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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Art as Critical, Revitalizing, and Imaginative Practice toward Sustainable Communities

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This book introduces the importance of contemporary art forms to realizing the primary objectives of EcoJustice Education, a set of theories and pedagogical practices that begin from the fundamental acknowledgment that humans are utterly dependent upon a complex and diverse ecological system (Bowers, 2001; Martusewicz, Edmundson, & Lupinacci, 2015). Everything that we do, make, use, or rely upon ultimately comes from the natural world of which we are a part. From this vital recognition, we also understand that damages to the ecological system are damages to ourselves. Environmental and social impoverishment can be traced to the same deeply embedded cultural ways of thinking and being that our industrialized systems use and are created from. The very symbolic systems that we come to take for granted as given or inevitable produce the structures—material and ideological—that must be exposed to begin the process of needed change to current policies and relationships causing harm. Art can be a crucial practice in this work.

The question of the relationship between artist and society only became relevant when the artist's position changed from a craftsman serving governing institutions to the expressive creator of original works, and then, later, to a critical voice against the abuses of our social and ecological world (Jiménez-Justiniano, Feliciano Feal, & Alberdeston, 2013). In this book, we focus on the work of international artists, educators, and scholars across many genres—literary, poetic, graphics, dance, theater, sculpture, mixed media—to examine these necessary interconnections among social justice and ecological well-being. We bring art to EcoJustice as a means of emphasizing the role of these diverse practices in moving us toward our ethical responsibilities for creating holistically healthy communities; this includes not only exposing the problems looming before us but also imagining what else could be.

Our work in EcoJustice Education traces a growing gap in economic and social well-being among social groups within the Western industrial societies, the US and Europe, primarily, as well as between the global north and global south. These are due to a dominant set of modern discourses that hierarchize relationships, define some humans as superior to others, and define all humans above the more-than-human world. Such definitions of value rationalize political and economic decisions, leading to cascading social and ecological crises.

An extractive, dispossessive industrial economy uses and promotes assumptions that glorify possessive individualism, a mechanistic view of the natural world, and an overriding belief in the natural progress and superiority of Eurocentric technological development. These ideas have been promoted over several centuries via imperialist power/knowledge relations that create and reproduce powerful institutions as well as subjective definitions and identities supporting an economic system that produces social and ecological impoverishment. This industrial system depends on the extraction of fossil fuel-based energy that pollutes the air, water, and soil, and defines itself as superior to societies based on land-based traditions and relationships. Thus, those societies so defined are being pulled into a global economic system, and their ecosystems and people are exploited for cheap material and labor resources for ever-more wasteful consumerist societies. We are now facing severe changes in our climate based on the release of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and perhaps more seriously, but far less acknowledged, we are suffering from the loss of the soil and potable sources needed to provide food and water.

An EcoJustice framework, organized via three strands or tasks, works to define education as an ethical process that identifies and challenges these destructive methods presented as inevitable by dominant cultural manners. The framework also helps students to recognize the value in diverse ways of knowing and being, practices, relations, and rituals that are more in balance with our interdependencies, both human and more-than-human. To accomplish this, one must also imagine one's responsibility to the places where we dwell as they are and as they should be.

These are the broad objectives that we believe can be inspired by contemporary art practices. This book takes a look at a number of internationally inspired art projects that we see as having specific educational value. Because these aims are intertwined and complicated to address separate from one another, most of the chapters touch on all three of these aspects in one way or another, often with an emphasis placed on one strand more than the others. In the following, we introduce in more detail the theoretical foundations of this framework, along with a general discussion of how art moves us toward the ethical, epistemological, and ontological shifts needed to change course from the current destructive trajectory of Western industrial culture.

Strand 1: A Cultural-Ecological Analysis

A dualistic structure of thought runs through Western industrial society, defining our relationships with each other and the natural world, determining where we locate value and what we learn to identify as inherently inferior or superior. Social and ecological violence is born in and maintained by this fundamentally violent hierarchical structure: culture–nature, mind–body, reason–emotion, man–woman, and civilized–savage. These typical Cartesian divisions rationalize mastery and possession of those bodies defined as less worthy by those who self-identify as primary and superior due to their capacity for Reason. Human supremacy, Male supremacy, and White supremacy become analogues for one another in a complex system of meaning, knowledge, identity, and sociopolitical structures. As Val Plumwood (2002) argues,

A hegemonic centrism is a primary–secondary pattern of attribution that sets up one term (the One) as primary or as centre and defines marginal Others as secondary or derivative in relation to it, for example, as deficient in relations to the centre.... this kind of structure is common to the different forms of centrism which underlie racism, sexism and colonialism which therefore support and confirm one another.... Dominant Western culture is androcentric, Eurocentric, and ethnocentric as well as anthropocentric. In historical terms, it is reason-centered.

(p. 101)

Modernism is based on the theory of rational humanism, which regards Reason as the only access to truth. Artists' explorations initiate multiple sensibilities, not just rational but also sensory, emotional, ethical, and aesthetic; therefore, art can serve as a persuasive way to challenge the overpowering effects of rationalism and its associated value hierarchies (Reckitt & Phelan, 2014; Warr & Jones, 2000). Similarly, the meaning of art is first perceived in its immediate appearance; the conceptualization of the work only comes retrospectively. We can, for example, appreciate music without the need to analyze it. It touches us in emotional and perhaps even spiritual ways; we may be inspired to move our bodies in response, and such inspiration is an interpretive process. It is meaningful, even while it may not be instrumental. Such an experience is necessarily relational; it is not possible to dissect it into the qualities of a specific object; it happens between the world, the art, and its receivers. Similarly, the feeling that I experience in my forest walk is not caused solely by my own psyche or the qualities of the forest but in our meeting. Something that is no-thing gets created there, and it is here in this generative process that hopes for new or at least different ways of being in the world lies.

However, it must be noted that not all artistic practice can challenge the intellectual approach. Modernism, for example, privileges vision over other senses

because vision has been tied to rationality, and other senses are often treated as more “primitive” (Vasseleu, 1998). Instead of presenting coherent knowledge, contemporary art can provoke understanding and imagination which is open-ended (Leavy, 2015). Multisensory approaches invite the unknown; rational and universal truths are replaced with multiple embodied possibilities (Warr & Jones, 2000).

Art forms that challenge dominant discursive practices and subject positions interrupt our sense of inevitability and normalcy, shaking the foundations of our individual and collective relationships to our epistemological and ontological assumptions, their place in the development of our institutions, and the assumed telos of our existence on Earth (Reckitt & Phelan, 2014; Warr & Jones, 2000). For example, in Chapter 2, “For the Most Important Parts of You: A Story about Science,” Hala Alhomoud offers a sharp critique of the hegemony of rationalism in science and medicine in the creation of the object-body. She uses her art practice to explore the conflicts between material reality and scientific information, and to expose the false division of mind and body as the basis for our dominant worldview and social organization.

In Chapter 3, entitled “Recognizing Mutuality: The More-Than-Human World and Me,” Raisa Foster also focuses on the dominance of rationalist perspectives, in particular as they are linked to specific definitions of masculinity and the body, as well as her formulation of pedagogical recognition. Her dance theater piece *Katiska* features six young men in a series of movements that displace masculinity as rational, challenging the viewer to come to terms with culturally embedded gender stereotypes and educational practices.

In Chapter 4, “The Experience of the Uncanny as a Challenge for Teaching Ecological Awareness,” Antti Saari explores the entanglement of the experience of the uncanny and ecological concerns in education. He claims that we must rethink learning not just as a way of gaining more and more knowledge but also as remembering things we do not want to think about. He uses literary analysis to demonstrate how aesthetic experiences activated by ecological writing can be one way to do so.

Literary analysis is also the starting point of Erin Stanley’s Chapter 5: “Letters from Love’s Great Room: Fiction as Cultural Ecological Analysis and Pedagogy of Responsibility.” She has found, in the novels of Wendell Berry and Harriette Arnow, two important fictional characters who have taught her the role of love in social and ecological justice. Stanley crafted letters by blending text from the original novels with her own to highlight the complex interconnectedness in herself and the characters of the books while revealing the harms of normalized practices of hierarchy and exploitation in the modern societies.

Strand 2: Revitalizing the Commons

The second strand focuses on identifying those patterns of belief and behavior that lead to mutual care and the protection of more sustainable ways of life within both modern societies and traditional indigenous communities. In

general, “the commons” as a concept is derived from the ancient practices in land-based traditional communities where grazing areas were shared among families, and a set of regulatory policies developed to ensure that the carrying capacity of the land was not exceeded. Similar agreements were developed for the use of water sources. What is important to our purposes currently is that the commons represent both our necessary relationships with the larger living world and those beliefs, practices, traditions, and so on that help to maintain the healthy mutuality among people and with the more-than-human world that is essential for well-being (Bowers, 2001, 2006; Martusewicz, 2009, 2013; Martusewicz & Johnson, 2016; Snyder, 1990).

These relationships are non-monetized; that is, they do not require that we pay to have access to them. And the particular practices are far ranging—from food cultivation and preparation to music and games, homemaking, car repair, child- and eldercare, barter practices, and so on—and undervalued due to our consumerist systems and lifestyles. Sometimes underappreciated as “just neighborliness,” these practices of care form the bonds of love and generosity that keep families and communities healthy and happy. The practices themselves are ancient and grow out of worldviews and knowledge that are based on relationships of care. While they still exist, albeit in tenuous form, they are not identified as necessary because they take a backseat to and have been weakened by industrial processes of commodification.

The modern Western worldview is mechanistic: The world is viewed as a machine, and everything is believed to be understood through the laws of science, reducible to separate parts that can be examined, measured, and thus controlled. By dividing different art forms into specific categories, we reinforce the same mechanistic worldview. The idea of progress as continuous cultural development or “improvement” is closely connected to this mechanistic, as well as linear and rationalist thinking. The aesthetic values of an artwork are linked to modernist ideas of art as a medium-specific demonstration of the artist’s technical skills. However, ancient rituals, those human activities which nowadays we may call “art,” brought forward the connectedness of different sensibilities and the holistic expressions of stories, images, sounds, and movements. Rituals engaged participation in communities. Creative expressions were an essential part of festivities but also very much present in everyday practices.

Today, we are so accustomed to thinking of art as an elitist practice that we do not remember that it has not always been separate from other human activities, as Cynthia Freeland (2002) explains:

Ancient and modern tribal peoples would not distinguish art from artifact or ritual. Medieval European Christians did not make ‘art’ as such but tried to emulate and celebrate God’s beauty. In classical Japanese aesthetics, art might include things unexpected by modern Westerners, like a garden, sword, calligraphy scroll, or tea ceremony.

(p. xviii)

In Chapter 6, “Art Is That which Takes Something Real and Makes It More Real than It Was Before,” Tommy Akulukjuk and Derek Rasmussen discuss the Inuit concept of art, which is very holistic, even fundamental for life: “art is something that is in everything,” Akulukjuk says. The authors discuss how Inuit art is often done for both the love of traditions and the love of environment: Art is connected to the land and spirit. For the Inuit, art is profound, but it is never self-conscious and elitist; in contrast, it is fundamentally connected to everyday practices.

In Chapter 7, “Poetry and EcoJustice in a Kenyan Refugee Settlement,” Veronica Gaylie shares samples of stories and eco-poems created and collected in a Kenyan Refugee Settlement. Gaylie uses poetry as a method of advocating for action and involvement in the global climate discussion. She asks how to discuss EcoJustice in the communities of the global south. How do we acknowledge the stories of the people in these communities and natural environments with sensitivity and respect?

Chapter 8 by Bagryana Popov, entitled “The Uncle Vanya Project: Performance, Landscape, and Time,” demonstrates the use of site-specific theater productions in which the natural landscape becomes an important “actor” in the interpretation of a classic play. Her work blends artistic, ecological, and historical perspectives of a specific place, and in that way, it aims toward an experience which can awaken us to a new awareness of our local environment and our responsibility toward it.

Similarly, Kathleen Vaughan, as she describes in Chapter 9, “For the Love of the Forest: Walking, Mapping, and Making Textile Art,” wants her art to generate recognition and appreciation of our local environments. She shares her art practice, which combines three related methods: walking in urban woods, mapping, and creating embroidered textile artworks. Through her textile art of maps, she wants to turn our attention to the shrinking natural environments in urban spaces.

Strand 3: Engaging Imagination

The third strand of the EcoJustice framework argues for imagination as an essential means of engaging the forms of responsibility needed to generate healthy communities. As Wendell Berry (2012) has written, “for humans to have a responsible relationship to the world, they must imagine their places in it” (p. 15). We must, that is, imagine that it is possible to live ethically on this earth and what that could look like. Such a goal requires new forms of subjectivity, new relationships to beauty and care, and thus educative and artistic practices that can help move us away from the destructive effects of capitalism and toward democratic and sustainable communities. For Berry, imagination is not just about thinking toward the future but instead requires that we think about how and where we are living now, and for whom we are responsible and

why. Imagination is required and woven through the first two strands, insisting that we expose and trace the particular ways in which our historical and current ideological and material systems are affecting the land and the people. We must also identify the ways of being that run counter to the destructive tendencies of those patterns, practices, and relationships that might heal the damages done.

In contemporary art, the meaning of an artwork is not necessarily found in the artist's intellectual intention or superior technique but in the dynamic space of artist–artwork–audience. The artist can be seen as a facilitator who creates spaces for dialogue and imagination—with her/his collaborators and the audience as well. Contemporary art has also turned its focus from “art as object” toward a conception of “art as process.” Instead of producing stable objects, artists can create performances, installations, and events that have impermanent quality: The works only exist here and now, emphasizing the importance of the present. These kinds of artworks are not sellable objects, but they invite us to experience presence; in other words, to focus on observing, witnessing, and sharing instead of producing, criticizing, and owning.

Integrating creative processes into educational practices does not have to lead to artwork as an outcome. The meaning of artistic ways of knowing can merely be found in its attempt to help us understand complex interrelational ecologies and cultural systems. There is a chance that the abstracted and fractured pieces of scientific knowledge about the ill-being of humans and other species will not affect us enough to change our politics and behavior. We need art as well, both as makers and receivers, which touches our hearts and moves our hands for better future.

In Chapter 10, “Finding My Wound, Bandaging My Knife: Stimulating Inner Transformation through Art,” Jussi Mäkelä describes the concept of social sculpture which he has borrowed from German artist and activist Joseph Beuys. By following Beuys, Mäkelä claims that the social organism is something that we have power, freedom, and responsibility to shape; society is our work of art, which we have made, and which therefore also represents our sense of aesthetics and the things we value. In light of Beuys's theory of sculpture, Mäkelä suggests that the most crucial task for a responsible human is to find a creative balance between chaos and order. In the mechanistic world which forces almost everything into a determined form and reason, it is more important to celebrate also the creative force of chaos and emotions by practicing art.

In Chapter 11, “Building Ecological Ontologies: EcoJustice Education Becoming with(in) Art-Science Activism,” Alicia Flynn and Aviva Reed discuss the possibilities of an illustrated science adventure storybook to visualize complex ecological processes and to affect a reader into new understanding. Flynn and Reed use narrative and illustration to develop “characters” from the multiple species involved in coral building and to investigate complex scientific ideas, such as photosynthesis, evolution, and global warming. Flynn and Reed suggest that EcoJustice educators and scholars can combine knowledge from

natural and social sciences to the creative pedagogy of the arts to cultivate ontological ways of interrelational being.

In Chapter 12, entitled “Apptivism, Farming, and EcoJustice Art Education,” Anniina Suominen shares her experiences from an art education course which attempted to bring together advanced technology and artistic forms of communication. Apptivism, which combines application technology and eco-social activism, aims to create change toward sustainable living by engaging the users’ critical thinking and empathy. However, Suominen stresses that even though application technology and social media can grasp the attention of the masses, the real change of attitudes and behavior of individuals cannot be achieved without face-to-face engagement with others, humans and more-than-humans.

In Chapter 13, “Creativity as Intrinsic Ecological Consciousness,” Srisrividhiya Kalyanasundaram (Sriivi Kalyan) describes the principles of her contemporary artistic practice from the frame of traditional Indian concepts. Kalyan criticizes the Western idea of creativity as a commodity in arts and education created by consumerism. Drawing from traditional Hindu thoughts, Indian artistry, and philosophy, she argues that in the cultivation of contemplative modes of creativity, where mind and body, emotion and action, meet, we can find an intrinsic ecological consciousness.

In Chapter 14, “Love in the Commons: Eros, Eco-Ethical Education, and a Poetics of Place,” Rebecca A. Martusewicz describes two separate experiences: one with elementary school children and their families in Detroit, and the other from her childhood, in which paintings were the vehicle for engaging visions of the local commons. She introduces the concept of “eros” as a connective meeting of bodies and imagination to explore the possibility of love in the commons. She explores sensual and dynamic experiences in place as erotic and necessary invitations to education and thus eco-ethical consciousness.

Conclusion

These scholars, artists, and educators invite us to push out what we mean by EcoJustice Education; where it is engaged; and what its potential is for shifting our ways of being in the world toward more empathetic, ethical, loving practices and relationships. Healthy communities require us to consider the quality of the relationships that we make with each other and with the more-than-human world, and to recognize and work to protect the generative networks that create life itself. This requires both critical engagements with the deeply rooted cultural paradigms and systems that we are living in and unavoidably complicit with as well as the ability to identify and imagine ourselves otherwise.

As Wendell Berry (2012) instructs us, “it all turns on affection,” and art is a multidimensional way to push us beyond the competitive, individualistic, and mechanistic logics that continue to dominate and do violence in the world.

This book is our introductory offering, imbued with the hope that it will inspire others to have the courage to bring artistic pedagogies of responsibility to their classrooms and communities as creative and inspirational ways out of the messes we have made of the world.

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