

## LEEF reading group - 'Environmental Art'

### Wednesday 25th April 2018, Royal Festival Hall, London

**Background:** The aim of the LEEF reading group is to link theory and practice in urban environmental education. We discuss an essay or article and reflect on how it connects with our daily work and delivery. We are currently reading chapters from *Urban Environmental Education Review*, Cornell University Press, 2017.

**Our April reading group was based on the article "Leveraging Environmental Arts for Education and Sustainable Futures" by Hilary Inwood, Joe Heimlich, Kumara Ward, and Jennifer Adams.**

A copy of the article can be found here: <http://www.thenatureofcities.com/2016/06/16/environmental-arts/>

#### What is environmental art?

Through our reading and discussion we identified several types of urban environmental art. These included:

- Place-based art: Art that interacts with a public space, eg. a city park or green space; that makes you consider the area in a new way; or that tells/reimagines the story of that place. See Gemma Seddon & Poppy Flint's 'A Tail for Dagenham Brook'. <https://dagenhambrook.wordpress.com/>
- Campaign art / art about the environment: Art that broadcasts an overtly environmental or political message, usually to draw public attention to an issue as a form of protest (see Greenpeace's giant polar bear or the Liberate Tate oil slicks)  
[-https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/emma-thompson-joins-greenpeace-campaigners-on-londons-southbank-to-protest-shell-10482200.html](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/emma-thompson-joins-greenpeace-campaigners-on-londons-southbank-to-protest-shell-10482200.html)  
[-https://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2016/mar/19/liberate-tates-six-year-campaign-to-end-bps-art-gallery-sponsorship-in-pictures](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2016/mar/19/liberate-tates-six-year-campaign-to-end-bps-art-gallery-sponsorship-in-pictures)
- Art using natural/recycled/biodegradable materials
- Art on the subject of nature, for example ATM Street Art.. <http://atmstreetart.com/> - a London based street artist painting birds and animals threatened with extinction.
- Art that serves an environmental function, eg. a sculpture that cleans polluted water...

This led us to question where the boundaries of environmental art lie. Is any art that challenges us to engage with our sense of place/time a form of environmental art?

Campaign art might be contrasted with educational art. While the former aims to achieve a political goal, the latter tends to use less direct messaging and is more concerned with people's experience and development of self / ideas.

We also challenged the authors' assumption that artists are 'the antibodies of the cultural bloodstream' (McKibben, 2009). We only need to consider the power and corporate influence of the mainstream art world to see how this idea is problematic. It was felt that change is facilitated through the intention and skill of the artist, rather than because there is something inherently progressive or political about art.

We discussed the idea of the artist as environmental educator either through the final artwork and/or through the process of developing the artwork. For instance, the art-making process might engage a community, or school group around environmental issues or local places. The results of that engagement could be found in the artwork or in a change in the participants thinking about an issue or a place.

Another challenge discussed was that environmental art as environmental education (like much environmental education) can often occur as short, isolated events whereas longer-term engagement with the students/audience/participants might lead to more effective educational outcomes.

### Questions and comments from a practitioner's perspective -

- **How do we make our educational art projects more meaningful?**  
Art activities on the subject of nature, such as creating animal masks, could be made more meaningful by connecting to the place, ie. by exploring habitats, or inventing new stories about the space and the creatures that live there. Biodegradable art like mud/clay animals or Goldsworthy style art can be made using found materials and left behind in the space, thereby allowing direct engagement and connection with the site.
- **How do we engage people that are intimidated by art (especially adults)?**  
Engaging adults in art can be challenging as they may feel that art is not for them or that they're not good at it. This was a problem identified even with secondary school students. Younger children tend to be much less self-conscious about art and have a natural propensity for creative play. Formalising art as a subject for assessment in school could be one reason that people believe that they are not good at it. As a result people tend to conflate creativity with a skill for fine art. One idea for engaging adults is the idea of **shared or collaborative art**. For example, one person might start to make a picture/sculpture which is then passed to another member of the group, with each participant adding their own energy to the work. This can also be done with activities like whittling/wood carving, where each piece is passed around the group until it's complete.

### The future of urban environmental art for education

The recently launched 'London Borough of Culture' award – inspired by the UK City and European Capital of Culture programmes - could offer new opportunities for environmental arts. Initiatives like the National Park City campaign bring added momentum and potential for fusing environment & culture in the city.

Initiatives like Phytology in Bethnal Green Nature Reserve offer a source of inspiration. Phytology brings together artists and ecologists to create projects/events that engage local communities and link strongly to sense of place. Interdisciplinary and collaborative work between environmental educators and artists could be a way of reaching new audiences and engaging people in new ways. <https://phytology.org.uk/>

We also discussed other art forms not explored in the article. For example digital art, and using film/video to engage young people in reimagining the future.

### Conclusion

Our discussion linked with the first LEEF reading group on 'Sense of Place' since some of the most effective forms of environmental art allow us see and respond to our environment in new ways. It was great to have Poppy Flint's work as a case study of environmental arts in action. The cityscape offers a rich and varied canvas which challenges us to respond in ever-changing ways. Our discussion revealed how the built environment shapeshifts through demolition and development. Communities feel ownership or lack of ownership over spaces; green spaces are threatened and rescued, polluted or planted up - all of these things form the backdrop for the work of environmental educators. Art can offer an important tool for responding to the shifting sands of the city, and engaging new audiences in environment, nature, and sustainability.