formal learning (see e.g. Bekerman, et al. 2005; Werquin, 2010). Art can be a part of physical, social, technological, local and didactical learning environment (see Manninen et al. 2007). It is also present when the learning environment is seen as an ecosystem, a place, a virtual space or a dialog (see Mononen-Aaltonen, 1999).

In my research I have developed the idea that art as a learning environment is a didactic dialogue. By didactic, I mean that a dialogue with art has goals and some kind of methods that promote learning. My notion is perhaps closest to Nicholas Burbules's pedagogical communicative definition of dialogue: the relationship of the interlocutors deliberately aims at teaching, learning and understanding new things. Dialogue is on-going and developing communication with the aim of achieving a better understanding of the world, of each other and of ourselves. In some cases, the participants do not know where the dialogue ultimately leads or whether it can achieve the pre-set goals of teaching. Despite this, dialogue can be highly educational or edificatory. (Burbules, 1993, x and 8-9.)

Next I will propound an idea on how contemporary art could be seen as a learning environment. The idea is based on material gathered from teachers.

### 3. Teachers on contemporary art as a learning environment

The material discussed here consists of the views of fourteen class, art and specialized teachers on contemporary art as a learning environment. The material was collected during an advanced training course for teachers on contemporary art as a learning environment, which I held during the academic year of 2008 –2009. The material includes 36 conceptual maps prepared by the teachers and discussions over a web-learning platform. The conceptual maps were done with CmapTools-program. The assignment for the maps was to start with the concept of ‘contemporary art as a learning environment’. The themes of the discussions over the web-learning platform were 1) the relationship of learning and contemporary art, 2) contemporary art from the viewpoint of appreciation, 3) the artistic process, and 4) contemporary art as a part of teaching. The themes were based on course practice. In the analysis presented in this paper, I have
gathered up all the words, groups of words, and sentences from the maps and discussions and sought for a general idea regarding how the teachers see contemporary art as a learning environment.

The data from teachers reiterates the often-presented ideas that art influences the overall development and growth in individuals. It is regarded as an aspect of human subsistence, as having a restoring and healing power. Art fosters understanding and provides means for life. It is a form of education, a new relationship with learning, offering new procedures and support for life-long learning. But this is just the starting point. The data also provides answers to questions with which the properties defined for contemporary art can be bound to experiences that facilitate learning.

How does art generate growth and development? With reference to the data, this could be answered by noting that man has a relationship with the environment, himself and other people. Art leads the individual to establish, among other things, a perceptual, investigative, observing and experiential relationship with his or her environment. Art makes one alert to the use of different senses and leads to the discovery of the things. A relationship with oneself forms through the capacity of art to train thinking and other skills. Art involves intellectual deliberation and thinking in new ways. Studying within the context of art means the acquisition and creation of knowledge. The relationship with the self is also constructed through by the art encouragement of individual solutions, an analytical approach, different interpretations and creative activity. The relationship with other people is created through the interaction fostered by art. It is generated by the different views aroused by art, the exchanges of opinion and the sharing of experiences. Through this, art involves learning, which will lead to cooperation and communality, and becoming heard and noticed. Social networks are also associated with art. These notions still operate on an abstract level, which begs the question of how the creation of relationships with the self, other people and the environment achieves the concrete form in art.

The research data shows that art offers the opportunity to be – and in this case to study – in different places, to think in different ways and to interact with different things. The use of art in teaching expands the learning environment from the classroom and the school to art museums and galleries. Contemporary art in particular expands it to the nearby environment, the outdoors and the city, into public and private space and the media. Different ways of thinking find a concrete form in the fact that art can be viewed from many different perspectives and keeping the whole work of art in mind while simultaneously exploring the details.

As a result, the appreciation and creation of art are both problem solving, in which thinking can be channelled in various different ways, thus making the learning complex. The basis of reciprocity lies first of all in the fact that when dealing with art, the teacher acts as an instructor, even in a learning capacity, and the pupils and students are regarded as an asset. Secondly, art generates discussion not only between people but also between the individual and the artwork. What then will create an opportunity for different learning situations, multi-level thinking and reciprocity?

Based on the data, I summarize the answer to this as the presence of skill, knowledge and emotion. From what, then, does their simultaneous presence stem? It comes from the experience of art as something that activates people. First of all, art makes a person react in many ways – with various emotions and opinions, self-expression and a desire for more knowledge. The individual will have the need to pool resources. On the other hand, art, and contemporary art in particular, creates the feeling of not understanding, but also provides moments of insight. Then again, art makes people act. Briefly put, art makes one use one's skills and knowledge, to act both physically and mentally, and to share one's experiences. But despite this, the question of what makes one act and react remains.

Here I refer to the parts of speech as an aid to classifying the data. I will start with verbs. In the present material, and in broader discussion on art, the role of an active subject is often assigned to art. Art activates, because it has functional characteristics. By this, I mean the occasions when art is, for example, said to tell something, to reflect its period, make a statement, blend into its surroundings, transform,
comprehend, bring forth, perform and live. Moreover, art entails activity concerning the individual, whereupon it provides impulses, demands, inspires and arouses thought. It challenges, arrests, appeals, activates and empowers, or annoys and infuriates, just to mention a few of the expressions found in the data.

In the data, adjectives describing contemporary art show which properties are regarded as important for learning. The multidimensional, multisensory and complex nature of contemporary art provides a good starting point for various activities. The different reactions stem from contemporary art being regarded in a variety of ways: as ugly and beautiful, amusing and oppressive, mundane and unique, tangible and abstract. It can assault the viewer or be silent. Paths to learning different things are opened up, on the one hand, by the personal nature of contemporary art, and on the other hand, by its culturally bound nature and manner of being part of the context of presentation. The experimental aspect of contemporary art and its originality and openness are felt to promote, for example, the learning of self-knowledge and ways of learning. The conceptuality and symbolic nature of contemporary art and its attendant indefiniteness foster wonderment, which is important for learning. This is also prompted by the surprising nature of artworks. Thinking typical of children can be also found in contemporary art.

Nouns appearing in the data outline definitions that can be assigned to art, in general and contemporary art in particular. One way of defining the significance of art in connection with learning is to regard it as a creative event. Contemporary art is a field of activity, even a large one, of unbridled action. It is a process and a journey. On the one hand, it is play and inspiration, and on the other hand insight and exploration. A work of art can be both the method and the result of research. The creative act involves both the author of the work and the person experiencing it.

Another way of linking art to learning is to consider it as expression. Expression has content and form. It is executed in a specific medium; colours and materials have been chosen for it. Expression is the use of imagination, involving mind, body and emotion. It can be highly personal and therapeutic while communicating with others. It is a signal and a message.

According to the teachers' views, art is something that expands thinking. Being an object of study and interpretation and a space for reflecting emotions and ideas, it activates thought. Art is also intellectual deliberation when artworks are approached as enigmas and challenges. Art can inspire and even cause change.

An important role in learning is gained by the fact that art is understood as a conception of reality. It is commonly considered as mirror, reflecting values, attitudes and norms, and conceptions of, for example, power and normality. Art reflects culture, whether one's own or another. It is also a framework for studying reality and the environment. Art entails documents of time and place, and it presents conceptions of man. Notions of reality also arise from art being "part of oneself", in the roles of its author or the one experiencing it. Art is someone's way of thinking and interpreting. It entails recollections, experience, opinions, and also dreams. Contemporary art is also an alternative way of viewing the present age. Art contains various peeks into another person's way of thinking, and provides answers to questions. It can also be approached as a borderline state between reality and fiction, or the reality of fable, as one of the teachers put it.

The analysis of the teachers' view about contemporary art as a learning experience has been summarized in the following figure. Bidirectional arrows in the figure indicate that a starting point to approach contemporary art as an learning experience can be any of the things mentioned. One can for instance want to improve relation to oneself and do that through contemporary art. Another is interesting in a piece of art and that can activate a learning process.
Fig. 1. A way to see contemporary art as a learning experience.

4. Conclusion: learning through art

The data from teachers supports a view that art has three functions in education. Firstly, there is art education, which can be described as education (knowledge and understanding) in or of art. The starting points of the aims, contents and teaching methods are in art and its aesthetic properties. It also entails exercises in the creation of art, which in Finland is usually called art pedagogy. Secondly, the broader function of art in education concerns the overall education of pupils and students, with related creativity and expression. It is also a means to develop general skills, such as meta-cognitive and affective ones. A third function is the instrumental use of art, whereby it is integrated into various subjects. With regard to the second and third functions we may speak of art in education or education (knowledge and understanding) through art.

In order to approach the properties of the actual artwork more closely, the research material can be broken down into parts. These show that the experiences produced by art, and study in connection with it, can be considered in concrete terms. Concrete terms help us place for art, as both a means of teaching and a subject of it, even strictly defined goals. This tells that art is not just an indefinite area that is difficult to define and evaluate, just something with the role of a lighter touch among important academic subjects.

The conclusion that the cognitive processes activated by art can and do have a great deal in common with the processes of other spheres of knowledge could be drawn using the data. The data entails the things, which Arthur Efland ends up with when he examines the relation of art and cognition. According
to him, in art there are present cognitive flexibility, integration of knowledge, and imagination (Efland, 2002, 159). Efland emphasises that the richer an individual's world of experience is, the wider his or her possibilities will be to develop cognitively (Efland, 2002, 161.) The fact that art has similarities with other areas of knowledge and skills, it is a source of knowledge of other things than art itself, and a means for developing even scientific thinking, makes it easier to take it as a credible environment of learning.

At the same time it is good to remember that creativity and the use of imagination, for example, are not the sole prerogative of the art. This, however, does not eradicate the fact that art also contains specific ways of experiencing, investigating and telling about the world. One quality that can be found also from the teachers' material is the ill-structuredness (Efland, 2002) or openness of art. I would describe it as positive indefiniteness. It is indefinite because it has no predefined goal, be it the process of making or interpreting the work of art. It is positive because the solution to an indefinite problem is not seeking but finding. When dealing with art, a person not only acquires information but also creates it. Because of this, contemporary art is also a necessary learning environment.

According to Nelson Goodman, after an experience of art one steps back into the ordinary world changed, to see things not seen before, to see things in a new way. Learning has taken place. (Goodman, 1984, 85.) So learning through art is not just learning by using art or with its assistance, but literally learning through it. I would claim that the indefinite or open nature of contemporary art necessitates or rather offers an opportunity to address the encounter of art and man as a dialogue bound to a context. Since it is a dialogue, both parties influence one another. Human experience and interpretation introduce elements into the work, which in turn arouses a process in the individual. Of interest here is the way in which this dialogue influences people and how active the individual must be for art to achieve change, learning and growth in him or her. The analysis of data gathered from teachers seeks to answer these questions.

The views of the teachers also bring up the idea that contemporary art provides excellent opportunities for two-way learning. When exploring and studying art as such, one cannot avoid considering its relationship with the rest of the world, and viewing the world through the matters that it addresses. When utilizing the making and reception of art in connection with something else, we cannot avoid exploring and interpreting art itself. But this requires that we consider matters without philosophical preconceptions or historical limitations. We will then realise, as noted by Richard Shusterman, that "art surely forms part of life, just as life forms the substance of art and even constitutes itself artistically in 'the art of living' " (Shusterman 1995, 194). This kind of attitude makes it easier to approach art. The feeling of being alien to art is reduced when artworks are approached from the perspectives of familiar things and areas of life. Here one could well speak of understanding art. By this I do not mean a shared understanding, a universal explanation, but personal understanding, a way of explaining an artwork in a manner suited for oneself. Sometimes the explanation can be found easily, while sometimes it requires a great deal of work and outside information. Sometimes understanding emerges before an artwork, and sometimes only after a longer period, maybe even years.

In their research on the content of art teaching in British secondary schools and the role of contemporary art in it, Dick Downing and Ruth Watson noticed that discussion on contemporary art leads broader discussion on why art is included in the curriculum and on the kinds of content supporting the realization of goals. The researchers maintain that questions of this kind should always be present in a changing world. (Downing & Watson, 2004, 116.) I maintain that in Finnish schools art education calls for a critical discussion of the nature and tasks of art. The school is not able to use all the possibilities art serves for learning. Throughout the history of mankind, people have had need to do things that are called art. As individuals, people also engage naturally in artistic activity from childhood onwards. (See for example Dissayanake, 1988, 1992.) What role do schools have in the loss of skills in addressing matters and thinking in artistic ways? Or in keeping artistic and scientific thinking so distant from each other? I
wonder whether the indefiniteness and complexity associated with art, and contemporary art in particular, could be made into an asset.

References


