Art in Science Museums

Towards a Post-Disciplinary Approach

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4.5.6 Artistic activism and narratives on environment

There is no unique and comprehensive definition of Environmental Art, yet this research is often conducted by artists who are personally concerned with the conditions of the environment and who seek not only to explore the relationship between mankind and the natural environment, but also to actively contribute to change human attitudes towards nature.

After the first alarm bells for the evident loss of biodiversity went off in the 1980s, environmental conservation programs in the 1990s advocated for a deeper integration between the ecological and social dimensions, as well as for a more direct involvement of scientists in the fields of environmental decision making and education. An activist strand of artistic research then formed a generation of artists that have joined this process, engaging not only in their own practice but also in education.

The growing number of academic interdisciplinary courses feeds on this dedication and on emerging collaborations between scholars from the fields of visual art, literature, philosophy, sociology, botany, conservation and so forth. It is also through the training of future scientists that artists can become active members of social change.

Case study:
Parque Etnobotánico Omora,
Puerto Williams (Chile)

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The Biocultural Conservation Program based at the Parque Etnobotánico Omora aims to study and implement activities to generate conservation consciousness. It is led by an international and interdisciplinary cooperative group that integrates biological investigation, philosophical concepts and arts.

Ecotourism with a Hand-Lens

An outdoor ecology and ethics university course that translates into a public outdoor activity created by a team of artists, writers, scientists and philosophers to promote sustainable development, including wellbeing of both humans and the community of living beings. Drawing and metaphor composition are used both as tools for observing and understanding the world, thus reinforcing scientific knowledge and ethical valuation; tools for science communication and cultural transformation.

Figure 4.5.6 Ecotourism with a Hand-Lens: an innovative activity developed by the interdisciplinary team of artists, philosophers, and scientists at Omora Park. It invites visitors to observe the microcosm and appreciate the ecological, aesthetic, economic, and ethical values of biological and cultural diversity, and their interrelationships

Source: Photo by Adam Wilson, Archive Omora Ethnobotanical Park

Description

Located in the Cape Horn Biosphere Reserve in Chile, the Omora Ethnobotanical Park is an outdoor museum and a biocultural laboratory dedicated to research, education and conservation at the southern end of the Americas. Every year since 2000, about 30 university students are offered the *Ecotourism with a Hand-Lens (EHL)* course. Teachings involve philosophers that discuss environmental ethics and scientists who develop research on mosses, birds, insects and the methodology of minimum alteration of the environment and of its inhabitants. In order to communicate the values discovered during their field experience, students belonging to departments of arts, philosophy, journalism, political and biological sciences work with a writer to develop metaphors and then with a visual artist to transform them into images and prepare interpretive signs that are later installed in the park itself. This experience is shared with local school children, teachers and ecotourism guides who jointly guide ~~three-hour-long~~ tours based on the work done by students and conducted by artists, philosophers, scientists, members of the Yahgan indigenous community and by the students themselves. These courses are offered year-round and help appreciate the aesthetic, economic, ecological, and ethical values of the Miniature Forests of Cape Horn.

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EHL courses and activities both rely heavily on the use of drawing as an observation and discovery tool. Metaphorically, the course's lenses do not only amplify the vision of mosses and other small organisms, but also offer conceptual lenses to broaden the understanding of nature and ethical co-inhabitation within it.

Outcomes

Bringing writers and visual artists to teach EHL courses alongside philosophers and scientists allows students to participate in truly transformative experiences. As they explore the power of drawing, narratives and metaphors, they enrich their biocultural understanding while also contributing to conserving biocultural diversity itself. Science and philosophy teach them that mosses, humans and all living beings share the common vital pulse of cellular respiration, growth and reproduction. Drawing and composition of metaphors help them to perceive the breathing of mosses, the calls of birds, the waves of oceans and many contrasting human languages.

Complemented with philosophical readings and scientific enquiry, the EHL courses and resulting guided activities help participants experience and understand first-hand different perspectives through which to perceive and value the world.

The way the course is structured and feeds into the public activity of the park results in a win-win situation as students feel integrated and responsible for the environment they have analysed and worked in, while the park finds new creative and often unexpected ways of communicating to local ecotourism guides and the public its values of biocultural diversity.

Drawing is a medium available to everyone, and in the intimate time taken to observe and prepare a drawing, the artistic practice becomes a tool of personal observation to recognise otherness. Emotions stirred by such artistic practices can enhance future science researches' skills to understand the surrounding world and respect other living beings as co-inhabitants rather than as mere natural resources.