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LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

**Environmental Art making: Strengthening learning through creative
land interactions**

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Abstract

Environmental Art has developed globally since the late 1960s. In contrast to a movement this artistic direction was never predefined by a series of standardised principles. As a result the field has become very broad and inclusive. Arguably the key distinction that separates these works from earlier land based artwork is their focus on direct interaction with land as opposed to merely the representation of it. Another significant difference in this field is the de-emphasization of the aesthetic object by some artists; in turn the process of creation and its conceptual basis have been given greater importance. This reconsideration has allowed greater scope for temporary and ephemeral works.

Where impermanent [temporary] works have a definitive installation and de-installation timeline Ephemeral Environmental Artworks have a brevity of life that when coupled with a lack of any formal de-installation process means that the works departure is more like the gentle passing of a life. The combination of being process-driven and the allowed retrogression of the form as part of the interaction ensures these works have a unique relationship with the sites they inhabit.

This relationship between artwork and site creates a learning space that is rich for both artistic and environmental education. The art making provides direct learning through reflection and response, which can be layered with more subtle learning opportunities through inter-disciplinary associations. The requisite basis of relationship to site and allowed retrogression of the form creates space for students to be mindful of their environmental impact while also challenging preconceived notions of ownership, responsibility, action and inaction as well as acceptance of change and sustainability of practice within the environment. As the artworks incorporate change with the retrogression of the form the making of the works allows for individual growth through peoples' physical interaction and dialogue with the land.

Introduction

Environmental Art has developed globally since the late 1960s. In contrast to an artistic movement this field was never predefined by a series of standardised principles. As a result the term tends to be very inclusive and the breadth of works that it references is very broad. The parameters of the field are blurred further due to the profusion of alternative terminologies and overlapping sub-divisions.ⁱ Land Art, Earth Art and Earthworks were all terms used to describe the practice early in its history. More contemporary terms include eco-art, green art and elements of bio art and sustainable art. Of all the many terms Land Art and Environmental Art are the two which are most commonly used to refer to the overall field. Unfortunately the term Land Art is also specifically associated with the monumental interventions by American artists such as Michael Heizer, Robert Smithson and Walter DeMaria; which lessens its effectiveness as an umbrella term. Therefore for the purposes of this paper, and in line with the recommendation of Sam Bower - Director of Green Museum, Environmental Art will be used as the umbrella term to refer to the field.

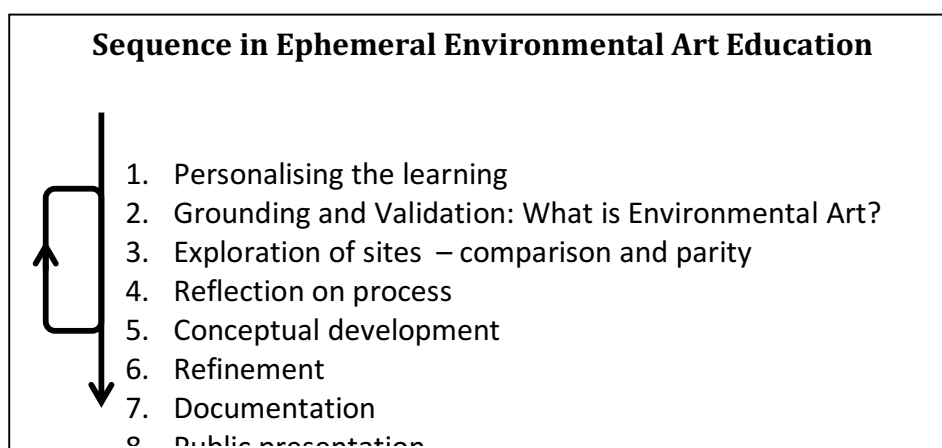
This new direction in art was in part a reaction away from the commodification of the art object and the power that gallery structures exerted over the art world. As one artist Michael Heizer stated “*the position of art as malleable barter-exchange items falters as the cumulative economic structure gluts. The museums and collections are stuffed the floors are sagging, but the real space exists.*”ⁱⁱ Another significant difference was the de-emphasis of the aesthetic object by some artists, which in turn allowed the process of creation to be of greater conceptual importance. It should be noted that this de-emphasis of the significance of the art object was not specific to the field of Environmental Art. This re-evaluation was occurring in art more generally at that time. Art critic Lucy Lippard documented this changing trend in her seminal text *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*.ⁱⁱⁱ A key distinction that separates Environmental Art from earlier land based artwork is the focus on direct interaction with land as opposed to merely the representation of it. As Ben Tufnell describes it the works are characterized by “an immediate and visceral interaction with landscape, nature and the environment”.^{iv}

The extension of the field that followed with the reconsideration of process provided a place for temporary and ephemeral works. In regard to Environmental Art the distinction between temporal and ephemeral is significant due to the works relationship to site. Temporary works are impermanent and have a definitive installation and de-install timeline that defines their existence. The works exist in the site and are then removed. In contrast, Ephemeral Environmental Artworks tend to be created on site and have a brief duration that when coupled with the lack of any formal de-installation process means that the works departure is more like the gentle passing of a life. Indeed many artists such as Andy Goldsworthy consider the retrogression of the form to be part of the work.^v The combination of artwork being process-driven along with the allowed retrogression of the form as part of the interaction ensures that these works have a unique relationship with the sites they inhabit. The pieces interact with the space in which they are located and ultimately elements of that space interact with the work to cause its retrogression.

Parallel to the development of this art form there has been an increase in social mindedness towards the environment. The creation of Environmental Art is one means by which people can explore their relationship to land and express their feelings, concerns and concept. Introducing this art form into schools gives scope for both direct and indirect learning across a range of disciplines. To facilitate these schools based projects an eight step sequence has been devised to strengthen the potential for student learning. This paper explores the strengths and weaknesses of four case studies in relation to how they progressed through the sequence.

Discussion

Over many years of involvement with artist in school residencies which have focused on ephemeral Environmental Art a methodological sequence for engaging students has been developed. This process involves eight steps from initial introductory activities through to the public presentation of student work. The number of steps



necessary varies in relation to the desired outcome, the level of immersion required and the age of the students. The eight steps can be seen in the table below.

The purpose of the first step is to seek a beginning point that connects each student's personal

interests with the overall process. The objective of this is that it will heighten each person's connection to their creative process while also differentiating their methods of environmental interaction and their artistic outcomes. The second step is a presentation about what is Environmental Art, what drove its development, who is making it and why. This formal arts learning gives students a strong perspective of how their works relate to the field globally and begins to challenge considerations of what is possible. Steps three through six develop these possibilities by following a standard model for artistic development. That model relies on growth and learning through a cyclic process of experimentation, reflection and refinement. It is through these steps and with consideration of conceptual development that much informal and associative learning can take place. Step seven deals with the practice of documenting ephemeral art. As this art form is fleeting by nature, there is often a complimentary process involving the creation of a record of the transitory form. The final step in the process is the public presentation of the work and or the

documentary outcome. While this step brings a sense of completion to the overall process it also allows for further art industry specific learning.

In considering the efficacy of this model four case studies through which it has been developed are being discussed.

Case Studies

Case Study 1 – Koroit and District Primary School (2010)



Figure 1 *Celtic Knotwork*

Figure 2 Detail of woven willow ball on *Celtic Knotwork*

The engagement with the Koroit and District Primary School was directed to students in grades 3-6 over a two week period. It was heavily focused on producing a large scale outcome on a section of community walking trail. The tight parameters of this residency limited the opportunity for significant immersion and student learning in

relation to the making of the artwork. Personalizing the learning was limited to a short group discussion relating to the town as the site of the work and aspects of individuals' relationship to the place. This was then followed by a discussion of what is Environmental Art and how its practice is related to other art forms. Due to the pre-defined restriction placed on the outcome there was limited potential for progression through the learning sequence. Further development of the artistic outcome through reflection and greater concept development wasn't possible.

The final work that came out of this process was a large Celtic knotwork pattern that was drawn onto the walking path. Along the length of the work eighty woven willow balls were placed at various points. Each ball was created by the students and interwoven with various natural elements that they brought to the work from their home environments. Ultimately the need for a predefined result hampered the students' opportunity to meaningfully explore their expression in relation to the land through the creation of an Ephemeral Environmental Art piece.

Case Study 2 – Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative Youth Group (2009)



Figure 3 *Wy-char-arng* created on the dry lakebed of Lake Wendouree, Victoria

The second case study relates to a process of engagement with the Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative youth group. There were approximately 15 teenage participants in this program. Similarly to the Koroit and District Primary School this

project was focused on the production of a large scale outcome. Unlike the Koroit project however the form of the outcome was not pre-defined before the process of engagement. This allowed a great deal more scope for personalizing the learning (step 1), exploration (step 3) and reflection on process (step 4).

To support the participants in personalizing the learning a series of class-like activities were conducted over a three month period. These classes included an introduction to Wathaurong language with local language historian Dr David Cahir from Federation University. Additionally, a series of art classes with locally-based Yorta Yorta artist Billy Blackall were conducted. These classes opened the dialogue for design to what would ultimately be a massive geoglyph drawn onto the surface of a dry lakebed.

Further explorations of design were conducted with consideration to the conceptual intent for the final onsite work. In contrast to the first case study the pre-defined parameter for this project was not the outcome but rather the concept of water and lack thereof. As the design progressed further conversation with participants and elders refined other aspects of local significance such as the lack of indigenous acknowledgment at the site.

During the creation of the onsite work this conceptual basis and reflection on process needed to be revisited on a number of occasions. As public opinion about the work ebbed and flowed participants needed to reflect on the significance of ephemerality to the piece. Some members of the community requested that the work be made permanent by filling in the lines of the work with colored concrete. Therefore as water returned to the lake the piece could remain visible. Decisions relating to this request ultimately came back to the concept and the importance of the process. As the work was intended to highlight what was missing and lost, such as fauna through the Europeanization of the swamp to a lake and the lack of dialogue regarding the indigenous history of the site, it seemed inappropriate to create a permanent statement. After all, the work was not intended to be an answer to a question but rather the beginning point for a conversation.

The final work from this engagement was a geoglyphic drawing of three platypuses on the dry lakebed of Lake Wendouree, see figure 2. The design of the work has the platypus swimming in a westerly direction near the northern banks of the lake. The overall work was almost a kilometer long and eventually washed away with the return of water to the lake approximately 6 months later. Much like the first case study it was difficult to maintain group enthusiasm with participants feeling various degrees of connection to the outcome. This was both a matter of individual's sense of separation from the creative process and also variable group cohesion and attendance.

Case Study 3 – Lavers Hill P-12 College (2007)



Figure 4 Artist working in the environment with students

The artist in school residency with Lavers Hill P-12 College was aimed at middle years students from grade 5 through to year 8. It was a four and half week engagement with the thematic basis of exploring change in the Otway Ranges. While this theme was broad it was also quite disputed with many students coming from families of either conservationists or loggers. Prior to beginning the project the

school indicated their preference for a permanent final outcome. It was agreed that the lasting outcome for this project would be a limited edition artist book.

Unlike the earlier case studies the devised program of engagement with Lavers Hill did not emphasize a singular onsite outcome. This gave the project a lot more scope for individual contemplation, and it was here that students did their most in-depth reflection and learning. Steps 4-6 gave this project a much deeper level of engagement.

As this project was focused on a much more individualized process of reflection and exploration the personalizing of learning was similarly focused. Students were encouraged to engage with their home environments and talk about change in the environment with their families. This gave each of the students a very individual basis from which to begin their work.

By step 4 the students were generally making ethical decisions around the impact and permanence of their works. While these considerations were intended to occur, students were not given direction about their choice of outcome. Instead they were encouraged to consider the ramifications of their actions and make their own choice. Later on during group discussions these choices were referenced in line with students' broader regard to permanence, ephemerality and impact.

As part of Step 6 – Refinement, students explored various documentary techniques while also being mindful of the limitations of the artist book format. Along with photography, drypoint and linocut printing students were also encouraged to consider written responses to the ephemerality of their work. Arguably, the strongest of these written responses was in the succinct and refined form of haiku poetry. Below is a poem written by a year 7 student in reaction to making sand castles in the tidal zone at Johanna Beach, see figure 5 below.

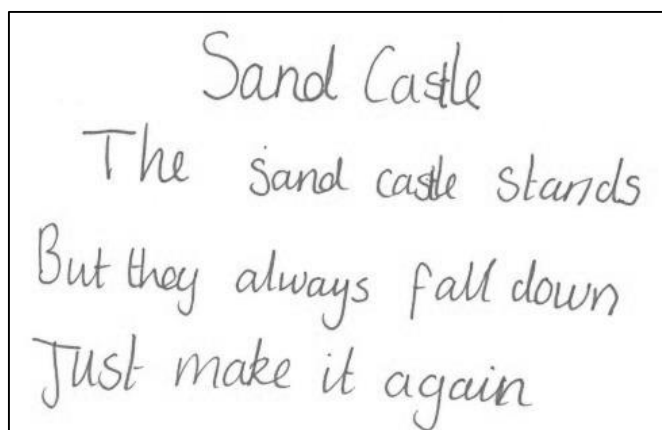


Figure 5 Year 7 poem relating to ephemeral

Environmental Art piece

While this project did consider the complementary role that documentation plays, it did not provide much scope to what the document could be. This restriction was inherent in the need for a documentary process that suited a book format and allowed replication for the purposes of creating an edition.

The final outcome of a limited edition of three artist books was produced by the students. Each student was given a spread of four consecutive pages. The first page showed the photographic image of their work. The second and third pages were a semi-transparent leaf on which the student's textual response to ephemerality and change were printed. The fourth and final page was each student's print-based response to their onsite work. The use of the semi-transparent leaf allowed for a sense of relationship across the four pages while also implying differentiation and change within that relationship.

Case Study 4 – Dimboola Memorial Secondary College (2008)

Figure 6 Teacher working onsite with student

Figure 7 Exhibition view

The residency with Dimboola Memorial Secondary College was targeted towards year 9 and 10 students and continued for the duration of a full school term. Due to the age of the students more complex concepts could be grasped quicker and explored more thoroughly. The final exhibition based outcome was very open ended and provided minimal limitation to the final outcome. This meant that over the course of the term all eight steps of the process could be engaged with at a significant level.

The personalization of the learning in this project was done in a manner that was intentionally blind to the overall objectives of the engagement. Students were simply asked to go out into the nearby bushland and take photographs of the things they saw that were of interest to them. After returning the classroom students then analysed their pictures to reflect on aspects of the landscape that appealed to each

of them. This then became the framing mechanism for the individualization of each students concerns and work moving forward.

Steps 2, 3 and 4 in the sequence were delivered in a similar fashion to the earlier case studies. Interestingly, stage 3 often requires more work with older participants as younger students appear more at ease with the required sense of outdoor play and imagination. In contrast older participants appear to need more validation that the creative process parallels their understanding of a rigorous artistic endeavor. Much like in case study 3 ethical questions of material access and use were raised. In most cases this led to students deciding that minimal impact was their preferred approach.

Step 5 - conceptual development, was able to be explored to a much more significant depth than in the earlier case studies. This heightened degree of immersion and individual expression was due to the personalization of the process that was established in Step 1. From this students' expressed a heightened measure of concern for the development and expression of the concepts behind their own works. Conceptual development was not limited to considerations in the classroom. Students were encouraged to consider inter-disciplinary learning and personal environmental associations more broadly. This allowed for a greater degree of personal reflection and social reference in which students saw links between the creation of their work and the expression of greater environmental concerns. These non-directed associations strengthened individuals' development of concepts and linked artistic expression with a range of subjects such as personal narratives, imagined mythologies and scientific and civic issues. This in turn gave a sense of inter-disciplinary alignment and validation to the creative process. Additionally, it tended to result in works that had broader social resonance with stronger links to the community.

The refinement stage (Stage 6) of this project allowed for a review of the onsite work and its success in relation to the conceptual intent. This gave students a space in which to review work and make their own decisions regarding their creative success. From there students could either rework their concepts and the onsite pieces or move on to the documentation phase. Unlike in case study 3 the idea of documentation was very open ended. There were no specifications placed on materiality, longevity or salability of these pieces. Rather, students were encouraged to consider the notion of conceptual appropriateness within documentation. The question was posed, could an element of the conceptual basis for the onsite work be referenced or incorporated into the documentary outcome?



Figure 8 Shadow

Out of this question arose the pieces that formed Stage 8 – public presentation. This celebration of the project was an exhibition in which students documentary pieces were to be shown. Invariably, the breadth of approaches that students had taken to their onsite work led to a similar degree of breadth in their documentary forms. Some students focused on the handmade quality of the onsite work and replicated this in drawn and printmaking documentary outcomes. Some focused on process and narrative over time, producing artist books and photomosaic works. While for others the notion of ephemerality and fleeting moments was more significant and so they made documentary forms that would degrade and disappear with time. One particular student was specifically focused on the idea that the documentation should be a fleeting trace of form and he exhibited the carefully crafted shadow that can be seen in 8.

Conclusion

The direct and interconnected relationship between ephemeral artwork and site creates a learning space that is rich for artistic, environmental and ethical learning. The eight step sequence outlined in this paper offers a tool for guiding student experience to deepen engagement. The art making provides opportunity for direct

learning through reflection and response, which can be layered with more subtle learning opportunities through inter-disciplinary associations.

The requisite basis of relationship to site and allowed retrogression of the form creates space for students to be mindful of their environmental impact. Specifically it challenges preconceived notions of ownership, responsibility, action and inaction as well as the acceptance of change and sustainability of practices within the environment. By focusing material use to natural elements primarily found on site participants could create forms that would ultimately retrogress with minimal concern for environmental impact. This material focus also put participants at ease due to the perceived lack of preciousness.

Across the four case studies there are a number of variables that were seen to affect the quality of learning that arose from the projects. The primary limiting factor was the extent to which students could input their own direction into the process. The major restraining factor in relation to this was the degree to which the outcome was predefined. Heightened predefinition appears to hamper the space for participants to have a meaningful interaction that involved the development of their own personal expression. In this regard it appears necessary to interrogate the objectives of the project and decide if the creation of the artwork is most important or is the opportunity for improvement to student learning the primary motivator.

Beyond predefinition there were a number of secondary factors that influenced the level of learning and engagement with the overall process. The time allowed for each project and the age of students impacted the degree to which issues or concepts could be probed. While younger students seemed more at ease with the sense of play, it was older students' ability to conceptualize and grasp complex theories more readily that allowed for a rigorous interrogation of ideas.

Over the four case studies the most successful project from the perspective of student engagement, conceptualization and opportunity for learning was case study 4 – Dimboola Memorial Secondary College. This project was the only one to

experience all eight steps in the sequence, with learning potential at each step. Interestingly, the first seven steps outline a process of engagement for creating ephemeral Environmental Art, while the eighth step – public presentation is broader and more vocationally based. Arguably this step may be able to be removed without deleteriously affecting the potential for learning specific to Environmental Art. There are however wider art industry learning opportunities that come with Step 8.

While case studies 1 and 2 appear less successful in terms of individual contemplation and expression they were more focused on the production of a group outcome. By necessity participants needed to develop skills in negotiation and compromise to produce a communal result. Participants also needed to grasp the significance and importance of concepts in order to present ideas back to the group. While case study 4 considered issues of civic and social concern more deeply in their concept development, it could be argued that the practical learning of group work was more grounded in the earlier case studies.

Although not within the scope of this paper a fifth project would be interesting to explore the possibility of a group-based, singular outcome that is not overly predefined which also allows the participants to engage with all eight stages of the sequence. The question would then be could students still have a similar depth of learning and engagement while maintaining social cohesion to work towards a form of group expression.

ⁱ Bower, *A profusion of terms*, "Green Museum.org", http://greenmuseum.org/generic_content.php?ct_id=306, [accessed 19/5/2016]

ⁱⁱ M. Heizer, as cited in Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, 13.

ⁱⁱⁱ L. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (California: University of California, 1997).

^{iv} Tufnell, B. *Land Art* (London: Tate Publishing 2006), p. 16.

^v A. Goldsworthy, *A Collaboration with Nature*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990, and Deakin, R "Zen and the Art of Andy Goldsworthy." *Modern Painters* 10, no. 1 (1997): 50-54.