

Looking for the Existential Dimension of Art in Education

Janeke Wienk

ArtEZ University of the Arts, The Netherlands

j.wienk@artez.nl

Biography

Janeke Wienk started her career as a visual artist and art teacher on a secondary school in the Netherlands. She wrote several books for a new subject called 'cultural and artistic orientation' in the Dutch school curriculum and she also made more than 50 television programs on art for adolescents. At ArtEZ University of the Arts Janeke is working at the art educational department since 2000. She developed some new interdisciplinary programs to enable students of dance, visual art, theatre and music to develop themselves as art teachers in interdisciplinary settings. She was head of a master program for Art Education and for now she is bringing this experience into a new master's program at ArtEZ, called Human Matters, in collaboration with the University of Humanistic. This program re-connects the arts to the humanities in order to address persistent global problems. Janeke continues her practise as artist educator at IMAE, International Master program Artist Educator and in a program liberal arts at ArtEZ. Since 2016 she is a phd candidate supervised by professor Gert Biesta at University of Humanistic in the Netherlands.

Abstract

In this article I take account of the current discourse in contemporary arts education based on a review of four art educational handbooks published in the 21th century. This review shows that the predominant tendency to value

arts role in education in instrumental terms leads to a cavity of art's true educational potential. Therefore, I make a case to re-address arts natural ability to connect to the core of human existence, showing some glimpses to re-define arts crucial role in education.

Keywords

Arts education, existential dimension, human existence, subjectification, pedagogy.

Introduction

During my 30 minutes presentation at the InSEA congress at Aalto University in June 2018, I resumed my two extensive academic literature studies on contemporary art education into two single PowerPoint slides. On a third slide I introduced a few glimpses of alternative directions for contemporary art education. Although this brave and maybe even brutal bombardment of concepts and conclusions during the first seven minutes of my presentation enabled me to save enough time to share my own art educational practise, I am happy to unfold my story with a bit more space and time in this article. Methodologically, I loosely base this text on the insights of 'Pedagogical text as Method' (van Manen, 1998) using my own tone of voice to talk to you as if we were art teachers during the coffee break after my presentation. This might lead to dialogical reflection and involvement of us personally. In this article I illuminate only the theoretical part of my research, as compressed in these three slides. I will elaborate on my educational practise and the work of my students in successive articles on my ongoing art educational practise in the Primo Levi project.

First slide: in conversation with four handbooks

So, I will pick up the thread of the first slide that I showed during my presentation and the 10.000 words academic article behind that single PowerPoint slide. Two years ago, at the start of the new adventure of my PhD trajectory, I embarked on a PhD-for-dummies training at the University of Humanistic in the Netherlands. I was and still am very lucky to be supervised by professor Gert Biesta, whose profound educational philosophy and subtle guidance helps me to contextualise my own practise as artist educator in an inspirational and light-hearted way. However, presumably on behalf of the same rigor as other PhD research trajectories are organised in many universities, I first had to make what felt like a giant detour: the compulsory production of an academic literature review to pinpoint my own professional position in the field of art education. And so I did. I will offer the full text of this article for publication in the course of 2019 and for now, as I did during my presentation, I will only share the core insights of this endeavour, condensed into this one slide moment.

After some nerve breaking and rather ineffective library sessions, where I tried to get grips on ‘the current debate on contemporary art education’ using the largest databases of peer-reviewed literature, I decided to use my intuition to find a more comprehensible way to say something relevant about the field where I am working for more than 30 years. Thanks to my frequent visits to InSEA conferences, I was able to visualise some opinion makers who made the difference for me, such as Eliot Eisner, Liora Bresler, Brent Wilson and Michael Parsons. I decided to let go the rather alienating activity of desk top literature research, and I chose to review four handbooks on art education, all published in the first two decades of the new millennium: *Handbook of Research and Policy in Arts education* (Eisner, 2004), *International Handbook of Research in Arts Education* (Bresler, 2007), *The Routledge International Handbook of the Arts and Education* (Fleming, 2015) and *Palgrave Handbook of Global Arts Education* (Barton

and Baguley, 2017). To review these handbooks, I took the different perspectives of the editors as a starting point. In their editorial introductions they give account of the lens they used to frame, organise and shape the field of arts education leading to key-concepts, recurring themes and grand narratives. I discovered that the comparison the editors' lenses thematises the current field of art education and its self-conceptions in a rich and interesting way.

For example, I observed that Eisner's first concern is to mark a milestone for art education, since his handbook is the first to be published in the field. I did not realise until I started this research that the arts entered the field of educational research handbooks that late. Eisner's notes however that the roots of arts education are founded in the practice of teaching arts and crafts; 'theory and research were to come later' (Eisner, 2004, p.2). Therefore, he seeks to define relevant categories and ideas for research by collecting and re-defining the fields grand narratives, like research on children's art, aesthetics and the history of art education itself. Although the bulk of the collected research is rooted in an academic research tradition related to the social science tradition mainly, Eisner also seeks to initiate a scholarly tradition rooted in the tradition of arts and humanity at the same time. However, the artistic ends up to be predominated by the academic in his handbook.

Looking at the second, epic handbook based on its size and scope, Bresler's main concern is to define and re-define the art disciplines' borders in historical and contemporary perspectives. She emphasises the importance of both defining borders and crossing them, in order to establish cross-fertilization as 'part of a larger characteristic of the 21st century: 'the softening of the boundaries' (Bresler, 2007, p.xviii). Notably, Bresler avoids re-framing the arts in education as interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary. By doing so, she places the arts disciplines in an open, artistic arena, rather than provoking an academic, philosophical discourse. I interpret this as an effort to address the essence of art educations potential, rather than go into specialist's debates.

In the third handbook, I discovered that Fleming also creates a new openness to explore the

potential of art itself in education, in this case by re-addressing the arts as the primary field of attention. Fleming describes the current confusion on the nature and importance of the arts and their relationship to education, illustrated by an account of UNESCO's unstable directions in arts educational policy. 'If nothing else, all that contemporary activity and global decision-making suggest a high level of both interest and confusion about the nature and importance of the arts and their relationship to education. That at least is nothing new'. (Fleming, 2015, p.1) His response to this confusion is to shift focus: not education, but art should be leading in the discourse on arts education again, as an effort to overcome the tendency to address one element of a dichotomy and to disqualify the other.

In the last handbook that I analysed in the context of my academic article, *The Palgrave Handbook of Global Arts Education*, I encountered an editorial focus on the advocacy of art education in the first place. The editor's introduction enumerates the benefits of arts education of all sorts and forms across the globe, contextualizing this advocacy in the global tendency to marginalize arts education. They also observe that governments, like other stakeholders in the education sector, tend to ignore these benefits, in spite of the extensive research that has been undertaken and built upon in the respective arts discipline areas. Barton and Baguley proclaim a strategy to overcome the disjuncture between art's potential for education and the inconsistency of policymakers' acknowledgement of this potential by proposing that the main goal of arts education should be to facilitate, stimulate and organise the encounter of human being and art. (Barton and Baguley, 2017).

Comparing these various editorial lenses brought me onto a tentative analysis. I came to understand that the emphasis on academic research of Eisner frames arts education as an emancipatory movement related to the political status of arts education within the field of education. This strongly positions arts education as a scholarly field, which holds the potential of empowerment, but it also leaves some crucial aspects overlooked, such as the maintenance of the

characteristics of the arts in relation to research. Therefore, Eisner's motto for research to 'keep the albatross flying, while you study it' (Eisner, 2004, p.2) is not a lived value yet in his handbook. His awareness of this however, prohibits the research as presented in his handbook of losing the essence of the field.

The defining and crossing disciplines borders of Bresler creates the space needed to overcome the danger reported by Eisner, that is, to lose sight of the essence of art in the process of academic research. Therefore, Bresler represents the Albatross perspective as editor. A disadvantage that I observe here, is that it might be hard to meet the standard that Bresler sets. The substantial handbook in two parts is too comprehensive and maybe too expensive as well, to find its way to the classroom art teacher or artist educator's studio. Unintentionally, the handbook might broaden the gap between arts educational practises and its scholarly research and reflections on it, while its main goal seems to bridge the gap.

Flemings approach of the arts in education creates the possibility to overcome dichotomies in arts education, such as instrumental – intrinsic, that predominated the discourse in arts education for a long time. He also shifts for the educational to a more artistic focus. The new paradigm of 'art for life' that Flemings lens seems to initiate, calls for new approaches of arts education that are more related to the nature and potential of the arts. However this editorial lens is inspirational and provocative, it does not meet with the content of the handbook Fleming edited yet, as shown for example by the strong and traditional emphasis on curriculum studies.

The focus of Barton and Barguley on global arts education entails a political mind set, related to an ample attention to advocacy on arts education. This emphasis on advocacy for global arts education involves an implicit defensive tone of voice that is related to the fields history of marginalisation in the school's curriculum. In their attempt to advocate the benefits of arts education the editors follow the political mainstream of UNESCO initiated conferences and statements, which are formulated very broad and open, which entails the danger of becoming

meaningless.

Still on the first slide: some characteristics of the conversation

So, the few months of living in these four handbooks brought me a few insights, that eventually fitted that one single slides I mentioned in the introduction of this article. Firstly, I concluded that the contemporary debate is dominated by a tradition of shifting rationales in art education leading to the impression that art education is good for many, if not all, educational purposes. We all know that this a-specific qualification can be turned into its opponent easily, that is: good for nothing. Art educators and researchers are quite focussed to define and to promote the chameleon named ‘added value’ of the arts in education. This mainly instrumental focus brings along a defensive and ideological tone of voice that leads to contradictory statements and idealistic, yet unfounded claims. Research on art educational practises is dominated by a social science approach that tends to overlook the pedagogical perspective. In this perspective, I encountered a predominant mind-set in the debate on art education, that I came to define as ‘dichotomy-prone’. The majority of the articles I reviewed showed a tendency to define the field of art education using dichotomies, such as instrumental versus intrinsic, or discipline based versus multidisciplinary, as the backbone of the reasoning and argumentation. Other well represented dichotomies are: high art versus low art, canonical versus non-canonical, modern versus post-modern arts education, western versus non-western, local versus global art education and also: expressive versus conceptual and aesthetics versus conceptual art education.

Second slide: the conversation on art education in the Netherlands

After the writing of this article, I brought my quest for the current debate on contemporary art education into the context of the art education in the Netherlands. Therefore, I studied some editorial lenses of Dutch and Belgian researchers, such as Folkert Haanstra, Barend van Heus-

den, Pascal Gielen and Emile Heijnen. In the Netherlands I found two additional characteristics that colour and shape the Dutch conversation. Firstly, there is the focus on the dichotomy art versus culture in education. There is a tendency to replace the arts by the even harder to define ‘culture’ (van Heusden, 2016). Although this stems from the aspiration to place art and culture in the heart of the school curriculum, there is also the danger of the disappearance of the arts in the shade of the umbrella of culture.

Secondly, I observe an overwhelming enthusiasm for creativity in education, leading to the misunderstanding and confusion that art and creativity are the same. On top of this, creativity is misunderstood as an ability for problem solving. During my InSEA conversation in Finland, I collected these characteristics of the Dutch conversation in a second slide, asking my audience if and how they recognise these characteristics as well. I saw a lot of consenting heads nodding yes, but this is only the evidence of the anecdote of course. However, the influence of the new, skill-based thinking introduced as the 21st century skills is widely spread, and not only of influence in the Dutch discourse on good art education. Within this framework the arts are also defined by creativity as problem-solving skill. This tendency puts more emphasis on the instrumentalisation of art in education on top of its instrumentalisation in the 20th century. The focus on dichotomies on the one hand, and creativity on the other, together with the absence of a pedagogical focus scattered the field of art education, a phenomenon referred to Gert Biesta as a double crisis in art education (Biesta, 2018).

Interlude: short explanation of the existential dimension

Bringing my audience to a fundamental point like this within two slide, made me feel responsible for offering some light at the end of the tunnel. Therefore I collected some glimpses of alternatives for the role, place and function of art in education. My presumption here is that some essential elements of art are not addressed in contemporary art education. I refer to this

essence as ‘an existential dimension’, meaning arts ability to connect to the core of human existence, related to questions like ‘How can I be at home in the world’.



Figure 1: Chiara Shiota, Japanese Pavilion, 2015 (photos Janeke Wienk)

As an interlude in my presentation, I illustrated this existential dimension referring the work of the contemporary installation and performance artist Chiharu Shiota, who made the enchanting exhibition ‘Key in the hand’ in the Japanese pavilion during the 56th Biennale in Venice in 2015. Although there are many ways to illuminate an existential dimension of art through many different works of art, I chose Shiota’s work for its evidential reference to this dimension. As part of the installation, consisting thousands of keys on red woollen threads, she showed a video registration of toddlers from all over the world being interviewed on the question ‘How did you come into the world?’. Surprisingly, the video shows that young children of different cultural backgrounds share the same unambiguous attitude, telling playfully and cheerfully about their own birth and even pre-birth experiences. The relevance of Shiota’s work to point out here, is that she poses questions about human existence in an artistic setting, leading to a quality of answers that differs profoundly from posing the same questions in a clinical context of academic research. My interlude on Shiota enabled me to follow my line of thought, leading to the tentative definition of some specific aspects of the existential dimension in art education.

I presume that arts role in education might not be primarily to answer existential questions, but moreover to pose existential questions, to open up to that existential dimension and to represent a profound quality in education, and in the school curriculum. In this perspective I like image art as a field, moreover than a subject, a specific content or set of competences. Attached to this idea of a field, I consider the teachers pedagogy as a crucial element, since addressing this existential dimension by entering the fields of art, requires a specific quality, that transcends the level of competences as well. Whereas art is nothing else than reflection on human existence par excellence, I found this essence hardly addressed in the art educational debate at all (Wienk, 2016).

Third slide: five glimpses of the existential dimension in art education

Therefore, I concluded these ambitious 7 minutes of my presentation with a third slide. On this slide, I showed these five glimpses: art education for life, art education to get to know self, other and the world, art education as humanising process, art education as education of the soul and art education as emancipation. A first exploration of these five existential-based approaches brings some new insights on the potential of this dimension.

I encountered some explicit advocacy for *art education for life* in Flemings handbook, but also in the Netherlands, where the predominance of the neoliberal political context is seen as the central hindrance for education to relate to something else than professional education. (Gielen, 2012). This economically driven framework ignores education's task to address biographical and personal education as well. Gert Biesta refers to this dimension as 'subjectification' (Biesta, 2010) as a missing link that prohibits a lot of education to become good education. The arts are supposed to have a special ability to address this biographical education, but I did not found a practise-based elaboration of this concept yet, nor a specification of the pedagogy needed for this. Some problems that I encounter here are the lack of any scientific approaches of human

life and biography, other than the psychological and biological framework has to offer. The concept of home art meaning the drawings that youngster make at home (Haanstra, 2011), or an idiosyncratic approach of music meaning the music one enjoys as a part of daily life (Bisschop Boele, 2011), show some strong starting point to explore art education for life more in-depth.

Secondly, I see a glimpse of existential approach of *art education to get to know self, other and the world*, a concept that is quite well-documented and elaborated in the current debate, such as theories in the Netherlands like ‘authentic art education’. When given a closer look however, the definition of ‘the world’ is often conceptualised as ‘world as experienced’ or simple as ‘lifeworld’. The definition of ‘self’ is often defined in terms of competences or skills, such as ‘self-regulation’ or ‘self-reflection’, referring to the neoliberal context of professionalism as well. Furthermore, the concept of ‘lifeworld’ might unintentionally lead to the colonizing of students based on presumed subcultures that are related to processes of socialisation rather than the individual process of becoming a human being in and with the world, referred by Gert Biesta as grown-upness (Biesta, 2013). A closer look from an existential perspective of this lifeworld and how to approach it through art education can lead to the existential dimension in a more essential way. The role of art to educate on one’s self, the other and the world however, is not yet referred to in terms of pedagogy, except from ‘Letting Art Teach (Biesta, 2017).

My third glimpse Art education as humanisation is not elaborated in terms of education that much, but I encountered it in a specific article in Flemings handbook on the impressive and touching collection of children’s’ drawing made in concentration camp Theresienstadt (O’Connor, 2015). In this context the sole act of making art is defined as humanisation itself, without being attached to external educational, or societal goals. Contemporary examples of this glimpse of the existential dimension of art in education are elaborated within therapeutic frameworks as used by NGO’s such as War Child. I did not encounter many references of the concept of art as humanisation in educational contexts yet.

Art education as education of the soul is the fourth conception that is hardly address in the literature I studied, except from one chapter in Bresler's handbook. The definition of the 'soul' is problematic in this chapter's introduction however, leading to a new age tone of voice. Since I intuitively assume that there is a huge relevance for art in education in terms of soul, for example as complementary aspect to 'body' or 'material'. This aspect of soul is not often addressed in contemporary art educational context, presumably because of the trend in art education to meet with the educational framework that is mainly dominated by learning effects, outcomes and measurements (Biesta, 2013) . It would be interesting to research art's role in education by defining art as the soul of education. Claiming the spiritual dimension of art would make a good start, I guess.

The fifth glimpse I mentioned is *Art education as emancipation*, a concept that seeks to address some existential dimension in the context of an international master program, where I work as a tutor and lecturer. This program, named IMAE, bases itself on the theoretical framework of Freire, where the liberation of suppressed in society is stimulated by art educational projects, that are mostly community focussed on processes of socialisation rather than subjectification (Biesta, 2018). Some tendencies in secondary education, such as alter modern art education (Groenendijk, 2012) seek to re-define art class in terms of activism, leading to a new pedagogical approach as well. As it comes to the question of emancipation, Biesta refers to emancipation as liberation from being caught in one's own desires, which is especially important in a world that constantly tells us that we need more desires, for example to enable the economy to continue to grow. (Biesta, 2015)

What comes after these three slides: some tentative conclusions and further steps

Overviewing these five glimpses, I see great potential to elaborate on the concept of an existential dimension as a 'third option' for art in education. The glimpses are hidden and overgrown by the dominance of the instrumentalised language and concepts of education and need further research. Concluding I would say that there is a lot of energy, good will, research, development, experiment, advocacy, debate and time spend on the search and research for arts place in education. It is my observation however that all this energy does not lead towards a clear, autonomous, artful positioning of the arts in education. One explanation for this could be that not only the place of the arts in education is in a process of re-defining itself, but also the place of education in society is in a state of redefinition if not crisis. This explains what Gert Biesta (2017) addresses as the double crisis in art education; not only art in education but also education itself has lost its connection with its core business, that is to relate to human existence itself. I presume that the conception of 'subjectification' that plays a crucial role in Gert Biesta educational philosophy holds a great potential for art education in the 21th century.

In the next phase of my research I will focus on finding more 'words' to address this existential dimension of art in education. I will also continue and deepen my research in my own practise as artist educator, specifically focussed at the pedagogy needed to bring art, education and being human into a meaningful dialogue. I'll be happy to keep you posted!

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