

Echoes from the dark forest: affect in the learning of contemporary art and (in) the ecology of subjectivity

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Darkness, the crunching sound of snow under one's feet, spotlights of our headlamps, the narrow path, branches scratching our faces, the smell of frozen weather, star-bright night. From afar one can hear a dog barking, the smell of gasoline is drifting from the traffic. The cold weather prevents the fumes from entering into the upper atmosphere. As if one would descend into the cold arms not human but organic, dividing branches, stripe-like pillars of trees, prickling needle crowns and folding screens made of branches, thickets, producing glimmer of light, snow covers of crystallic structures reflecting moonlight.

This is what I wrote in my research diary after visiting the dark forest with the students for the first time. This particular, concrete forest exists near the city centre of Kauhajoki, Southern Ostrobothnia, Finland. From the perspective of the Finnish capital city area - a periphery.

In my contemporary art workshop we went with the students to the dark forest in Kauhajoki in order to listen, smell and feel its existence during the freezing cold winter days. We approached the dark forest with open minds without knowing what would happen. My pulse started to rise when we turned off our headlamps and stood in a circle in the middle of the dark, cold, wintry, snowy forest. We stood there so quietly that one could hear a pin drop. What

would happen now? What will happen next? What an earth am I doing? May one act like this? And what will follow?

I surrendered to the snowy, cold, black and blue dimness, sucking the feeling of the cold embrace of the forest in me. As did all the others. After standing there for a while, our eyes got accustomed to the darkness and we started to perceive the shapes of the trees, the tones of the forest and the stars in the sky. Darkness started to change into dusk.

This moment became the most essential 'engine' of my research, its leading motif. The dark forest affected with its intensity also to the ponderings of the pedagogic space and the conceptions of contemporary art as an open, infinite space and a concept.

One of the students wrote the following in his diary after the first visit to the dark forest:

A lot of stars and the shapes of the trees against the sky would have made a great photograph. Even the silence started to feel fine when one could listen to one's own thoughts. When the lights were turned on, I felt truly disappointed since the same things did not seem that great anymore. The whole way back from the forest I kept wondering why does the light help one see things even though it also hides the same ones.

To continue, even if we only think about walking towards a pitch-black forest, it causes us to feel fear, even horror. Not to mention when we actually do walk from the light into the even more darker and darker forest, it gives us the creeps and makes one's mind to start a unique fear apparatus.

In the dark I felt fear taking over my body and I felt as if I were alone in the dark even though there were many people around me. I felt the coldness, the silence, the fear, the mysteriousness, the unbelievable beauty of the forest, its ghostliness.

It felt weird when we were walking so slowly and quietly only observing our surroundings and then suddenly someone passes by jogging or walking hastily. I felt the freezing cold weather, the ground under my feet and then little by little my fingers went numb, the flashlight in my hand, the scarf and my jacket pockets gave warmth to my face and my hands, wind blowing. It's so damn cold out here...

This is how the students in my workshop described experiencing the dark forest and echoed all of their voices into a voice of a collective pack. The reason behind me taking the students into the cold dark forest was that I wanted to start the workshop with an intense enough experience to make their minds and bodies act in a way I could not totally foresee.

According to the well-known cultural theorist Brian Massumi, 'fear is the anticipatory reality in the present of a threatening future'. He also states that what is not completely actual but threatens the present like a gleaming light and which formulates matter remarkably is experiential, true and a lived fact. This also means that the experiences of every human, animal and other living organisms are always true.

In the beginning of my research in 2008, there was a school massacre in Kauhajoki which immensely affected and shaped the direction of my research in a truly powerful and unique way. It was only then when I started to realise the potential of art education in this world of terrorism and other global threats of which the latest being the ecological threat on our planet. There is no doubt that the vision of the world has darkened. Under this particular darkened sky I have done my research by trying to find answers to its many questions. The current state of society has been described as the 'controlling society'.

This means, in particular, the increase of one's inner control in a society where the centres of power are even more decentralised. People are required of self-reflection, correct diets, correct physical exercises, the correct amount of consuming and the correct amount of recycling. The interface of public and private has become narrower. And if nothing else, the social media

has made the line between public and private a total blur. One loads in the internet their most intimate material which used to be impossible even in one's dreams. Around and inside all this the ever intensifying consumer capitalism offers young people ready-made identities with alluring products in a more and more accelerating pace.

My research was implemented and lived in the Kauhajoki Art School for Children and Young People where I was working as head teacher at the time. This naturally puts the emphasis on Basic Education of Arts as the centre of context. This particularly unique system of art schools in Finland offers non-compulsory education outside the comprehensive and high schools and is regulated by the Ministry of Education and the national curriculum. By no means can the art schools in Finland be considered as one of the hobbies among many other after school activities:

Basic Education in Arts has an objective to offer to students possibilities to study art persistently, determinedly and according the student's own interests. Teaching is enhancing the relation to art and lifelong learning in arts. The teaching will improve the skills that are essential to the particular field of art and gives you the transferable skills in order to apply to trade school or higher education within the particular field of art.

The national curriculum from the year 2017 also emphasizes sustainability, ethics and ecological values in all Basic Education in Arts:

The basis of the education is the knowledge production and presentation of each field of art. The questions of aesthetics , ethics and ecology drive for pondering and estimate what is valuable and meaningful in life. In the Basic Education of Arts the ground for socially and culturally sustainable future is built.

The most essential themes in my research are those of aesthetics, ethics and ecology. Those may appear in unorthodox dimensions in their interpretation. Or perhaps, they may appear in totally radical forms.

My research methods can be described as nomadic with arts-based elements. Nomadic research is ambulatory practice, itinerant, wandering, searching, you have to throw yourself to the stream and follow the flow. Opposite to this, appears the Royal Science, which wants to separate itself from the objects it is enquiring, sitting on the cliff watching the stream flows by.

When I started to plan my workshop in the Art School of Kauhajoki, I began from what was the most familiar to me educationally. This was the experiential learning, the tradition in pedagogy which emphasises learner's own experiential knowledge and experientiality. The aim is, however, to elaborate this experientiality and slowly add intellectual, reflective and theoretical elements in the mixture by continuing towards experientiality in a circular or spirally manner. The pedagogical goal is to connect the learned matter into one's experiential horizon and thus promote also the political goals, such as democracy and social equality.

To sum up with, the definition of 'work' in the experiential learning may be crystallised as learning being a process in which knowledge is created by the transformation of experience. Knowledge is not an autonomous element which can be acquired and mediated but created and re-created again and again. The most essential thing is that learning alters one's experiences in both its objective and subjective dimensions.

The entanglement of knowledge between time, place and embodied perspective creates new research. The embodied knowing or knowledge is another important starting point in my research and its analysis. Experiential learning and embodied knowledge do both strongly emphasise human's being-in-the-world not as a separate knowing subject but as an intertwined being entangled to the world and evolving mind-body-continuum. The elements of knowledge, experientiality and embodiment alternate and complete one another. One may also discuss the

so-called intra-active pedagogy in which the world with its all organisms and materialities constitutes as an active agency. Nature and culture are also seen as inseparately intertwined.

The actual questions in my research are connected to experientiality, embodiment and an intensive being-with-the-world and becoming-with-the-world. Sensual encounters, preconscious and instinctual desires, the irrational side of human being. Affectivity and materiality, the body.

To everyone's own dark forest which lies inside us all. However, the dark forest can be found also outside. My interest in research has been that something which makes matters twist, to change directions in a matter of a second, to increase or decrease the human atmosphere. To get inspired or to improvise. Even though I may not use this particular terminology, those are found in my research in terms, such as affect, becoming-other, becoming-animal, the line of flight, smooth space and a body without organs.

The theoretical and philosophical thinking based on the French Continental philosophy challenges this kind of terminology in order to think about the familiar in a new way, in a way that may not have even existed before. This was also the theme of my workshop, the familiar turning into odd and the strange turning into well-known. How to encounter the oddness in the world, in the nature, in other people, even in oneself?

Contemporary art has been in a significant role in my workshop through pondering, presenting and encountering these particular questions. Through the contemporary art we have dealt with the dynamics of human being and his/her territory. The most essential of these dynamics have been materiality and its effects which can be found in the spaces where we have roamed, such as in the art class, in the school corridors, in the forest nearby, on the streets and in the night club of a hotel. From the mediums of contemporary art we have used painting, drawing, photography, installation art and performance art which proved to be the most challenging and at the same time the most rewarding form of art. Finally, I asked the students to write a fictive story called 'The strange competition of the white masks in the dark forest'. With this story-

telling the students had the opportunity to combine fiction with their own experiences and thus create new kind of interpretation and reality.

We started with performance art by merely experimenting with different tools, such as face paints, masks, costumes, collective drawing, playing instruments and dancing, in a happening in the class room called 'Perfodiving'. As soon as everyone found interesting materials and tools we moved little by little towards the other stages of performance art. Finally, we were able to carry out an improvised performance art in the white masks on the streets of Kauhajoki, out on the front yard of the library and in a night club of a hotel nearby. This particular group of white masks did not have a manuscript or any other kind of plan. Instead, everyone just let their imagination free through the mute white masks.

The pedagogical space is usually governed by the overflowing speech of the teachers, written assignments and examinations, essays, oral tests etc. As if learning was only verified by language. In my research I have been looking for different kinds of spaces for learning. Smooth spaces. Certainly we used writing in the workshop, for example, for written diaries and in the end the fictive story as an end reflection. However, silence and embodied feeling, the new experimental dimensions rose to the most essential role in the workshop.

The teachers were open to the same experiencing as the students. Together we were wondering about the complexity of the experience, environment and mind which often surpasses all explanation, writing or symbolism. There are so many things which we cannot explain or understand through our experiences, however bright the particular surroundings or the space may be.

Finally, to sum up with, even though summarising in this particular research orientation tends to cause drastic measures towards the understanding of the complexity that the ecology of subjectivity is all about one passing moment and the course of events, its sensitivity towards these events in their individuality and singularity, the irrationality between the human and the

world as well as the outer forces' participation in subjectivity.

One just have to throw yourself to stream of the world like a slalom canoeist in the assemblage of a river and a kayak.. To go with the flow. The French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari stated that how may one become worth of all the events? Do we know how to listen to the forces outside of us which also may penetrate us and lead us to the whirlwind of changes? But also, how do we assemble with certain materialities and intra-act with them?

On the other hand, Deleuze and Guattari state: 'How may one re-singularise oneself into this world?' This is an ethico-aesthetic question which directs itself towards the future by searching through experimentalism and creativity for new forms of being-together in a world in which tight identities may fortify themselves even in extreme opposites. In this sense, it is all about experientialism, experimentalism, randomness and potentiality of living in a moment which may open to this confined world of ours their limitless, infinite variations.

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