

Thematic Issue on Art and a Hopeful Future

EDITORIAL

Art Education in the Age of Crises: Opportunities for Hope and Transformation

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The culture of post-industrial societies has proven unsustainable in many ways: climate change, overconsumption of natural resources, violent conflicts, and social inequality create a looming dystopia that leaves people hopeless and without a vision for the future. Amid complex ecosocial crises, it is essential to consider the role of art education as an educational and societal resource. Art education is not isolated from other sectors of society but is always connected to broader cultural and political contexts. In other words, art education can never be neutral; it either strengthens or challenges and reshapes the values and practices prevailing in society through its choices. This thematic issue, *Art and a Hopeful Future*, brings together studies presented in the Arts Education Special Interest Group at the 2023 FERA (Finnish Educational Research Association) Conference, focusing on the significance of art education as a builder of hope for the future.

The perspective of hope is critical in a time when dystopias are emphasized. Hope can be described not only as a personal attitude and emotion but also as a prevailing atmosphere and action in the community (Bloch, 1986; Freire, 1994). Hope helps seek positive solutions, even when the situation initially seems hopeless. Additionally, hope is needed to imagine a better future (Berry, 2012). Art education plays a central role in imagining more sustainable and positive futures: bold creativity and fearless imagination are vital when seeking alternative solutions to unsustainable societal models and practices (Eisner, 2002).

However, hope cannot be baseless wishful thinking; it must be grounded in recognizing and acknowledging facts (Pihkala, 2017). Knowledge must also be critically examined, as the interpretation of phenomena depends to some extent on culturally bound perspectives (Haraway, 1988). Therefore, understanding complex ecosocial phenomena requires interdisciplinary examination. When scientific facts about the root causes and consequences of complex problems are combined with imaginative visions of a better world, people's hope for the future can be strengthened (Foster, 2017; 2023). Art education that combines critical knowledge with creativity and even creations of utopia can help lay the foundation for a more sustainable and just future.

Art Education in Societal Change

Since education cannot occur in isolation from society, it is crucial for art education, which addresses ecosocial crises, to not only identify unsustainable practices in its own field and society at large but also to actively challenge and reform them. The education system's focus and educational ideals on individual performance and competition are symptoms of a broader societal mindset based on instrumental thinking and the promotion of continuous growth (Pulkki, 2021; Värri, 2018). These ideas have led to the current social and ecological crises (Foster, 2017; Foster, Mäkelä & Martusewicz, 2019).

In and through art education, difficult questions can be raised. Through art, learners can critically examine the values and practices that govern the current post-industrial lifestyle; on the other hand, art can also help imagine and explore entirely new ways of living and being (Foster, Mäkelä & Martusewicz, 2019). Contemporary art education does not happen merely through the transfer of knowledge or the teaching of skills but primarily by providing learners with the opportunity to experience and create the world through embodied participation. Contemporary art education emphasizes the holistic nature of learning, highlighting the importance of embodied experience and the materiality of reality in constructing knowledge and creating meanings (Atkinson, 2022; Foster, 2017; Sutela, 2023; Ylirisku, 2021).

Art education based on a mechanistic and instrumental understanding of reality focuses on transferring knowledge and skills—such as analyzing and categorizing specific characteristics and teaching the correct techniques and styles. While these can also be important, contemporary art education increasingly aims to support the learner's active agency and experiential relationship with the surrounding world. Experiencing and creating art are not merely intellectual processes but occur primarily through sensory and emotional experiences (Griffith, 2021). Learners are not passive recipients of knowledge but actively process and shape the world through their embodiment (Sutela, 2023).

Art can also be learned outside of schools and art institutions. For example, participatory public artworks or community performances that encourage interaction between the participant and the

environment open up possibilities for new insights and the formation of connections. Such art should not be interpreted merely as an objective end product but as an ongoing relational process in which different actors play active roles in forming the meanings of the art. Interactive art experiences can help understand complex phenomena—such as the relationship between humans and nature—in ways that purely cognitive processes might fail to do (Giannachi & Stewart, 2005).

Contemporary art education, based on an embodied and relational understanding of reality, also strengthens the skills of empathy and a sense of community (Foster, Salonen, & Sutela, 2022; see also Foster & Sutela, 2024). When learners engage in art together, they share their experiences and emotions, which can deepen their understanding of each other and their own environment (Foster & Turkki, 2023; Sutela, 2023). Through art, one can also learn about entirely different communities, cultures, and ways of living. Art projects can focus on various themes, such as multiculturalism, equality, equity, and social justice (Quinn, Ploof, & Hochtritt, 2012). When people are exposed to different perspectives and experiences through art, they can better question stereotypes, oppressive structures, and practices that lead to violent conflicts and environmental destruction. Art education that emphasizes the appreciation of diversity and the understanding of otherness is therefore an essential tool in building a more peaceful and sustainable future.

Arts-Based Media Education Awakens to the Diversity of the World

Today's societal crises, such as climate change and growing inequality, are in many ways also problems related to information dissemination. The media partly shapes our worldview and influences our perceptions of reality. Environmental destruction and social inequality often receive less attention in public discourse than, for example, economic issues, which can reinforce the perception that ecosocial problems are secondary. These choices create a reality where progress, individualism, and competition are prioritized over the advancement of justice and a sense of community. Ecosocial crises are interpreted

and addressed through cultural narratives (Nogales-Muriel, 2024; see also Foster et al., 2023). Media education aims to help learners recognize how these narratives are constructed and what values and beliefs they uphold. Media education can open learners' eyes to how, for instance, environmental issues are portrayed and how images and stories in media can either strengthen or challenge unsustainable ways of thinking.

Critical media education, focusing on community-based interpretation of the world through art, can help learners develop ecosocial awareness. It clarifies how individual actions and attitudes are connected to broader societal and environmental structures. Learners become aware that knowledge is not neutral or objective but constructed through power structures and ideologies.

Marjo Pernu's article, *Monitulkintaisuuden mahdollisuudet taideperustaisessa medialukutaitojen tukemisessa*, (Opportunities of Ambiguity in Supporting Arts-Based Media Literacy), addresses the significance of teaching visual media literacy in the training of art teachers. Pernu highlights how arts-based methods in media education can support the development of learners' flexible intelligence and ability to accept ambiguity—skills needed to navigate increasingly diverse media environments and engage in critical reflection. Pernu's research emphasizes how future teachers must be prepared to meet the challenges and opportunities brought by diverse media environments.

Learning to embrace ambiguity is essential to critical thinking; arts-based media education can strengthen this skill. Art exposes learners to uncertainty and incompleteness, as creating and experiencing contemporary art often involves processes where outcomes are not predetermined or explicit (Foster, 2017). When learners understand that things can have multiple meanings and interpretations, they also learn to tolerate uncertainty and see the multifaceted dimensions of problems. The ability to handle uncertainty is a critical skill in today's complex and constantly changing world, and art education can provide a safe space to practice this skill. This ability is particularly important in the case of ecosocial crises, as solutions to complex global problems are never simple.

Public Art Challenges and Engages

Public art could have a more significant role in societal change today, as it can reach a broad audience that may not seek out traditional art venues such as museums or galleries. Accessibility is what makes public art an effective tool for social influence. Public art can be viewed as art education that offers people the opportunity to pause, reflect, and experience art even in unexpected places, such as city streets, parks, or public buildings.

Public art can also be seen as a community platform that brings together different people and perspectives (Cartiere & Willis, 2008). Unlike in galleries and museums, where art is experienced within specific institutional frameworks, public art is embedded in the middle of everyday life. Public space allows art to engage with viewers from different backgrounds, beliefs, and experiences. Art can also provoke people to question their values and behaviors. In public spaces, art can act as a catalyst for interaction and discussion. It offers a space where societal issues, such as climate change and social inequality, emerge and become shared experiences (Demos, Scott & Banerjee, 2021).

While public art has tremendous potential as a societal influencer, it often becomes reduced to mere decoration of the environment. Public art may appear simply as an aesthetic addition to the urban landscape—murals or monuments that beautify the space but may not provoke deeper societal discussion. This view of public art ignores its potential to influence people's thinking and actions, even altering worldviews. While visual beauty can enrich public spaces, art can also have a critical and transformative role. In the age of ecosocial crises, art can depict problems, generate critical dialogue, and mobilize people to act for societal change (Foster, Mäkelä & Martusewicz, 2019).

Oona Myllyntaus and Heikki Heinonen's article, *Utopianizing Hope through Public Art*, discusses the potential of public art to create hope in both its viewers and participants. The researchers' case study introduces the concept of utopian potential, which is explored through three participatory contemporary art pieces from Turku. Utopian potential does not refer merely to utopia as an end goal, i.e., an ideal future society, but also to the processes and opportunities of human

action leading towards it. The examination of participatory public artworks shows that hope for the future often emerges through actions experienced in multi-site works, where different parts of the artwork are explored by moving between them. The article also invites reflection on what kind of public art is explicitly needed in an ecosocially crisis-ridden world. Should public artworks contribute to building a more sustainable community, where art serves as a tool for ecosocial interaction, activism, and cultural change?

The core idea of utopian potential is that public artworks can inspire hope through actions related to communal creation and experience. The article describes how multi-site artworks, interpreted by participants as they move between different parts, can generate hope and new perspectives. Public art is not merely a means to express hope but can function as a process through which communities learn to act together and see new possibilities.

In art education, public art can serve as a platform for communal learning and participation. When learners participate in creating public art, they gain a concrete opportunity to influence their environment and feel that their actions have significance. This participation strengthens their sense of agency and ability to generate change. Public art can thus be a significant tool in fostering communal hope and agency (see also Hunter et al., 2022).

Art Museum Collaboration Promotes Active Agency

Art museums play a significant role in art education as they offer the opportunity to examine the connections between the past and the present. Museum collaboration can provide learners with tools to understand how the development of art and culture reflects societal changes and values (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). In the age of ecosocial crises, it is even more critical to understand that current problems are not isolated phenomena but are linked to broader historical and cultural processes (Martusewicz, Edmundson & Lupinacci, 2015). Museums offer a space where various themes can be addressed critically and from multiple perspectives (Sandell, 2006). Museum

collaboration supports learners' expansion of temporal perspectives, which can help them consider how we might act more ethically and sustainably in the future.

Experiencing art in museums is thus not only an aesthetic event but also a pedagogical tool that helps understand the state of the world and its changes. In art education, especially in collaboration with museums and art institutions, the involvement of students is emphasized when they actively engage in observing and experiencing art. In this way, learners not only receive information but also create an understanding of art and its connections to history and contemporary society.

Seija Kairavuori and Hanna Niinistö's article, *5.-6.-luokkalaisten käsitykset Mun Ateneum -ohjelmasta osallisuuden ilmentyminä* (5th-6th Graders' Perceptions of the My Ateneum Program as Manifestations of Participation), examines the collaboration between schools and art museums from the perspective of student participation. Based on a survey, the study found that students highlighted the experience of art and creation as central aspects of the museum collaboration. Approximately 68% of students described the project primarily as an art experience, but the interaction between the museum and the class also emerged as a significant factor. However, the project did not elicit any particular thoughts for about one in five students.

Kairavuori and Niinistö emphasize the importance of considering students' active roles in school and museum collaboration projects. At its best, museum collaboration can promote social inclusion and create meaningful learning experiences that support the agency of children and youth. This perspective is particularly important during ecosocial crises when people's sense of belonging to their local environment and the planet as a whole should be strengthened to ensure a sustainable future (Salonen et al., 2024).

Transformative Tools Awaken Hope

Ecosocial crises challenge traditional teaching practices and place pressure on teachers to find new ways to support their students' holistic learning and well-being. Complex social and ecological

problems require flexibility, creativity, and the ability to deal with uncertainty from everyone—perhaps especially from teachers (Laininen, 2018; Sterling, 2010). On the other hand, as the world becomes more complex, teachers also need ways to strengthen their resilience and professional growth. In this challenging situation, methods derived from art education can provide tools to support students' but also teachers' well-being (Oreck, 2006).

Arts-based methods—whether from visual arts, music, dance, or theater and drama—not only offer creative ways to teach specific content but can also help tackle more extensive, complex, and difficult-to-grasp questions (Eisner, 2002). Art provides a space for expressing emotions and experiences, which is central to supporting emotional well-being and fostering a sense of community (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014). Teachers can also benefit from arts-based methods, as they provide an opportunity to reflect on their work and emotions while enriching teaching methods and practices (Leavy, 2018). Incorporating art into teaching can also transform the interaction between teacher and student.

In Heidi-Tuulia Eklund's article, *"I Thought Drama Was Not for Me": Teachers' Experiences and Acquired Skills in Using Drama Activities in Teaching*, the use of drama as a pedagogical tool is examined from the teachers' professional development perspective. Eklund's research shows that integrating drama into teaching can enhance teachers' creativity, classroom management skills, and moral awareness. This benefits not only the students but also the teachers' own professional development as they learn to embrace uncertainty and enrich learning communities through the communal nature of drama. Eklund's research emphasizes how arts-based methods can be transformative tools, not only for developing teachers' pedagogical skills but also for their own personal and professional growth.

Arts-based methods can allow teachers to critically examine and develop their practices. Professional development does not require perfection but openness to experimenting and learning new things. Art allows teachers to confront the unknown and address difficult questions with their students, helping to create hope and discover new, more sustainable ways of living. Teachers must receive training and support in adopting art pedagogical tools. Art can be a means of creating new visions for a future filled with hope and community.

The Hopeful Future of Art Education

Amid ecosocial crises, it is easy to fall into dystopian visions where the future appears bleak and filled with threats. The task of education – and especially art education – is to provide a counterbalance to this hopelessness. Painting dystopian scenarios can lead to feelings of despair among learners, potentially resulting in passivity and even cynicism. Instead of dystopias, we need utopias. Utopias are not just idealistic dreams; they are necessary means for actively imagining alternative futures and believing in the possibility of change. Therefore, education that encourages students to imagine ideal futures and to acknowledge that their thoughts and actions matter is needed. Art education can support this utopian imagination by providing an open and fearless space for creativity and collective thinking.

In art education, which is based on an embodied and relational concept of learning, rational knowledge, skills, emotions, and spaces are intertwined. Learners can experience that art is not an abstract phenomenon separate from the world but an essential and integral part of their everyday lives and ways of being. Although art education points towards the future and even utopian imaginings, it must connect learning to the learner's everyday experiences, existing phenomena, and concrete environments to have an impact.

Art education offers significant opportunities to strengthen critical thinking, imagination, and a sense of community in the era of ecosocial crises. It can challenge prevailing unsustainable practices and provide tools for building a new, more sustainable future. Art benefits not only students but also teachers themselves, offering them tools to support their professional growth. Through art, teachers can examine their values and attitudes, find new pedagogical perspectives, and develop their ability to cope with uncertainty and incompleteness. Arts-based methods offer ways to reflect more deeply on the teacher's role and purpose as a societal actor.

This thematic issue provides a few examples of how, for instance, art museums, public art, and arts-based media education offer means to strengthen students' critical understanding of current problems and, at the same time, inspire them to see new, hopeful solutions to societal challenges. Arts-based methods also enhance teachers' well-being, professional growth, and ability to navigate complex and demanding teaching situations toward a more sustainable future.

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