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Is Peace out of fashion? - Societal challenges in art education

Keywords:

Identity, Art Education, Drawing, Art, Architecture.

Abstract:

This article discusses art education approaches to diversity and cultural changes we are facing today, based on the results of an experimental workshop called "Uma Cidade Para os Teus Olhos" (A City for your Eyes), held at Universidade do Porto in Portugal. The 59 editions of this one-day workshop challenged groups of 14 teenagers to reflect on the phenomena of the city through imagining and drawing the most desirable city ever. The analysis of the outcome allowed us to see how about 800 children between 11 and 13 year old deal with their self in confrontation with others, giving us the arguments to demonstrate how the psychological phenomenon of identity is a potential art tool to educate the new generations for current emerging societal challenges.

Introduction

This communication at the InSEA congress held in Aalto University in Finland 2018 discusses art education approaches to diversity and cultural change. We will start by reviewing the main societal concerns within art education from the mid-20th century until today. Then, we will go through the results of an experimental workshop with teenagers, titled "A City for Your Eyes", that has taken place yearly, for the last six years, at the school of architecture of the University of Porto in Portugal. The first approach will produce the arguments to make the case for today's pertinence of addressing identity issues through art practices, and the second part will demonstrate how the psychological phenomenon of identity is a potential tool to educate the new generations for current emerging societal challenges.

Societal concerns

Nationalism can be a form of identity that deviates the focus from one's self to the nation's self. The individual self is compliant, and, in the strongest forms of nationalism, it is annulled and assimilated by the group. A few generations ago, the Industrial Revolution gave rise to forms of nationalism that spread all over the civilized world. Soon Europe's nations witnessed that ill form of identity construction, fuelling hate for otherness, which made possible two massive and extremely mortal wars that devastated humankind in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the period following World War II, a devastated Europe found ways of reconstructing itself physically and psychologically. Artists and art education played an important role in this cultural and spiritual healing, pursuing the ideal of peace maintenance. In this post-war period, a first attempt in the search for an alternative education consisted of the so-called "education through art" that emerged in 1943 based on the homonymous work of Herbert Read (2001) and through the Society for Education through Art, founded with Thomas Munro and directed by Read since 1953, having created branches in various countries and having originated InSEA. (Rhoades, 1986). In fact, these ideas have achieved great popularity for two or three decades, but its practice, resulting from several uncoordinated experiments taking place in some countries, turned out to be ineffective. According to M. Ross (1998), when Read's ideas were misunderstood they proved abortive and when they were understood they were seen as threatening to vested interests, for ideological reasons. However, his thought ended up having a tremendous influence in new modern curricula and pedagogies, mainly in children's education in the second half of the 20th century.

Admittedly anarchist, the education through art approach was created as an instrument of ideological struggle to create a peaceful alternative to the seemingly endless cycle of violence. Articulating a response to an education system that cultivated the separation of intellect from emotions, Read advocated a moral revolution, that he saw as a personal mission. He argued that to create an educated civilization, education had to be moral, and moral education is an education of emotions and therefore a matter of art.

His vision was grounded in the pleasant belief that every child is an artist and it has structured itself around a somehow fuzzy concept of expression that came from Psychology. Read linked Psychology with Art and with Education to achieve his ultimate goal: the complete reorientation of the human personality. In practice, this highly speculative, propagandistic, somehow mystical and transcendental theory (Ross, 1998) placed full emphasis on the child, her personal development and self-expression. It led all technical issues and academic matters to a mere subsidiary role and resulted in a polarization between manual instruction and moral support (Ross, 1998). This interest in moving away from technicalities was not alien to what was happening in the visual art world among the vanguards in general and in the core of abstractionism in particular.

In general, the art movements at the turn of the century had a particular interest in the form itself and deviated their focus from the narrative to the point of excluding it. This has been done in several ways, like transitioning from an interest in the representation of the exterior world to a focus on inner self expression, the exploitation of non-sense or the concreteness of the art object itself. The rise of abstractionism appeared as a search for a "universal art language". That was the main concern that led its leader, the artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), to abstract art which, like music, tries to express feelings and the human soul in an immediate way.

The turn from realist art to abstraction, during and after the wars, can also be seen as a moving away from the circumstantial terror that people had been immersed in. A turn from negative feelings, like hate and fear between humans, to the beauty of each individual's positive feelings as a universally sharable and unique expression. It is precisely this new focus on expression that links Read's ideas with abstract art and creativity. That connection would become quite popular in art teaching later, in the second half of the 20th century. The influence of the new visual art postulates in the curriculum was huge and spread everywhere after the war, forever changing western art teaching. Thierry de Duve (2005) notes that "... all great modern theorists of art, from Herbert Read to E. H. Gombrich to Rudolf Arnheim (...)

devoted considerable energy to breaking up the 'visual language' into its basic components demonstrating the universality of its perceptive and psychological 'laws'".

Although Read's concept of art was somewhat blurred, it proved able to incorporate the aspirations that teachers and artists had, back then, which can be seen as part of the more general post-war reconstruction spirit, looking to implement a modernist teaching more in tune with the new pacifying goals of the time. The idea of the existence of a "visual language" that structures a "science of art" are the assumptions that have been mixed together – with other concepts steaming, back then, from Gestalt Theory and Geometry – to form the conceptual basis of the new modern academic programs, resonating with Read's concepts of expression and creativity that gave shape to visual art courses everywhere. De Duve (2005) describes this new vision when he states that "(...) From Froebel to Montessori to Decroly; all school reformers and philosophers of education, from Rudolf Steiner to John Dewey, have based their projects and programmes on creativity (...) not tradition (...)".

Today, as the war nightmares in the west have faded away amid time and memory, peace is becoming taken for granted. It is out of fashion. Also, abstractionism and other historical vanguards have lost their social pertinence and feel empty to the new generations, given also that so much has been happening in the world, and in the world of art, since then. More recently, the digital revolution helped to give rise to globalization and, lately, radical reactions to it took the form of new neo-nationalisms. These signs should stop us taking peace for granted, after so much effort to restore it, and as it seems to result from such a fragile equilibrium of forces. As educators we should remember the efforts and the historical role of art education towards the education for sensibility and realize the pertinence of addressing identity issues through art practices today.

Case study



Figure 1 - First drafts example. Workshop "Uma Cidade Para os Teus Olhos" archive data.

Every July, since 2005, the University of Porto in Portugal welcomes around 5.000 children that join some of the two hundred workshops offered in all areas of knowledge, in each edition of the children university program “Universidade Júnior”. One of those workshops, created by Professor Pelayo, is “Uma Cidade Para os Teus Olhos - A City for Your Eyes”, which takes place at the school of architecture (FAUP). Since 2012, this experimental art workshop challenges each year twenty groups of fourteen teenagers to reflect upon the idea of the city through the use of drawing. The outcome of each workshop is a collaborative big drawing of an imagined city. The analysis of fifty-nine of those drawings allowed us to see how vital it is, for the eight hundred children that participated in the workshops, aged between eleven and thirteen years old, the construction of a social identity.

The one-day workshop begins with a guided visit to the buildings of the faculty of architecture, so that children can understand what the practice of architecture is about. During the visit, the phenomena of the city and the fields of architecture and urbanism are approached. Children interact with the various buildings and connect with the outside spaces. This interplay with a high-quality space allows them to naturally integrate the architecture lesson on the school building complex, by awarded architect Álvaro Siza, which is itself a lesson in architecture, place and beauty.

In their workshop room children get inspired by the challenge of inventing a city that makes sense to them (meaning "the best ever conceived") and, after basic graphic 3D simulation instructions, children draw their first drafts. Usually they show very high levels of concentration and try to do their best in what is a quite complex task. They are asked to think about the urban facilities they think are necessary in their city. An example of what comes up at this stage, even though the workshop is just beginning, can be seen at figure 1.

At this point, children present and explain their designs to each other (these are audio recorded) and receive encouraging feedback from the architecture students that run the workshops and from other children. They are approved as "Junior Architects" to conceive all together an “ultimate city” by selecting from their previous drawings the urban equipment that they feel is important in the new big collaborative drawing of a city. The filming and the execution of the collaborative city drawing begins, taking place in another room so that they are not disturbed by their mates. Each child takes his or her turn in drawing something from their previous drawing. The process is filmed to make the final video where the drawing seems to become alive, growing on its own. When filming in the other room, all other children can follow up what’s being added to the drawing in a television screen where one can see the filming of the collective drawing in live action. At this point, they must think about the important facilities that this city will have and select from their first drafts their contribution to the final city drawing. During all these activities the children get proud of what they have learned to produce and feel empowered active citizens that have a word to say in the world. In figure 2 we can see an example of the results of children's efforts during the workshops.



Figure 2 - The filming room. Workshop "Uma Cidade Para os Teus Olhos" archive data.

The final collective drawings become the raw data for an analysis conducted inside a research that generically questions: What do children value the most in a city? The visual analysis of the fifty-nine drawings produced at these workshops allowed us to recognize and quantify the different urban facilities that the seven hundred and eighty-six children elected to feature on these idealized cities, and to categorize them.

We assumed that each drawn item in the children's drawing is meaningful for its author. In this case, each item stands for a piece of urban equipment that each child deliberately desired to see in the city. This was not done by chance; they developed personal objective and subjective criteria to meet the workshop challenge i.e. drawing "the best city ever".

In a first level of analysis we found 3072 in three main categories: 1219 items concerned vegetal elements, 821 items concerned dwelling, 421 items concerning transports and 611 items concerned various facilities. This data shows that for the children an idealized city is about half constructions (dwelling, transport related facilities and other facilities) and half nature, in a balanced way. We do not find big conglomerates of population that sacrifice the presence of nature.



Figure 3 - Final collaborative drawing example. Workshop "Uma Cidade Para os Teus Olhos" archive data.

A more detailed analysis of the category of various facilities, that was around 20% of all items, revealed to be very interesting. This group splits into 12 different kinds of equipment that included the following categories, ordered by higher presence: 105 Exceptional buildings, 66 Trade, 42 Sports, 35 Religion, 32 Culture, 30 Education, 30 Health, 30 Industry, 15 City administration, 15 Security and 14 Tourism. A chart representing these categories per quantity is Figure 3. The number of exceptional buildings in the children's cities exceeds all other types of urban facilities. Surprisingly, the most numerous facilities (exceptional buildings) have no survival value like all others, but a communitarian symbolic value.

The exceptional buildings category holds two sorts of items: contemporary buildings (41) - constructions that stand up in the city for their architectural and symbolic value by being different, exceptional and exuberant - and heritage buildings (64), like castles, the Big Ben, the Taj Mahal or the Eiffel Tower amongst other examples. These show clearly that a symbolic value is attributed to them.

Quantity of urban equipments in children's cities

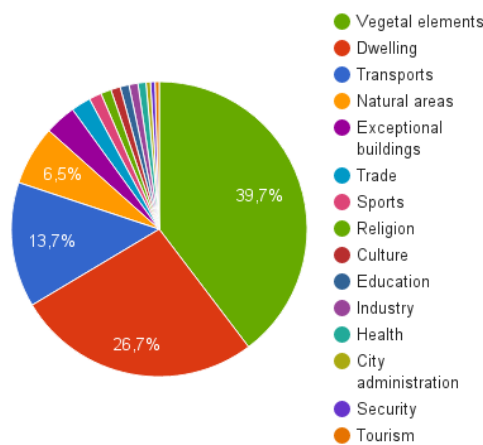


Figure 4 - Urban facilities chart. Workshop "Uma Cidade Para os Teus Olhos" research data.

The value that children ascribed to exceptional buildings means that art vehicles imbued of identity value is above all other more utilitarian aspects of life in children's vision. We concluded that, for them, art in a social context is a vehicle for expressing a collective identity held by a community that shares something – in this case a city. Children ascribed an enormous importance to art's power to unite humans in a shared common identity showing how they are sensitive to identity and art and its close connection.

Conclusion

Today, menaces like the lack of ecologic sustainability of the planet, new wars, terrorism and massive migrations are defying society and once again, one can see various signs of that same ill form of identity called nationalism re-emerging here and there. As we have seen, this is an adequate moment to remember InSEA's birth circumstances and first goals, realizing how they can resonate today, demanding us to rethink art education roles in general and identity issues in particular. Children at schools are naturally creating an enlarged identity sense that is psychologically vital for them, as we have seen, and that phenomenon cannot be neglected or ignored. As art educators we need to see the potential of art as a tool to educate present and new generations for current emerging societal menaces. Education must be open and connected to the world otherwise it loses its pertinence.

We conclude that art education today must rediscover its core aims so it helps youngsters to construct a bigger self; a self able to embrace all humanity in a way where differences not only are accepted but are also exciting and enriching. Embracing the ability of compassion, being able to empathize, makes us understand that our family or national identity is not big enough for our souls; there is a lot more of "us" beyond frontiers when we can recognize ourselves simply as humans.

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