

Creative Escapes: Moderating Environmental Art Projects during the Coronavirus Crisis

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Abstract: The paper reflects the course of distance learning of the Environmental art - one of the few seminars for future art teachers, which was realized due to its relatively safe characteristics, despite the ongoing coronavirus crisis.

Besides the formal description of an improvised platform for virtual communication with participants and moderation of their creative work in the landscape, the text also narrates the genesis of partial artistic concepts / environmental projects.

In addition, the aim of the paper is also to cover other aspects of the situation, primarily the pedagogical effects and limitations of distance learning and ignition of individual creativity in the open landscape during general quarantine measures and lockdowns.

Keywords: art education, environmental art, Covid-19 pandemic

"I must stay alone and know that I am alone to contemplate and feel nature in full; I have to surrender myself to what encircles me, I have to merge with my clouds and rocks in order to be what I am. Solitude is indispensable for my dialogue with nature."

Caspar David Friedrich

Introduction

The emergency situation, which suddenly affected all school institutions in the first quarter of 2020, had a significant impact, among other things, on the tertiary education sector. Students of the Master's degree program in Art Education at the Faculty of Education in České Budějovice also had to resort to an improvised study regime, while the sounds of sirens announcing the arrival of an unknown threat. From the first week of widespread quarantine, it was clear that intensive studio teaching had ended

indefinitely. The school premises were empty for two months, until the beginning of May that preventive measures gradually began to be more relaxed.

The intervention of emergency regulations in the master's degree program was significant in all aspects. The departments were first faced with the question of which of the subjects (or courses) can be implemented in full through virtual platforms and which must be organizationally or content-wise adjusted to meet the security limits of a constantly changing situation.

It was almost immediately clear, that the improvised distance teaching regime strongly influenced especially the study programs based on intensive and continuous transfer of practical skills. The situation thus fell uncompromisingly on the art practice. Although a number of subjects (especially those dependent on direct studio teaching) were replaced by homework and virtual consultations, the absence of contact teaching and methodological guidance was immediately reflected in the generally below-average quality of outputs from various subjects. The absence of the social dimension of common teaching also had a negative effect on the overall climate of the semester.

Even more hope went to the end of the semester when the seminar named as Environmental Art traditionally takes place. It is this subject, annually conceived by students and teachers as a creative point of the semester, that was finally evaluated as risk-free due to its character of individual creative research in the landscape. After all, what can be safer, in a time of restricting social interaction, than a lonely movement in the open countryside?

Into the Environmental Art

The Environmental Art seminar is one of the compulsory subjects of the last year of studies. It is a five-day field workshop, realized in the beginning of summer, focused on artistic and conceptually tuned activities in the landscape. Its goal is primarily to develop a complex sensibility in relation to a given place. An integral part of the course are also the lectures, which gradually introduce intermediate artistic approaches in the landscape with an overlap to their ecological, cultural and anthropological reflection, as well as the possibilities of their use in the educational process in primary school and beyond.

The content of the seminar follows the idea of many environmental artists that, in addition to a purely study approach, it is also necessary to ignite the quality of holistic perception and a more immediate experience of the landscape, so it can approach the subject of the perceiver and becomes his mirror, an immediately lived part. At this kind of approaches, the creator is more focused on his own presence "within" the real landscape, he works with its atmosphere, is tied to changes in time, he establishes emotional and more personal levels of communication with it. He is aware of the various layers of the

landscape (natural, human, spiritual and economic structures), with which, according to his intention, he works semantically. The scale of human interaction with the landscape can theoretically be anchored through Environmental psychology. In their paper *Environmental Psychology: Mapping Landscapes Meanings*, authors Williams and Patterson (1999, pp. 141-160) deal with forms of the relationship between man and the environment. They gradually define inherent and generally aesthetic meanings, focused primarily on the material component of the landscape and its use, through purposeful-instrumental and cultural-symbolic meanings, to purely individual and expressive meanings, focused on the intangible, spiritual component of the environment (and establishing more inner ties with it).

The landscape thus gradually reveals itself as a multi-layered space of events, with which it is possible to harmonize and include it in one's own life context. The distinctive expressiveness and the spiritual dimension of communication can enter this "creative game" through the pure emotional interest in landscape. Czech teatrologist Josef Valenta talks about the "event in us" that occurs when we enter a certain place where the landscape becomes a "scene of expression of the feeling" - the scene the landscape has evoked, in resonance or dissonance with our own personality. However, this event can also occur in our imagination or fantasy, which we develop towards the given place (Valenta, 2008, p. 59) – the landscape can thus also become a space of various emotionally colored fictional events. The general mediation of the above-mentioned experiences and qualities within the weekly course is of course a somewhat utopian idea. However, the pedagogical framework of the seminar works with these ideals and tries to initiate them casually during the approaches "in the field".

After several introductory walks (their number always depends on the certain location), the students' creative work follows. The whole genesis of both individual and group concepts is than continuously consulted and moderated, mostly during the evening presentations and discussions.

Into the Wild, Virtually

Of course, it was impossible to arrange interactive introductory walks through the countryside in the current situation. However, the purely virtual platform seemed equally non-functional. After considering all the risks, a compromise solution was reached: under the given hygienic measures, two meetings were organized in the school space. The first of them was an introductory seminar with a lecture and formulation of a creative task. The second one was final evaluation colloquium. This organization was situationally possible mainly due to the small amount of currently enrolled students (seven participants).

Further communication was then transferred to the Microsoft Teams digital platform (see Fig. 1), where a virtual classroom was created for this purpose. The continuous sending of sketches and

photographic documentation then took place in parallel through MS Teams class and standard e-mail communication.

Attendance at the introductory seminar had also a social dimension, as it was the first contact with the colleagues and the school environment after two months of emergency state. The meeting began with a one-hour lecture, which was a kind of substitute for the above-mentioned field trip. The aim was to introduce students to the main topics in environmental art and to present the possibilities of working with particular layers of the landscape on specific examples of already realized environmental artifacts.

The formulation of the task was and at its core identical to the standard course of the seminar: to intuitively choose a certain place (at this time close to one's own residence), spend a longer period of time in it and then respond artistically to a given (familiar) space-time. The systematic inner positioning to the character of the given place and emphasis on deeper communication with it was defined as a key starting point for one's own work.

In addition to the creative task formulation, the introductory briefing also focused on the overall organization of the workflow. Unlike the standard course run, where the creative concepts were consulted on a daily basis, the frequency of virtual communication was set individually - according to the creative pace of each of the participants. After the agreement, the length of the course itself was relaxed, instead of the usual five for the final nine days.

Hidden in the Nature

The creative paths of the authors naturally differed conceptually, in content and form. In addition to generous installations, where the preparation and realisation took practically the entire nine days, some interesting chamber objects and performance piece were also created as part of spontaneous walks around the home. Different approaches reflected both: the natural individualities and the significantly different landscape characters of the given locations. Naturally, they also demonstrated the authors ability to restore their creative concentration and self-organize at the end of a long period of residence at home.

Conceptually, artifacts working with the emphasis or visualization of elementary natural elements came closest to the realizations that arose in the previous years. In that spirit, contrasting compositions with the artificial material (see Fig. 2) and transient installations from nature products (see Fig. 3) were formed.

Work with the fourth (temporal) dimension in the landscape was then evolved through a portable object, the principle of which was the process of waiting for the sun's rays, which were trapped in the internal wooden structure (see Fig. 4).

Elements of action art were carried by the trapping web (see Fig. 5). The main idea of this performance was to evoke one's own traumatic experience in particular place.

The last two installations, made of natural materials, then worked symbolically with the ecological connotations. The first of them highlighted the water molecules in the bed of the disappeared stream (see Fig. 6), the second manifested the unique structure of the subcortical corridors of the European spruce bark beetle in the infested forest (see Fig. 7).

Conclusion

It was clear from the beginning, that conceptual and organizational changes will be reflected in the course results. According to the assumptions, the overall concept of the work was fundamentally influenced by the environment to which the authors were naturally connected (landscapes of home) and were well oriented in it. For many land-artists, responding to places with which one is naturally connected would be the greatest challenge. Andy Goldsworthy, for example, stated in *Rivers and Tides* (2001), that he creates his best works in the countryside of his home. However, he adds that it takes enough time and effort to fully understand the changes that are taking place in that landscape.

Based on the premises of environmental psychology, it is precisely the intense attachment to a certain place, which, according to Williams and Patterson (1999, pp. 148-149), can be considered as an approach of the emotional dimension (meaning) of the place and as a certain indication of its symbolic and spiritual meanings (and their intensity). This mental setting can be well distinguished from more shallow emotional reactions and quick aesthetic judgments, which reflect only the temporary perspective of the perceiver, responding to the external appearance of the landscape. In the deeper subjective attachment to the place, on the other hand, there is a bond of a more persistent nature – a bond, that can be developed especially during a longer stay at the place.

Difficulty arises here in the absence of new (surprising) perceptions, and thus the need to set oneself free from a certain stereotype of perception of a given place. In practice, the situation of the course participants required an even more *intensive involvement of the senses and the overall mental attitude* towards a familiar environment.

Another obvious aspect was the high degree of *individualization* of creative paths, resulting from the absence of group interaction and mutual comparison of projects, as well as the free course of online consultations. The creative statements thus acquired a more subjective intentions and artistic diversity. According to Valenta (2008, p. 35, pp. 67-68), it is the intention with which we enter the landscape that largely determines whether we will be more spectators or actors in the landscape scene, or if we will play both roles at the same time: “We watch / we listen / smell / touch (and

sometimes we taste) - this is the necessary basis of spectatorship and acting; and at the same time we also recognize the factual nature of phenomena. We perceive by the 'inner senses', kinesthetically or somesthetically. We empathize. We feel / experience. We self-reflect and reflect. We imagine (visually, acoustically, kinesthetically, etc.) / we have fantasies. And so we fill the spectatorship and open the source of our acting. In connection with the internal tactile perception, we react internally motorically. We externalize inner states, feelings and ideas with body and sound expressions and movements. We make decisions, we act pragmatically, instrumentally (we avoid the water puddle). We act under the influence of the landscape or towards it explicitly scenically, openly, addressed, and even theatrically. And so, we fulfil our involvement in one form or another."

We derive also other qualities indirectly from the knowledge of intrapsychic processes. One of them could be some form of *compensation* for the ubiquitous confinement to the "two-dimensional" digital universe during the coronavirus crisis, characterized by an almost permanent presence on virtual platforms. The kind of "screen consciousness" was immanently present and especially remarkable in students' everyday life. In straight contrast, it is the contact with the landscape - the three-dimensional world - that the philosopher David Abram describes as a return to the bodily experience of being in a dense perceptual field as opposed to the world of screens - a world we are just looking at (1996, pp. 53-55; 2016, p. 130).

We could call another quality as *openness to uncertainty*. Apart from the fact, that working with an open end is in itself one of the mental conditions of creative personality (Štěpánková, 2013) and is developed not only within free creation in the landscape, it is obvious to believe that the uncertain situation around the emergency period worked as its natural amplifier. Creative work in a diverse, incomprehensible, open, yet safe space of the landscape could then be the start of inner calming and psycho-integrative and therapeutic incidence. Existential attunement to the character of the place and exposing oneself to the openness of the situation is, among other things, the theme of the famous philosopher Henry David Thoreau, who reveals the connection between natural events and our inner mental processes in an essay with a brief title *Walking* (2001, pp. 233-234): „What is it that makes it so hard sometimes to determine whither we will walk? I believe that there is a subtle magnetism in Nature, which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright. It is not indifferent to us which way we walk. There is a right way; but we are very liable from heedlessness and stupidity to the wrong one. We would fain take that walk, never yet taken by us through this actual world, which is perfectly symbolical of the path which we love to travel in the interior and ideal world; and sometimes, no doubt, we find it difficult to choose our direction, because it does not yet exist distinctly in our idea.“ With the already quoted Valenta, we can conclude that "the landscape does not act, but it can cause the action of a person who enters and perceives it" (2008, p. 26).

Behind the partially moderated "escapes" into the landscape, in addition to initiating enhanced sensitivity, stronger creative individualization and compensation for living in a two-dimensional "world of screens", we also observe the formation of courage to enter open situations through creation in indefinite but safe space-time. As result of improvised conditions, an overall freer and more universal teaching form was created, shifting the standard, methodologically more coordinated content of the course to more authentic work in the landscape. In these dimensions, the "emergency" realisation of the subject took place as a conceptually different, but at the same time functional model of education.

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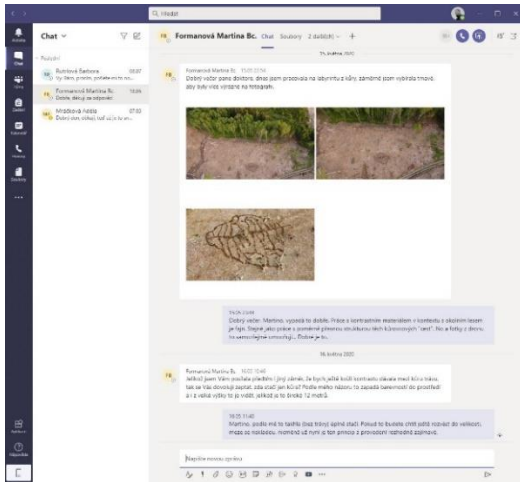


Fig. 1. Consultation of an environmental project in virtual class using Microsoft Teams platform



Fig. 2. Dressing the wind (author: Iva Veškrnová)



Fig. 3. Reflections (author: Magdalena Tonková)



Fig. 4. Sunlight catcher (author: Winona Marie Svatkovská)



Fig. 5. Landscape - a place for a trap (author: Lucie Farkašová)

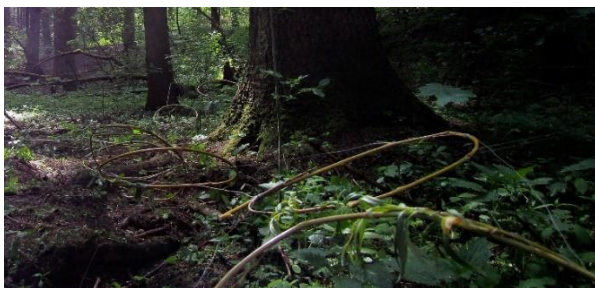


Fig. 6. Disappearance (author: Kristýna Kováčsová)



Fig. 7. Spruce bark beetle (author: Martina Formanová)