Green Art Education in Armenia

Since Alexander’s defeat of Darius III, Armenia has functioned as a buffer between the Classical-Mediterranean and the Persian, Byzantine and Seljuk, Russian and Ottoman. As a result of millennia of wars, few victories and many losses, Armenia today occupies only 20% of the historic land mass of Greater Armenia. Gone is access to the Black and Mediterranean Seas, profitable natural resources, the Biblical land of Eden, and Noah’s Mt. Ararat. Victimized by historic patterns of natural disaster, massacres and migrations, decades of Soviet decrepitude, and economic mandates that have trumped ecological considerations, the environment has suffered overexploitation, deforestation, and desertification. Additionally, the current global recession has further weakened the social safety net resulting in 50% of the population living below the poverty line. As a result, Armenian national discourse is permeated by declensionist and progressive plots that underlie a metanarrative of recovery.

Armenia enjoyed ecclesiastical autonomy from the period of St. Gregory the Illuminator, early 4th century, to the Arab invasions of the mid 7th century. Penned during this period, the Epic Histories, a compilation of varied materials bearing on the events, institutions, customs, and beliefs of fourth-century Armenia, narrate the complexities and contradictions of a society in transition from a still surviving Persian-Sassanian past to fervent Christianity. Through its compilation of tales of Oriental royal glory, unworthy rulers, unrewarded valor, and growing tensions among crown, church and magnates, the narrative’s recurring tropes of renewal and healing evidence a sympathy with a primordial earth and the hope for deliverance of its people, creatures, and land.

And St. Nersēs [the 4th century hero] sat on the patriarchal throne, and there was great peace in the realm during his pastoral care... He truly found fatherly perfection...and showed the same care to preserve [his flock] safe from visible and invisible foes. He most resembled the first trees, [for] he bore fruit of spiritual-teaching ... from the beginning of his supervision and pastoral care he dispensed abundantly [to his flock] all that was profitable, feeding [it] in spiritual pastures.

However, here the Edenic narrative ended. Human nature and the Promised Land were lost through a succession of culpable human acts that resulted in moral jeopardy and environmental degradation. The recovery of access to the lost garden became the sole path to a freedom in which people can recover the true selves that has been lost to the corrupting influences of their artificial lives. In other words, the Armenian story is “about the nature of natural national existence”, “the nature of the human

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3 Ibid., 112.
community”. Aware of the clear relation between the character of physical nature and the natural, national discourse reflects personal and culturally specific values: the essence of who a people think they are, how and where they should live, what they believe to be good and beautiful. It is now the role of the new generation as “restoration ecologists” to marshal human labor to restore an already degraded nature to an earlier, pristine state, and thusly, heal the nation.6

Armenia lies at the convergence of three bio-geographic regions: the arid Central Anatolian and Iranian regions and the temperately damp Caucasian region, as well as containing seven of the world’s nine climate zones due to diversity of elevations. In respect to the diversity of flora and fauna, half of the 3,500 plant species are at risk of extinction, and 300 of the 500 vertebrate species are rare or declining and 18 are at risk of extinction. Armenia’s forest cover was 25% at the turn of the 20th century and now stands at less than 8%.7 According to the Armenia Tree Project (ATP) founded in 1994, the lack of alternative fuel sources, poverty and unemployment are the leading causes of deforestation. The promotion of stewardship through environmental education and advocacy, reforestation, and poverty reduction have the potential to reverse the plot of the declensionist narrative by identifying nature as the victim of both human hubris and social changes that overcome “the necessities of nature” through domestication, cultivation, and commodification.8

As the theme of this conference is “Romancing Nature Again,” it is important to turn this discussion towards the role of the artist, artistic practice, and art education in supporting and securing the recovery narrative. As condemned by Suzi Gablik, radical autonomy has been the built-in assumption of artistic practice for so long.

Autonomy, however, soon condemns art to social impotence. The question of whether or not art will ever change the world is not a relevant question anymore: the world is changing already, in inescapable ways. We can no longer deny the evidence at hand. The need to transform the egocentric vision that is encoded in our entire world view is the crucial task that lies ahead for our culture. The issue is whether art will rise to the occasion and make itself useful to all that is going on.9

At center is the act of ego-deconstruction, “in which the self experiences directly the deep connection between the human world, the plant world and the animal world. When we experience the world as our

own body, illusions of duality dissolve, and with them, old assumptions about a distinct and separate ego-self codified by our culture.¹⁰

The Tufenkian Foundation, established by Armenian-American venture philanthropists, supports protection programs that strike at the heart of the social, economic, and environmental problems facing Armenia.¹¹ The Foundation is dedicated to modeling new approaches to long-standing problems and to pioneering projects that overcome new and long-ignored challenges. It has completed more than 50 projects in Armenia to combat poverty, promote education, protect the natural environment and renew national, civic, cultural and religious values. The chief areas of focus are assisting marginalized and vulnerable families, rebuilding civil society, rejuvenating cultural and spiritual life, advocating for environmental protection and rehabilitation, and developing the strategic borderlands of Nagorno-Karabagh. The Tufenkian Foundation founded the Zangakatun Social Services NGO in 2000 to implement a new model of how to combat extreme poverty, addressing the country’s most marginalized and vulnerable families and providing the support they need to break their cycles of poverty and neglect.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, many children’s clubs, educational centers, and hobby groups were closed and many children were deprived of opportunities to develop their skills and abilities. The centers funded by the Tufenkian Foundation provide their educational services for free, ensuring that the rising generation of public voices will speak for the larger society. The mission includes environmental education and advocacy to promote stewardship, actively engaging youth in a process to understand and appreciate the value of a healthy and sustainable environment.

In respect to pedagogy, here children develop a capacity for interpersonal reasoning, are enlisted in the healing and recovery, and motivated in the actual activities of care.¹² “The world,” writes Jungian psychoanalyst James Hillman “does not ask for belief. It asks for noticing, attention, appreciation, and care.”¹³ Pivotal is the understanding that all living beings exist in ecosystems, in webs of related, interacting, dynamic energy systems.

Children have an innate need and positive desire to create in order to learn and know. Their love of nature as process and love of knowledge as process are here combined as a unitary action, the mind as body interacting with the universe.¹⁴ Converting the self into a “theater of perception” in which he is at once producer, dramatist, and star, the child appreciates the harmony of his body, the power of

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¹⁰Ibid., 54-5.
¹¹For background on the Tufenkian Foundation, its history and initiatives, and narrative on the country’s needs, see www.tufenkianfoundation.org.
¹³Gablik, 142-3, for more on ethics of care.
¹⁴For childhood development in respect to environmental awareness and creative imagination, see Edith Cobb, The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1993), 22.

Children’s process of creativity reduces itself to mapping and traveling, picture and explanation, the gestalt-making process and thematic apperception. Thought processes are mobilized into constellations or psychological landscapes, for journeying with the exploratory mind.\footnote{Ibid., 46.} Thus, the act of mapping becomes a strategy for gaining awareness about the meanings contained in the environment. Some maps remain relatively invariant between people, describing the location of roads, hills, and rivers, for example. But others may give radically different representations of what we commonly suppose to be “the same place”: identifying favorite “landmarks,” safety and danger zones, areas of higher and lower density and crowding, work places, or sites of family significance.\footnote{Laurie E. Hicks and Roger J.H. King, “Mapping a Sense of Place: A Contextualized Approach to Designed Environments”, in Joanne K. Guilfoil and Alan R. Sandler, eds, \textit{Built Environment Education in Art Education}, (National Art Education Association, 1999), 14-15. Also see Terry Graff, “Art, Art Education, and the Ecological Vision”, \textit{NSCAD Papers in Art Education}, 1990, Vol. 5, 1, 79-96. June King McFee and Rogena M Degge, \textit{Art, Culture, and the Environment} (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1980).}

The city of Vanadzor was hard hit by the 1988 earthquake, leaving hundreds of families without homes or the means to support themselves. A generation has grown up under these conditions, children born to parents who came of age and living in rubble. In 2004, the Tufenkian Foundation brought the Zangakatun program to Vanadzor, where it serves scores of families each year. This location features classrooms, performance spaces, a computer lab, an enclosed courtyard and a cafeteria.

Students arrive at the Center after completing their day of Soviet-style education in STEM disciplines. First, they receive hot meals in the cafeteria. Then, they elect instruction in theater, dance, music, computer programs, and art. Class projects are built upon a core of ethical values (social and ecological) that extend beyond media instruction. Each week students attend group sessions conducted by psychologists in order to address the social issues related to poverty. Social workers are present to serve as liaisons with families. When the classes in the creative arts are complete, parents arrive for instruction in technology skills to improve their employment prospects.

As outlined by Hicks and King,\footnote{Laurie E. Hicks and Roger J.H. King, “Ecofeminism, Care, and the Environment: Towards a Greening of Art Education”, in Georgia Collins and Renee Sandell, eds., \textit{Gender Issues in Art Education: Content, Contexts, and Strategies} (National Art Education Association, 1996), 90-101.} within this reconceptualized, community-based orientation to art education, the first complex of questions, tasks, and concerns is \textit{foundational}. To engage in artistic investigations of the relationship between human beings and the environment, students acquire the necessary background, context, and motivation to care about what is taking place – the need for care that emphasizes active and public characteristics rather than the subjective state of mind of the individual.\footnote{Ibid., 93.} The second complex is the \textit{situational}. Students create works that draw attention to
specific environmental problems and situations. Students are encouraged to explore, direct attention to specific sites, and/or reflect on problems as they exist. The third complex is the sustainable as students critically assess how art can contribute to a reevaluation of the environment and how human beings live in the world. Art becomes the site for a critical reaction with a community of viewers.

Since 2003, the Tufenkian and Paros Foundations have sponsored the Manana Children’s Education and Art Center in Yerevan. The school aims to provide art education for children from 6 to 18 years old, preparing them to become leading journalists, photographers, designers, and filmmakers. The curriculum employed at the Manana Center begins with teachers inviting environmentalists, social workers, journalists, and political activists. Master classes featuring diasporan and international filmmakers and animators, give the youth a chance to express themselves and to meet their role models while identifying contemporary media-related issues. After group discussions lead by psychologists, students adopt a problem-centered approach simulating a real-life enterprise of processes and solutions identical to those employed by responsible citizenry. This participatory pedagogy continues as students, working in groups identify goals and values as starting point for conflict resolution and problem solving. Mandatory classes in creative writing aid in the students’ conceptualization of narratives and production of storyboards, drawings, photographs, or other visual formats for aesthetic problem solving. After the final product is completed, in this case a body of photographs or a short documentary film, it is presented to the collective student body for critical evaluation. Further dialogue and action take place locally and globally as the photographs and films are entered into international competitions, win awards, and publicize Armenian social issues.

Contextualized art education aims to empower teachers and students for a more engaged relation to place, their piece of the environment that has been colored by their feelings.\(^{20}\) Using narratives honors experience and importance is placed upon non-objective, non-hierarchical modes of teaching as well as serves as the basis for exploring, questioning, and challenging existing paradigms.\(^{21}\) As outcome, students develop the ability to reflect carefully and self-consciously on the social meanings embedded in their local environment by their preparation to participate in sustaining or reconstructing those embodied meanings.\(^{22}\)

Once the educator helps the child find meaning, the dialogue opens, meanings are negotiated, and there is the possibility for a springboard for ethical actions. Instruction and student products at the Tufenkian Centers have demonstrated that the current social and environmental crises can be addressed through a shift in the way students think about and interact with their environment within this “art education of place.” Understanding place demands a high degree of self-investment and

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\(^{20}\) David Sobel, “A Place in the World: Adults’ Memories of Childhood’s Special Places”, in Guilfoil, *Built Environment Education in Art Education*, 146.

\(^{21}\) Laura K. Guinan, “Personal Space and Public Place: Architecture and Narrative in Built Environment Education”, in Guilfoil, 59.

\(^{22}\) King and Hicks, “Mapping a Sense of Place”, 12.
reflection from students. As Lopez states, “a sense of place must include, at the very least, knowledge of what is inviolate about the relationship between a people and the place they occupy”. 23

Functioning within the public and political structures of the social body, if narrative becomes the site of power struggles and manipulations as stated by Roland Barthes, then it retains the potential to be a medium of individual and social empowerment and a vehicle for change. Narratives are found in many ways in our built environments: the way we physically move through a building or a garden; the memory or history evoked through particular materials, shapes, and forms in our built worlds; the personal experience or story employed by the architect in the design of a space; the relationship of individual buildings to the growth of our neighborhoods, communities, cultures, etc. 24 They enable us, in Cynthia Ozick’s words, to “leap into the other”, imagining the experience and the feelings of the other, and develop the capacity for attentive love. 25 This particular kind of subjective “engrossment” in the object of care has been termed “an ecofeminist environmental ethics of care in art education... that offers a fruitful theoretical foundation for reflecting on the place of care for nature both in art education and in artistic practice”. 26 For only by nurturing this ethos of care can the recovery narrative succeed and Armenia be healed.

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24 Guinan, 60.
26 Hicks and King, “Ecofeminism, Care, and the Environment, 91.